

Cost of Care

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August 6, 2017

Scripture Reading: Luke 10: 1-6
from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Later the Master selected seventy and sent them ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he intended to go. He gave them this charge: "What a huge harvest! And how few the harvest hands. So, on your knees; ask the God of the Harvest to send harvest hands. On your way! But be careful – this is hazardous work. You're like lambs in a wolf pack. Travel light. Comb and toothbrush and no extra luggage. Don't loiter and make small talk with everyone you meet along the way. When you enter a home, greet the family, 'Peace.' If your greeting is received, then it's a good place to stay. But if it's not received, take it back and get out. Don't impose yourself."

The financial cost and availability of health care has certainly been in the news and on our minds these past weeks. The political crisis around those questions has brought to the forefront urgent and extreme examples of individuals and families struggling with dire situations, seeking justice, resolution, and relief to their situations. Regardless of whether or not our personal health care plans have been threatened or challenged, we have been confronted with a massive societal need. It is pretty clear to everyone that something has to change the current status quo practices.

Along with the electoral campaigning, the election outcome, and the new administration – all of which have been so confrontational and alienating – these past months we have been experiencing the visceral polarization between the *haves* and the *have nots*, the angry and the apathetic, the hopeless and the hopeful, as we learn nearly every day of another change being proposed or enacted, another group being hatefully targeted.

It is a strange time – a time when much of what we believe is being challenged. It's a strange time of change breaking open what has been, at so many different levels, all at once. Change is challenging not only what was, but also the ideas of what might come.

During this time of national change, we at Community Congregational Church are experiencing our own period of transition, and we are called to take into account the larger theological fractures that define us as a denomination. These fractures are revealed in statistics that identify a national decline in church membership and interest in mainline churches, broad changes in societal patterns, competing family interests and involvements, and technological obsessions. We at CCC are affected by these national trends as we attempt to actively engage in the quest for next steps and a new or revised direction. We're trying to figure out who we are now and how we can help shape the future of our beloved community.

It seems to me that in these times of huge changes for our country, our church, and our lives, we are being called by God, as a people of faith, to pay particular attention to what is going on around us. We are called to actively risk the personal cost and be willing to pay the emotional price of envisioning and helping to bring hope, justice, peace, loving kindness and healing responses into our ill society.

If we step back a minute to reflect on our ancient Biblical history, we are reminded as people of faith that tumultuous times and changes like those we're currently experiencing or fearing are not unique to our century. Some of the Bible stories might even provide some ideas as to how to proceed. For example, the text from Luke this morning reminds us that God has already prepared us for the work ahead. This text identifies communities of faith (the one in the scripture reading included 70 people – well beyond the chosen twelve) who were sent out with the Good News of God's presence and all-inclusive love. They were not to proselytize. They were instead to model and follow the examples of the dedicated teacher-healer Jesus, and to focus on the tasks that would help address and identify the behaviors and practices that were causing much of the pain and misery for the people they encountered. They were to seek ways to address the suffering. They were warned that it is not easy work to counter demons. They were instructed in humble and peaceful approaches, in ways to offer genuine assistance, and in ways to assess a responsive outcome. Their preparation instructions quite clearly included the warning that they might feel like lambs entering a wolf pack. Interestingly, they were also advised not to spend valuable time where their efforts were rejected, but to move on, seeking the places where their efforts would be more welcome

So, how does this all relate to the notion of the *cost of care*, and to our call for involvement as a people of faith? The answer is simple. The individual cost of caring is to spend precious time for the benefit of someone else. Opening one's heart to the joy and relief of another's recovery or release from pain and suffering is fairly easy, but once opened, the heart is exposed to the possibility of the heartache of loss, or of being broken by death, disappointment, betrayal, or dismissal, all of which can be parts of the ongoing journey. Caring for others while bringing comfort and love can hurt. It can also hurt to make the decision *not* to care about others. A bit strange to comprehend is the personal loss that can occur with a conscious decision or practice *not* to care, which can ultimately result in loneliness and unhappiness.

I am reminded this morning of the three words that are on the bell at the entrance to our outside labyrinth. They are three words that, whether or not we literally walk the path, we can remember symbolically in our minds: beloved, called, equipped. We are people loved by God, called to share that love with others, and equipped to do so.

Several examples of the emotional cost of caring occurred a couple of weeks ago while I was with our daughter in a hospital in Sacramento's intensive care unit. Late one afternoon we observed from the outside window of her room that a patient was arriving by helicopter, and we soon realized that this patient was being rushed into the next room, where the medical staff received the patient and began immediate response and treatment efforts. Throughout the evening, family members and friends quietly slipped into the room by twos, and shortly came out weeping as they allowed others to enter. A chaplain arrived and walked with some to a quiet area for conversation.

This scene went on throughout the night. Early in the morning, when all had quieted down a bit, our daughter and grandson were startled by the soft sound of music coming from outside in the hall. They soon realized that a young woman was seated just outside the next room, playing her harp. They found that the music soon drowned out the sounds of beeping machines and hospital noises. The harpist's music provided several peaceful moments in a tense time. Our daughter and her son both found themselves moved by the gentle beauty coming from the harpist's fingertips. That beauty reached deeply into their own weary recovery vigil, and brought a calming relief. We don't know other details. Was the harpist called specifically to play for this patient, or was this a regular practice in that hospital unit? Was the patient a man or woman, young or old? Did the patient live or die? All we know is that people in great pain themselves cared about the person struggling in the next room, as did the many others who provided medical expertise, energy, prayer, and effort, to bring comfort to ease the suffering. Their hearts were all engaged with the needs of others.

Beloved community, change is challenging us. Human needs are crying out. We don't have all the answers, nor do we know where we are headed. We have much to learn. But we can trust that we are a creative, equipped people who believe in the power of love, prayer and action to help us on our paths. We have been called to give, and we have plenty to offer. We are fortunate to have the gift of each other, this community, to join in the journeys ahead. We can afford to care.

The cost of care is to take the time to engage in the gifts God provides for us as beloved people to address ills, work to get rid of hatred and violence against one another, work to heal the sick and injured, and help bring about peace. May God continue to bless us with opportunities in our efforts to serve.

Amen

I selected Kim Stafford's poem to serve as an invitation to communion this morning because it speaks in poetic form about committing ourselves to counter negative expressions and experiences with our own loving, caring, reconciling, uniting, generous, giving, welcoming behavior, as steps toward building peace for ourselves as well as for the world.

Find Peace in Yourself for the World

May your museum of old atrocities open only once in 90 days.

May your map of scars become wonders.

May abundant tears be called forth by beautiful music.

May you look to the tops of trees, to hesitant light on distant hills,

To darkness in a child's eye.

To find peace, may you give sorrow a rest, let resentment, anger and disappointment stretch out where a meadow holds the sun.

May your hands open as the first evident act of an opening heart.

May the sweet taste of rain fill the bowl bitterness forsook.

Sip there, my beloved friend, for all of us.

When we sit at a family table to eat, we pass the food we share with one another. In like manner, when the disciples were seated with Jesus, he broke a loaf of bread to be shared with them and said, "Eat this in remembrance of what you have learned about love and how to convey it," and then he took the cup and offered it as a sip of new covenant, swallowed as personal intention to take that knowledge and share it with others. So in symbolic manner we will serve each other the bread and juice from this table, as a people of faith, remembering and sharing God's love with a world in need.