

“Ripples of Love”

Rev. David Gregory

November 4, 2018

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost



The Sea of Galilee

First reading

David Whyte in Consolations

Giving is a difficult and almost contemplative art form that has to be practiced to be done well; to learn to give is almost always the simple, sometimes heartbreaking act of just giving again. To stop giving in any situation is to call an end to relationship.... To give well, appropriately and often is to establish a beautiful seasonal symmetry between the urgency within us that wishes to be generous, and the part of the world that is suddenly surprised and happy to receive.

Second reading(s)

Ed Bacon in 8 Habits of Love

Fear can lead us to lives of self-absorption in which we covet blessings instead of conferring them on others. We find we can't let go, we assume the worst, we feel insecure, we act without thinking – or perhaps we do not act enough. It is hardly surprising that amid the pressure of day to day life and under the yoke of a fearful culture many of us struggle to open our hearts and be generous.... If we can only trust that ultimately the universe is kind, we will be released from the fear of scarcity that drives us.

Proverbs 11:24-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

*Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.
A generous person will be enriched,
and one who gives water will get water.*

For those of you who were able to join us last week, [you will understand why] I have observed a self-imposed news blackout since I completed this week's message in an attempt to avoid re-writing it this morning. I will grant you that this will have been "the week that was." We shall look back on it as historically significant no matter the outcome. We have done our best over these last weeks to find a deeper place from which to approach it, culminating in the gathering last Sunday night at Congregation Kol Shofar, an interfaith retreat here in this room on Tuesday, major insights Thursday morning in Stone Soup, and a deep communal experience of Centering Prayer on Thursday night. If we can stand here in this place one week from today and move forward from this ground of being, then we will have passed our mid-term exams in the School of Love; or more precisely, we will be poised for greater practices than these, growing stronger in our message to the world around us, that we are ready to live by a deeper standard than the political rhetoric that swirls around us. We will be ready to set the conversations we wish to have, instead of reacting to the agendas of others.

We've been spending a great deal of time with some of our favorite writers over the last couple of months, particularly the work of Ed Bacon, in *The 8 Habits of Love*. After today we will be moving on, but not without noticing a particular effect that his work is having in our region. I mentioned on Tuesday at the retreat, but will repeat here, that I was introduced to this book by Rabbi Susan Leider from our sister Congregation Kol Shofar, a number of months ago as we began planning our combined retreat. I was so taken with it that I began incorporating it into my Sunday messages, as you well know. As Rabbi Leider shared with us on Tuesday, she has been doing the same.

So here we are, two strong congregations, one from the Jewish tradition and one from the Christian tradition, in the same town, steeping ourselves in principles and practices from the same source. When you add to that the events of last weekend, the shootings at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, followed by the gathering of thirty-five religious and spiritual communities at Kol Shofar on Sunday evening in the practice of love and solidarity, there is a vibrational energy—we might refer to it as divine spirit—rising from within us, gaining the kind of strength in community that no political will can conquer. It is a flame that we will fan and feed, the kind of fire that we can welcome and nurture, providing light and warmth for us and for the world around us. It is the flame of generosity, this great openness of mind and heart that allows us to freely receive, and at the same time freely give. As the ancient Hebrew writing reminds us, "A generous person will be enriched, and the one who gives water will get water."

On Tuesday I brought a teaching on generosity to the interfaith community, and I led with an image of the Sea of Galilee, the beautiful, lively, life-giving sea which is fed by the Jordan River from the north, and flows into the Jordan River to the south. And further to the south, also fed by that same Jordan River, is the Dead Sea, which is exactly as it says, dead. The reason it is dead is that there is no outflow. The analogy is inescapable, to say the very least.

Inflow with no outflow results in stagnation. Outflow with no inflow will eventually lead to lifeless, waterless desert. The health of the body, the health of the spirit, and the health of the cosmos depend upon the movement of nourishment and energy both in and out. It involves our ability to receive and our ability to give. It is the art of allowing energy to flow to us and through us in a healthy way, and it will affect every area of our lives, our relationships, our care for the earth, our cultural presence, and our use of financial and material resources.

This flow is artfully described by David Whyte when he says, “To give well, appropriately, and often is to establish a beautiful seasonal symmetry between the urgency within us that wishes to be generous, and the part of the world that is suddenly surprised and happy to receive.” As Ed Bacon teaches, there is a difference between this generosity and simple charity. Charity satisfies the needs of the giver, which may or may not correspond to the needs of the receiver. Generosity has only the needs of the receiver in mind. I am taking the time to know you well enough to understand that I am giving what you *know* you need, versus giving you what I *think* you need. Generosity is about relationship, the inflow the outflow, the interconnectedness of life, and the healthy well-being of this sea of humanity that we need to protect from both starvation and stagnation.

And so we, as pastor and congregation, come to the month of November, having spent the better part of this year together, having moved through an intensive period of reconfiguration over the last three years. My life doesn't really resemble what it was three years ago, and as a community I don't think ours does either. We've asked the tough questions about why we're here. Are we just another mainline Protestant expression of a stagnant pond, just trying to hang on and preserve what we have, allowing whatever energy and resources that might happen flow toward us to bring us to a place where we can hang on to what we have? Are we satisfied with the familiar shores of the Dead Sea, the boundaries of what we have always known and are comfortable with? Are we asking others to come join us on this hillside and support a past that is defined only by our wishful thinking? Or are we ready to let go and see what new kinds of life will be attracted and supported, nurtured, encouraged, equipped, and prepared in this environment?

Generosity is about the flow. We open the gates wide to receive the time, the resources, the energy – actually the LOVE of others, and we also open the gates wide to let go, to release control, to relinquish our own comfort. The mission of the Community Congregational Church is not to gather our resources and to make ourselves happy. The world that would allow that to happen no longer exists. If you believe in the life-giving flow of this church community, I know that you will be open to give and to receive from it.

The School of Love is a School of Generosity. Freely we have received. Freely let us give.

Amen.