

Giving and Receiving, Loving and Being Loved, One and the Same

October 30, 2016

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Jeremiah 9: 24
Matthew 22: 36-40

Lord, take our minds and think through them, take my lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire, with the desire to know your love and to do your will. All this we are bold to ask in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Friends, today, two pieces of our faith life come together, the spirit of mission, and the spirit of being always open to reform – always listening believing that our God is still speaking. And I think they come together for our benefit – as we seek to grow in understanding, and to live out our faith. So let's take a look at this convergence, if you will.

Today is Mission Sunday, the day when we give thanks that the efforts of this past year, and particularly, those around our summer festival Summerfest. As has been written, "Summerfest is all about fun, family, friends, and raising funds to support local charities."

And today, it is with thanksgiving, that we gather – able to offer our financial support. In the "fun, family and friends" category, I can't help but think back to our face-painting table –where our children came with their parents, contributed coins, had fun (as did their face-painters) and those nickels, dimes and quarters have been translated into the checks given this morning. – Thanks also to all who counted our pennies, nickels and dimes.

But now, I'd like us to take a step back – or turn the page of our "Projects" booklet back by one and read together the very first paragraph. " You are part of the First Congregational Church's mission in the world. Most importantly, as you live your daily life - caring for family and friends, contributing to the lives of others through your job or volunteer efforts, supporting good works with your charitable giving, in all these ways, you are embodying God's love in the world. "

This article in the forward of our booklet, goes on to explain the many ways we seek to serve others through the budget and life of this church - but where I really would like to draw our attention this morning, is to that first paragraph, because it speaks to the heart of this gathering, where we recognize not only the daily acts of care we take in this world, but the daily caring, acting in love in which all of us gathered here take part.

You who are here to receive financial gifts, then translate those dollars into acts of loving kindness in countless forms. You embody God's love in our world. And we here today, would not only thank you. We would learn from you, that like yourselves, we might find ways to embody the teachings of Jeremiah as he called Israel to act with steadfast love, loving kindness which was seen in acts of mercy and efforts seeking justice and righteousness = the prophet's remedy for healing the nation that had been in exile, that had fallen away from God's hopes of them

Friends visiting with us this morning, as you hear us trying to support and understand, please know, that we look forward to attending Coffee Hour downstairs in Fellowship Hall and to continuing to learn from you; to hear your stories and to learn where we might add our time and talents to the treasure we have been able to share. So please think, and let us know those things you believe we need to learn and better understand.

Now I began by saying that this Sunday brings two pieces of our faith life together. Today is also Reformation Sunday. The day we remember Martin Luther posting his 95 theses seeking theological reforms on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral—reforms he wanted the Catholic Church to make in its practices – so that the church would become more accessible. Luther contributed to major theological reform by translating the Bible into vernacular German, which allowed people to hear and read the gospel of Jesus Christ in their own language rather than in Latin. Luther also strove to bring people closer to their faith by promoting the use of religious music. He loved music and believed that it was a gift from God that could both inspire and teach people in the church – and in their homes. A musician, singer, writer, and composer, Luther began authoring hymns in 1523. He converted portions of the liturgy into easy, joyful congregational song for all (as opposed to chanting by the priest and choir alone). In his lifetime, he completed more than thirty hymns, and we began our service with perhaps the most well known, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” written and composed in 1529.

So, today we continue the journey – perhaps more mindfully, of living our faith in ways that matter - and can best be understood by such as we in this time. I'd like now to invite us to look at our scripture from Matthew's gospel, familiar to most of us as the Great Commandment, as Jesus' response to one of the Pharisees who seeking to show him up, asked him, right out on the street, which (of the 600 plus laws set down in the Hebrew Scriptures for Israel's guidance) - which was the greatest? And Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

So far I think we're together with calls both from our Hebrew Scriptures and our Christian Scriptures – to love, to act in love seeking to show mercy and kindness, seeking justice, and care for the other - all of us sons and daughters of God - all of us, brothers and sisters.

But here, I'd like to add a little October 2016 understanding, as least as it comes from my heart and mind today. And that is the importance, of being a receiver, as well as a giver. We are taught, that it is more blessed to give than receive. It is a classic teaching from the Book of Acts – where the disciples were being taught the basic tenets of how to go out and found churches. And please understand, that I am not challenging the blessings surrounding giving – especially during our Stewardship season. ☺ But I sometimes think that receiving gets a bum rap. Given all the teaching about giving, I worry for those in need, who need to receive and about we in less need, who would give. I also think this command to love is relational. We cannot go out and act in love – without creating relationship, and I would clarify – without creating the potential of a loving relationship.

The teaching that it is more blessed to give – is teaching and inspiring giving. But the receiver also offers a gift to the giver when they receive. Not only a gift, but a meaningful relationship with the amazing potential to gain important understandings. Brad and I volunteer with the home community in Orland, Maine which seeks to serve first those who suffer most, which serves hundreds of people throughout Hancock County. We have worked with those friends now for nearly thirty years, and they matter.

This past week, we went to a memorial service for Maggie Corcoran, you may remember we prayed for her two weeks ago, and we were there for an amazing time of remembrances. There we learned of her attention and concern for each in that community – and theirs for her – despite her challenges as a “special needs” adult.

All areas of outreach bring about important understandings as we love and care for those in need. And amazingly, doesn't that phrase “those in need” include everyone of us – at one time of another.

Today we have spoken of mission and of reformation, within the understanding of our faith. We have spoken about love – about loving, and about being loved. Our God commanded us to love – at the same time, that God has always, been there with love for everyone of us - as a Mighty Fortress. That God also sent his Son to us, a reform effort if you will, there to live with us and teach us, to die for us, and then to rise again and share incredibly good news. Jesus came to us as a servant, and asked that we go forward as servants as well.

Now, enough of my words, let us close our service joining our voices in the relatively new words of Hymn #374. “Won't You Let Me Be Your servant.” written in 1977 by Richard Gillard who lives in New Zealand and writes of the christian community in which we serve and are served. Amen.