

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
June 10, 2018  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
2 Corinthians 4:15-5:1

*Dwell in the Tent of the Lord*

The Apostle Paul was a tent maker. He made tents that would provide shelter for travelers and families in order to protect them from the harsh desert elements. He wrote letters to churches that he founded which served as symbolic tents that provided shelter for the early Christians from the harshness of Roman oppression and the hard work of creating a faith community that would spread the Good News of God's unconditional love for all that Jesus taught. Paul wrote his letters before any of the gospels of what we now call the New Testament were written.

Paul made real tents in order to support his travels that enabled him to plant churches throughout the land. Just like you and me he had to make a living. Off and on he also was imprisoned by the powers that were in those Roman times and even in those times in chains he professed a patient, abiding, and loving sense that he was being sheltered by God's love and grace. Though he was shackled by chains his chains did not imprison his spirit or his mind as his life continued to dwell within the spirit of the living Christ.

When I was a very little boy my Mom and Dad would take my big sister, Nan, and I camping. We would pile into our then new 1955 Chevy and take off for the state and national parks of the Pacific Northwest—Glacier, Yellowstone, and the Northern and Canadian Rockies. The tent that sheltered us under the stars in the midst of the Douglas Fir and Pine forests was an old heavy green canvas Army surplus tent that my uncle who was a National Guard supply sergeant had given us. Man was that tent a bear to put up. It was heavy and bulky and when it was pouring rain in places like the Olympic Rain Forest, where we were camping, the water-soaked canvas would be three times as heavy. But, once inside in the shelter of that tent and in the arms of my Mom and Dad all was right in the world. The grace of God's love and the love of our parents was a beautiful and cozy tent.

We heard the Apostle Paul's words remind us this morning that...*Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure...For we know that if the*

*earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, [but] eternal in the heavens.* Earthly tents can provide us shelter only to a certain degree while the tent of God's grace is eternal and complete in every way.

Paul Pepper often signs off his emails and texts with the blessed words, "pay it forward." For those of us who know and love "our Paul" we know this is a way of life for him. His paying it forward has blessed this church in many ways. The infectious graciousness of spirit of each and every one of you here at Maple Street Church pays God's love forward in loving ways that we spend time together as a people of faith. As the more ancient Apostle Paul knew, *grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*

My friends, that is the magic formula that countless people of faith down throughout the world from the time of creation know and practice. If you and I extend God's grace and love to more and more people—if we pay it forward—our thanksgiving and gratitude will increase and that love and grace that is spread from person-to-person extends the grace of God through a troubled world. Grace is the thread that weaves an eternity.

In the novel, *Pay It Forward*, by Catherine Ryan Hyde and the later movie, a young boy begins the Pay It Forward movement as part of a class project requested by his teacher. The teacher asked her students to think of one thing that could change the world and try to do it. The young boy comes up with the idea of doing a favor for someone that would really make difference in their lives and then asking that person to do three favors for other people.

*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* Or, rather, as the original saying goes "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn." Legend has those are the words that Hillel the Elder tells a person who was seeking to learn the meaning of the Torah and living a good life. ( Shabbath folio:31a, *Babylonian Talmud*)

When you are tempted to let your frustration or hurt or anger spur you on to seek revenge or get even or hold a grudge try to remember that rather than repaying evil with kindness, by "turning the other cheek" as Jesus admonished, and that unselfishly paying the kindnesses you have received in your life forward to others will be a healing balm to you and well as to the person who may have upset or wronged you. Paying back evil with evil, or grudge with grudge, or insult with insult, will only cause you great heartache for a long while. Communities of faith who know this and practice paying it forward and practice forgiveness and practice a generosity of spirit are churches that are healthy and

survive. Personal relationships that do the same are the ones where true meaning can be found and that last to stand the test of time.

While the outer shells of our lives may take horrible hits from time to time, while it may feel that relationships are wasting away, if we but practice paying it forward, loving and forgiving one another, the tents that we build and invite our neighbors into will be places that shelter us from the storms of life and create lives that are pleasing to God and to our neighbors. Surely the way of love helps renew your inner nature day by day even in a troubled world. Dwell in the tent of the Lord always, moment by moment, and happiness and peace will permeate the core of your very being. Amen.