

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
March 11, 2018
Rev. Kevin M Smith
Psalm 100

“Generosity Changes Everything”

Timmy didn't want to put his money in the offering plate Sunday morning, so his mother decided to use some hurried creative reasoning with him.

“You don't want that money, honey,” she whispered in his ear. “Quick! Drop it in the plate. It's tainted!”

Horrified, the little boy obeyed.

After a few seconds he whispered, “But, mommy, why was the money tainted? Was it dirty?”

“Oh, no dear,” she replied. “It's not really dirty. It just 'taint yours, and it 'taint mine,” she replied. “It's God's.” (<http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/jokes/>)

The Psalmist tells us this morning: know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. (Psalm 100:3) We are God's. We are God's people. In our faith tradition, we are the People of the Way. The people who follow the way of Jesus Christ. Indeed, we are the Body of Christ in this place and in this time. I like the idea that we are his and Jesus is ours.

This idea of belonging to one another is something, indeed, to be thankful for, a relationship with something sacred, something holy, something that is transcendent of what is sometimes a very limited, troubled world. All that we are, all that we have, all that we do, and say, and think taint just mine, taint just yours, it's all part of this mysterious and beautiful spirit of the body of Christ, of the fellowship of God.

What shall we do with this relationship with the holy, the sacred, the transcendent? How do we honor the relationship we have with each other, with the world outside these sanctuary doors; how do we honor God? Let us return to the Psalmist. We hear: enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and God's courts with praise. Give thanks to God, bless God's name. (Psalm 100:4) There are many reasons we come to church on Sunday morning but one of the most important is to give thanks and praise. We enter the doors of this church and into this sanctuary of worship and fellowship with one another and the sacred.

Truly, though, we all know that it is not just the gates of the sheep pen, or the gates of the temple and the court of God, or the doors of the church and the sanctuary that the Psalmist is referring to—no, the world belongs to God, although we humans often forget that until something happens that makes us realize we truly are not in control. God's presence is forever on this little planet we call home, we are just temporary wayfarers and stewards of this precious place. The Psalmist encourages us to make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. (Psalm 100:1) Humankind and all creatures, flora and fauna give praise to the Lord by

fulfilling their nature. The nature of humankind, created in the image of God, is to love. To give love through praise and giving of each other and of being thankful.

Some folks at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California at Berkeley (yes, that's its name, the "greater good science center." What a wonderful name.) have studied giving praise and being generous and what it does for each of us. "According to Jason Marsh and Jill Suttie of the Greater Good Science Center, "When we give to others, we don't only make them feel closer to us; we also feel closer to them." Their research shows that "this is because being generous and kind encourages us to perceive others in a more positive light and fosters a sense of community, a feeling of interconnectedness." I like to think, as well, that practicing generosity, and living with a generous heart and mind, rather than living with a feeling of scarcity or fear or selfishness, is a way to enter this life, enter the gates of God's court, give praise to God and thankfulness to God. Each and every one of us comes into this life with absolutely nothing, at least no material things, and each and every one of us will leave with absolutely nothing material. I, for one, would rather spend all the time in-between those two life and death points feeling good about myself because I've given back to God by giving kindness, love, and compassion, my time, and material things I don't need to others. The funny thing about living life without fear and with generosity is that you end up feeling a whole lot better about yourself. You give and you get.

Huffington Post writer, Lisa Firestone, writes about the finding of research into this and states, "Being generous also makes us feel better about ourselves. Generosity is both a natural confidence builder and a natural repellent of self-hatred. By focusing on what we are giving rather than on what we are receiving, we create a more outward orientation toward the world, which shifts our focus away from ourselves. While maintaining a healthy level of self-awareness and sensitivity to oneself is important, too often we narrow in on ourselves with a negative lens. We spend too much time listening to the 'critical inner voice' in our heads, which scrutinizes our every move and nags at us with negative thoughts towards ourselves and others. These negative thoughts undermine our confidence and can lead to self-sabotage. Being generous distracts us from the critical inner voice's barrage of nasty thoughts and creates a strong argument against it as well. When we see someone else benefiting from our kind actions, for instance, it is hard for the inner voice to argue that we are worthless."
(https://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-firestone/the-benefits-of-generosity_b_5448218.html)

Our God is a good God. Our God is a smart God. God loves us so much that God created phenomena that in people giving to each other it makes them feel good about themselves which, turn leads more people to be generous because, for most of us, we do want to feel good about ourselves. The plan, folks, is for people to take care of each other and to give praise and thanks in rejoicing how good this makes us all feel to love God and each other through being generous within and without ourselves. Rev. Christina Rivera was writing to her congregation about racism, but her words have a lot to say about being generous, too. She wrote, "...as long as we are looking inward at our perceived scarcity we are not looking outward at work that needs to be done in the world." Our God is a good God. Our God is a smart God. Our God knows how we can better heal the brokenness of the world.

Just remember folks, when you make that pledge or give of your time or give of whatever resource you have you are 1) praising and giving thanks to God, 2) helping and loving your neighbor, and 3) you are helping yourself. Take two breaths and repeat. Generosity changes everything. Amen.

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