

Pass It On . . . With Glee

a sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church of Lincoln, Nebraska
by the Rev Dr Jimmy Shelbourn on November 3, 2019 **All Saints' Sunday**
2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 19:1-10

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This morning we are honoring, and rightly so, the memory of 23 members of our congregation – and one former pastor – who passed into eternity since last November. We honor them as “the saints” of the church triumphant in heaven, while we, who are alive and remain on earth are “the church militant.” We still have a daily fight ahead of us to follow Jesus Christ. But the church militant is also made up of “the saints.” We are. You and I.

What is it that makes a saint a saint? Reformed Christians have dismissed the notion that the Church can declare some extraordinarily faithful Christians are the only persons eligible to enter the category of sainthood. It is clear from the New Testament that the term “saint” is applied to **all** the followers of Christ -- warts and all. In fact, in the epistle reading today, we heard the Apostle Paul refer to Christians in Jerusalem as “the saints” . . . even though Paul often had disagreements with James, the leader of the Jerusalem congregation. But they are not and we are not saints because we earned it! **We are saints by grace**, because we are justified . . . saved . . . redeemed . . . given eternal life . . . by God’s grace. As the Anglo-Irish playwright Oscar Wilde noted: “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.”

But God never intended for any of us to simply receive God’s gifts of grace, but rather to pass them on, serving as channels for the gifts of God to flow through us into the lives of others and into the life of the world. So we are not canisters to receive the gifts of God, but conduits through which what we have been given by God can flow to others.

In the Gospel accounts about Jesus -- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John -- we encounter many incidents at the Sea of Galilee. Jesus called his first disciples from among those who fished in the Galilean waters. He preached to a crowd on the shore of this body of fresh water, using a boat as a podium. He and the disciples encountered a storm at sea and Jesus bade the wind and the waves to cease. One of his last recorded appearances after the resurrection, according to John 21, was a breakfast on the shore of Galilee.

The Sea -- really Lake -- of Galilee is fed by on the north end of the lake by the Jordan River. Then, on the south end of the lake, the Jordan River flows on toward the south. The Jordan also feeds the lake to the southeast of Jerusalem, but we call that body of water “the Dead Sea,” because it is so salty -- 9 times saltier than the ocean -- **that** it will not sustain marine life. The sea is “dead” because it only receives the water of the Jordan and **has no outlet**. The Sea of Galilee teems with life because the waters of the Jordan flow **through** it . . . It has an outlet. Likewise, as people who have know the love and grace of God, we need to have an outlet to “pass it on.”

As we read the Bible, we find that God’s activity in the world is usually depicted as being exercised *through* something or someone. The waters of the Red Sea, for instance, did not just magically roll back for Moses and the children of Israel as they fled from Egypt. Rather, as we read in Exodus, a strong wind blew through the night to reveal a path across the inlet of the sea. And when the Jews had been exiled for several generations in Babylonia, their return to Jerusalem was not accomplished with a magic carpet ride to transport them home to Judea; rather, God uses the rise to power of Cyrus, the Persian King, to allow the return -- and THEN the exiled Jews had to **walk hundreds of miles** across a desert, all the way home!

The Westminster Confession of 1646 -- the most influential document apart from the Bible for Presbyterians -- tells us that while God is the first cause of all that happens, **God usually works through secondary agents**: God’s activity in the world is generally indirect (according to chapter 5 of the Confession) -- God uses partners: nature, history, and individuals -- to accomplish the divine purpose for creation.

And we, too, are called into a vital partnership with God. God needs us! And we need God!

A pastor was visiting the home of a parishioner who happened to be an avid gardener. “My,” the pastor exclaimed, “Didn’t the Lord grow you some nice tomatoes this year?!”

“Well, Pastor,” the gardener replied, “I’d just like to ask you if you ever saw this patch of ground when God was tending it without me!”

“Hmm . . . weeds?”

“That’s right! Just weeds! If there were going to be tomatoes, God needed me to till the soil, plant the seeds, and . . .”

“But tell me,” the pastor interrupted, “what could you have grown without God?”

That story illustrates the truth that we need to be in partnership with God if we are to achieve good in the world. The psalmist put it this way:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they who build it labor in vain!”
(*Psalm 127*)

Active partnership with God -- being a **channel** of grace rather than a **canister** of grace -- is what God needs of us, even if it means taking a risk.

One of the most famous recipients of God’s grace was a wee, little man named Zacchaeus. (It’s the children’s song that helps make him famous!) When Jesus singled Zacchaeus out and called him down from the tree, **God’s grace reclaimed someone that others may have regarded as unsalvageable.**

Zacchaeus accepts Jesus’ extension of grace joyfully. The way the New Revised Standard Bibles in our pew racks put it -- Zacchaeus was “happy to welcome Jesus” -- is way too mild to fit the literal Greek text, which is more like: “Zacchaeus received him gleefully!” In the wake of this visit, Zacchaeus is transformed. He is a changed man. And he displays the change that Christ has made in his life with actions that reflect his realization of God’s grace: Zacchaeus follows-through with material responses that impact his pocket! He became a conduit of grace!

Somehow, I imagine that, as Zacchaeus began to give away money and reimburse his former victims, **he was giggling with giddy glee.** The Apostle Paul, in our epistle today, was making an appeal to the Christians at Corinth to participate in a special collection, but he cautioned them “not to give with reluctance or under compulsion, for God loves a **cheerful** giver.”

The forgiven, gleeful Zacchaeus gave way beyond any standard of religious duty: half . . . not a mere tenth . . . but rather **half** of his accumulated wealth he designated for charity to the poor . . . and on top of that, he pledged to restore everyone he had cheated at a 400% rate! At the end of such actions, wealthy Zacchaeus probably was not so wealthy. Not materially. But he had gained wealth beyond measure in knowing the riches of the bounty of God’s love for him.

It is said that all God would really need to *observe* to get an idea of how adequate a follow-through to God's grace is our Christian discipleship are two books: our Bible . . . and our checking account ledger. **Is the Bible well-thumbed? Does the ledger reflect a generous commitment to stewardship and community charities?**

Not that financial stewardship should ever be thought of as a way to curry God's favor!! Remember, [if you were here last week for Pastor Val's sermon] trying to curry God's favor was the tactic of a Pharisee in a parable Jesus had told, who thought he had **earned** God's affection because, among other religious duties, he tithed! No. Stewardship is properly a **response** to the pre-existing fact of God's gracious love, not a tactic to spruce up enough to earn God's good will.

But what is truly great about that summons we receive from God, is that **it is no onerous duty**: it is one that makes the giver glad. Jonathan Murray is a trainer in the area of philanthropy. One thing he tells those who are at his workshops is the secret weapon of charitable organizations: giving to the work of worthy causes, whether religious in orientation or community-based, **makes people feel good**. There's nothing quite like the sense that your contribution has really made a difference!

Discovering that glee in giving may even be vital to your health. The renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger, once related a discussion with a wealthy patient. Menninger asked, "What are you going to do with all your money?"

The patient answered, "Just worry about it, I guess."

Menninger pursued the matter, "Does worry make you happy?"

"No," the man replied, "but I prefer it to the terror I feel when I think of giving it away."

Menninger's conclusion is interesting: "Difficulty in giving can be a symptom of illness. **Generous people are rarely emotionally ill.**"

In the act of practicing our stewardship as an expression of grateful joy, we become capable of being happy, cheerful givers, just as a wee little man named Zacchaeus was, two thousand years ago.

You see, friends, life in a society such as ours can induce such anxieties that we can be frantically busy, **yet not always pursuing God's best intentions for our labors**. The question we need to ask ourselves is, "What is it that each of us can do to engage in partnership with God and make a difference for good in the

world?” God wants us to be partners: channels of God’s grace who know how to **pass it on! And do so with joy!**

Paradoxically, **we do not find real fulfillment in life when we seek only self-fulfillment** -- but a life of conscious partnership with God’s will puts us on track to finding our deepest purposes for our lives, preventing us from work that is an exercise in futility. Jesus was pointing us to this reality when he said, “Those who would try to save their life will lose it.”

That is the key to experiencing the blessedness of being a saint of God, even while we still inhabit the mortal frames of our physical bodies. What the saints who have departed this life now know fully, we can know in part as we pursue God’s will for our lives and our duties in life.

It is a matter of stewardship, not only of our resources, but of the very life that God has given us. **The challenges of faithfulness to the mission of the Church is a challenge that we need to shoulder as the Session builds a budget for 2020, the year in which we will be welcoming a new pastor for a new era in the history of Westminster Church. Will the new pastor find encouragement in the way we responded on November 10 – next week -- to our call to Christian duty?**

I hope that our commitments will be guided, not by our anxieties, but by our willingness to be risk-takers in partnership with God. As we take our part in response to God’s grace, we will find that we have far more blessings when we realize that we are not only **recipients** of God’s bounty, but the **means** that God needs for gleefully *passing on* the grace that we have received, as Zacchaeus did.