

As many of you know, I usually like to preach from the lectionary texts assigned for each Sunday so that you don't have to listen to my pet peeve of any given week. But sometimes I just can't. For instance, the gospel text assigned for today has a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness, and I just couldn't go there today. Fortunately, the worship ministry affirmed my decision to preach a more comforting sermon; Jim said that we needed a group hug, and Ed suggested some sermons on compassion and empathy. So today's text is actually one of the Thanksgiving Day texts, and I found it to be interesting and perhaps a little comforting.

On first reading it sounds like a passage on giving, but it's a special kind of giving. Paul is not talking about pledging to the church budget but about sending a love offering from the Christians in Asia to the suffering Christians in Jerusalem. This was kind of a big deal since the Christians in Jerusalem had not been very hospitable to the Gentile Christians in Asia. They had insisted that first the Gentiles become Jews and then they could become Christians. This had caused a big rift between the early churches, not to mention some hurt feelings. But Paul knows how deeply the Christians living in Jerusalem are suffering and besides his compassion for them, he sees this as an opportunity for his missionary churches in Asia to offer a reconciliatory gesture. So he encourages them to give not out of duty, obligation, fear, or guilt, but rather from the generosity of their hearts to help their brothers and sisters in need.

At least on this one Sunday of the year, I am supposed to preach on stewardship. I have never been very good at preaching on money, but I do have something to say about giving and generosity which are truly matters of the heart. Generosity is easy to preach on in this community because it's what you already are every day of the year.

I thought a lot this week about our church and the generous spirit I see in so many of you. I thought about the very difficult financial hardships many of you face, and how some of you who have carried this church for some years can no longer financially do so. I know this pains your heart. Yet, these circumstances offer an opportunity for those of us who have not been financially hurt from this economy to give to the church on your behalf. We need to give all we can in order to ease the burden and sorrow of those who cannot do so this year.

On the other hand, we have been incredibly blessed by receiving the special Centennial gift earlier this year. Perhaps this gift came for such a time as this. We had hoped to use this as reserve for some well planned future obligations. But that may have been our plan and not the plan of the One (with a capital O) sending this gift our way. Perhaps this gift is our financial bridge from one century of ministry into the next.

Giving is so much more than money. With Thanksgiving approaching I began to recall the moments we've shared this year, moments of great thanksgiving. We've had the opportunity to celebrate the good times and share the burden of difficult times. This is the church at its best.

A generous giver is one who's heart-orientation is towards the Divine and the Divine's hopes and dreams for all creation. A generous giver gives to that which makes his or her heart sing. A generous giver is one who is moved from a place of deep compassion and recognition that we are all interconnected; together we are strong.

Here at this church we manage to do so much on a very tight budget. I celebrate the commitment to mission, acts of mercy and justice, to which you give so generously. I celebrate

the passion that Michael and the choir bring to our worship of God offering something beautiful each week that lifts us to new heights of joy.

I celebrate Christina and her great devotion to our children--the careful way she treats them and balances order and creative chaos, the thought she spends on the trips they take and activities they do.

I celebrate Alice, our office administrator and adopted Unitarian, who is generous with her time and talents and eager to do whatever she can for our church. I celebrate all who volunteer to make this church run week after week. They give in these ways because giving to God is a matter of the heart and their hearts are turned towards God.

Now I wish I could tell you that Paul's church experience ended all happy-like. But it didn't. He received the love offering of reconciliation and went on to Jerusalem. The Christians in Jerusalem did not completely welcome him since Paul preached a more extravagant welcome of the gospel in which he said Gentiles did not have to become Jews before becoming Christian. In a prideful act, the Jerusalem Christians said that if they were to even accept this offering, that they badly needed, Paul would have to use a certain amount of the money for purification rites. I guess the money was tainted because it came from Gentiles and needed a good washing.

And of course, Paul's Gentile friends were to stay only in the outer courtyard in order not to defile the temple. While he was performing the purification rites, Jews visiting from Asia came to the temple, and they recognized Paul and had him arrested. Can you imagine? Here Paul brings a gift desperately needed, and the pride of the very people he's trying to help puts him in harms way, resulting in his arrest!

But Paul is not only a Jew but also a Roman citizen and so he kind of has an out. He insists that he be taken to Rome for trial; Paul figures the enemy will treat him more kindly than his own folk. The Jews must comply, whether they want to or not, and so he is shipped out to Rome. Talk about a dysfunctional church! Makes us look great in comparison.

But lest we get too uppity, it might be good to think about where we would draw the line of religious purity today. The names change but the situations often stay the same. Any church that keeps someone out of their sanctuary because of race, social status, sexual orientation, age or ability is doing what the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem did.

We must stay humble and always look in the mirror so that we do our best to be faithful and loving and true. Paul preached love, and he said that giving comes from recognizing the indescribable gift of God's love for us, and that that love knows no boundaries. And that is why we try to be faithful and offer an extravagant welcome.

So may we love as we have been loved. May we encourage our friends who are suffering for whatever reason. Let us celebrate the joys of the community. Let us turn in our pledges as we are able so that Steve can put together a responsible budget for next year. Let's make his day! Let us imagine walking in the shoes of our friends and neighbors and encourage them in their struggles. May the matters of our hearts be the same ones that matter to God, today, and in all the days ahead. And let's think about our closing circle as a kind of group hug because sometimes we need it. Amen!