

St. Paul's Congregational Church
March 24, 2019
Isaiah 55: 1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

What a beautiful invitation to grace we heard at the very beginning of our Isaiah passage – everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat! Written at the end of the Babylonian exile, Isaiah is offering a displaced people new hope. With this graceful offer, though, comes a note of judgment – God calls the people to turn to God and change their way of life.

Then the psalm provides a response to Isaiah's invitation to renewal – a seeking for God that's like an ache – my whole being desires you; like a dry, worn-out waterless land – my soul is thirsty for you. In the psalm we hear of the grace of knowing God as the bringer of joy and protection – available to all who would accept God's offer.

Then we have the parable of the fig tree – an image for the judgment and grace they can yet choose. This is a tough, harsh passage, isn't it – the fig tree which takes 3 years to reach maturity, hasn't produced any fruit. The owner wants it cut down – it's taking up valuable space – but the gardener asks for another year of fertilizing and care to see if the tree will yet produce. There is still time to turn away from that course of action, and with the gardener's help, to bear fruit. But it cannot take forever.

Yes, this is a tough passage – but it offers a word of good hope. God is still tending the garden. God is still working in and through God's people to bring light and life, love and peace to a broken and sinful world. And in that, there is indeed hope for us all.

There's another parable that has become a model, a goal that has informed my own faith, that invitation for grace and the choices we make:

The man was half dead. He had been robbed of his money and clothes, and then he had been severely beaten. Fortunately, someone from the nearby church came down the road. But when he saw him, he walked quickly away on the other side of the road from the tragic sight.

Then a church assistant came by, glanced at the man, and decided it was best not to get involved.

A third man came down the road, and it seemed likely that he would be no different from the first two. Besides, he wasn't even from that community. He was an outcast, a member of another ethnic group with

whom the local church people had little contact. In fact, they deliberately avoided going anywhere near “those people.”

But this man did not walk past the victim lying by the side of the road. Instead, he stopped, dressed the man’s wounds, put him on his donkey, took him to an inn. He got him settled, stayed the night with him, and left him in the care of the innkeeper. Before leaving, the outcast covered the expenses and promised to pay any remaining bills when he returned.

Jesus told this parable in response to a religious scholar who asked the question, “What must I do to receive eternal life?” When Jesus asked him what the Law of Moses said, he answered: “Love God wholeheartedly and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus responded, “Do this, and you will live.” But the scholar asked, “Who is my neighbor?” And as his answer, Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan – a profound story that cuts through the prejudice and social roles of the times – a story that gives us a model of generosity and self-giving love that is timeless. And, of course, we have the very example of Jesus’ life to teach us all we need to know about what it means to be generous and giving of our selves – if we call ourselves Christians, if we are serious about our roles as disciples, this is how we’re called to live, this is how we’re called to love. With no thought of reward – just because it’s the right thing to do.

At church council meetings we’re talking about what is the mission of this church? Simply put, it’s to foster love of God and love of neighbor – to share the good news with all we meet.

How do we do that? Our children’s moments have given us clues I think – Lent is a time of prayer. Lent is a time of growing. This week we heard that Lent is a time of sharing.

Today after worship I’ll deliver the Church World Service health kits we put together to Park United Church for those in need around the world. Last week we heard the beautiful image: gathering God’s people together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings - today we introduced our Sunday School project for the remainder of Lent – to purchase flocks of chickens through Heifer Project to help families around the world become more self sufficient. And the basket in the back of the sanctuary almost always has your food donations to be shared with the Family Service Food Bank. All of this is a wonderful thing – our financial and material gifts are important to be sure – we can be generous in these ways and make quite a difference in peoples’ lives.

But generosity is not just about money. Our self-giving, our generosity, can also happen in small, almost invisible ways. Profound, sacred moments of reaching out, profound and sacred moments when lives

are changed, when the Spirit moves softly and gently, no fanfare, no public acclamation, but when lives are touched, never to be the same.

I wonder if that isn't one of the most profound lessons of the parable of the Good Samaritan – that Samaritan man wasn't on a mission to help someone – he was traveling somewhere, perhaps to meet someone, to keep an appointment. It was “as he was going” that he helped the man lying by the side of the road. Here's the point: we don't have to make elaborate plans to help, to serve others – we need to be alert to the needs of people as we go about our daily lives!

We are called to be generous, to give of ourselves, our very selves to whoever is in our path. Not to look away, not to cross the street, not to avoid what seems hard – but to enter into another's life without expecting anything in return. And isn't that countercultural – in living generously, we don't ask what's in it for us – we just do it. Because Jesus told us to. That's all the reason we need.

And you know, sometimes the one reaching out, the giver if you will, has no idea of how he or she has touched a life, has no idea of what a difference a small, seemingly insignificant, word or touch or action has made.

So, think about your lives - where and when have you been touched in a quiet way - when you have suddenly realized that God has touched you through another person in a most unexpected way? It's happened to all of us, I'm sure. We need to take the time and energy to realize it and thank God for it and then pass it on. We've all been “the least of these” in some way, at some time.

In Middlebury our Sunday School children raised money year after year to buy cereal for our local food bank. Members of the congregation were faithful in bringing in their cereal coupons so the money would go even further. Well, there was one day when I was at the Stop and Shop – I knew which cereals were on sale, I'd carefully sorted out coupons - I was at the checkout with about 35 boxes of cereal. The woman behind me in line watched as I set it out. She said, “You either have lots of children, run a daycare, or you really like cereal.” I told her about our Sunday School project, that the cereal was all going to the food bank. She said thoughtfully, “It's good of you all to do that.” While the checker was ringing up the boxes, the woman packer was loading them into bags. She asked me, “Which food bank?” I told her and she said, “A few months ago we had a terrible fire in our house - we lost everything. That Food Bank gave us food - we didn't have anything else. Thank you for what you do.”

This project touched everyone in that immediate vicinity at the Stop and Shop that morning. And all of a sudden our Sunday School cereal project had a face. All of a sudden the “least of these” had a face. What a blessing that was.

That’s one of the challenges, isn’t it. We so easily forget that the “least of these” does have a face. Does have a story. How willing are we to see that face? To touch that pain? To minister to that need, whatever it is. And to see that glow of thanksgiving that indeed, there are people we don’t even know who care. Who care and share.

Self-giving isn’t just about money, is it. It’s very risky business - it’s not so easy to detach from the need “out there” when you’re serving at a soup kitchen, delivering a bed to a family in part of the city you’ve never been in before, handing out food at the food bank. It’s risky business to open ourselves to another’s pain, to another’s need, and then to respond. But that’s what we’re called to do. Just like the Good Samaritan did.

Money is important. Things are important. But, even more important to the mission of the church is presence. Presence - the giving, the sharing, of our very selves without thought for reward, the selfless giving of ourselves just because it’s the right thing to do. The sharing of the God in me with the God in you. That can be the risky-iest of all, but there’s no greater joy anywhere. And, you know, we so often don’t even know we’re doing it. We don’t know the full impact, either as the giver or the receiver. Perhaps we never receive the gift of knowing – but maybe we will - later.

I share with you a story I received some years ago from a friend:

When I was quite young, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember well the polished old case fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother used to talk to it. Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person - her name was “information please” and there was nothing she did not know. “Information please” could supply anybody’s number and the correct time.

My first personal experience with this genie-in-the bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn’t seem to be any reason to cry because there was no one home to give sympathy. I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway.

The telephone! Quickly I ran for a foot stool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver in the parlor

and held it to my ear. “Information please,” I said into the mouthpiece just above my head. A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into my ear.

“Information.”

“I hurt my finger,” I wailed into the phone. The tears came readily enough now that I had an audience.

“Isn’t your mother home?” came the question.

“Nobody’s home but me,” I blubbered.

“Are you bleeding,” the voice asked.

“No,” I replied. “I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts.”

“Can you open your icebox?” she asked. I said I could. “Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it to your finger,” said the voice.

After that, I called “information please” for everything. I asked her for help with my geography and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math. She told me my pet chipmunk, that I had caught in the park just the day before, would eat fruit and nuts.

Then, there was the time Petey, our pet canary died. I called and told her the story. She listened, then said the usual things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was unconsolated. I asked her, “Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of the cage.”

She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, “Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in.” Somehow I felt better.

Another day I was on the telephone. “Information please.”

“Information” said the familiar voice.

“How do you spell fix?”

All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. When I was 9 years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much. “Information please” belonged in that old wooden box back home, and somehow I never thought of trying the tall, shiny new phone that sat on the table in the hall.

As I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me. Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity, I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about half an hour or so between planes. I spent 15 or so minutes on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then, without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said,

“Information Please.” Miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well. “Information.”

I hadn’t planned this but I heard myself saying, “Could you please tell me how to spell fix?”

There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, “I guess your finger must have healed by now.”

I laughed. “So it’s really still you,” I said. “I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time.”

“I wonder,” she said, “if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children, and I used to look forward to your calls.”

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister.

“Please do,” she said. “Just ask for Sally.”

Three months later I was back in Seattle. A different voice answered, “Information”. I asked for Sally.

“Are you a friend,” she asked.

“Yes, a very old friend,” I answered.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this,” she said. “Sally had been working part-time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago.” Before I could hang up, she said, “Wait a minute. Did you say your name was Paul?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you.” The note said, “Tell him I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He’ll know what I mean.”

I thanked her and hung up. I knew what Sally meant.

Let us never underestimate the impression we may make on others. Let us never underestimate the statement we always make about who we are and whose we are. Let us always be aware that we are in mission, everywhere, anywhere. Let us be generous with our selves – let us be open to the generosity of others. Let us always remember that Jesus comes to us when we least expect it. Whose life has touched yours today? Whose life have you touched today? How will you share your time, talents, your treasure? Your presence? Will we recognize Jesus when He comes to visit us? Amen.