

‘Thanks and Giving’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
November 26, 2017
based on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 and Luke 17:11-19

I’ve never quite figured out how it works ... all I know is that it always does.
I’m talking about generosity. It really is true ... the more you give away, the more you receive.

What I do know, though, is that you can’t force generosity.
You can’t say, “Gee, I could really use a little more than I have right now, so I think I’ll be nice and give something away.”

Here is a story by Michele Pitman that helps with this point:

[Children’s Message story:]
THE GARDEN by Michele Pitman

Once there was a man who had a garden. In this garden he had leeks, daisies, peas, potatoes, apples, grapes, fennel, gardenias, and sage. He carefully tended his patch every day making sure there were no weeds that would come and devour his crop.

As the produce in his garden began to ripen and flower the man harvested them. He found that he had more than sufficient for his own needs so he decided he would share them with others.

He gave the leeks to an old lady across the road from him who did not have a family to love her.

He gave some daisies to the man whose smile of joy was a sight to behold.

He gave the peas to the little girl who had seen a war and was now glad she was far away from it.

He gave the potatoes to a mother with four children praying silently that she might be strengthened with patience and kindness.

He gave some delicious apples to a neighbor who had been kind to him many times past.

He gave grapes to a good young woman who was studying to be a doctor.

He gave the fennel to the fishmonger who worked hard and had loved his wife faithfully for over 45 years.

He gave the gardenias to the gentle girl who was looking for a job.

And he gave the sage to an old farmer who had lost everything in a drought but was self-controlled enough not to blame himself or anyone else for his misfortune.

As each of the recipients used the fruit, vegetables, and flowers the man had given them, something strange and wonderful began to happen in their lives.

- The old lady with the leeks began to know love.
- The old man who received the daisies was filled with joy.
- The little girl with the peas knew peace at last.

- The lady with the potatoes knew about divine patience and kindness.
- The neighbor, with the apples, felt kindness swell within his breast.
- The young woman with the grapes knew supreme goodness.
- The fishmonger with the fennel grew to love his wife even more.
- The gentle girl with the gardenias was gentler still.
- And the old farmer with the sage knew freedom in his self-control.

The man's bountiful harvests grew bigger each year and more and more people shared in the special gifts the amazing plants brought to them. Some of the people planted seeds from these plants and began to harvest crops of their own which they then shared with those around them.

And so, the garden grew and kept on growing - and the man? Well! He received a hundred times more than he gave. Not in fruit or flowers nor in vegetables or herbs but of the good and generous spirit in which he had shared his first harvest.

May you too, know such a garden in your life!

Please pray with me:

Generous and gracious God, plant within us this day seeds of gratitude. By your Spirit nurture us and shine your face upon us ... that we may be encouraged to walk in the way of Christ.

Amen.

Generosity, thankfulness, and gratitude are most fruitful when they are Spirit bred. That means our generous and thankful approach to life must be embedded or planted deep within how we live our lives. That is Jesus' way.

In order to reap a bounty of abundant life we must sow seeds of gratitude.

Today we read two readings from the Bible: One of the Apostle Paul's theology of giving from 2 Corinthians ... and the other about the power of being thankful in Luke.

For Apostle Paul, the theology of giving (how we think of God in terms of giving) was the heart of Jesus' good news message. Paul knew a new Jesus follower would not be able to live into their baptismal vows if they did not let go of their old ways and share in new ways.

It was this sharing with one another that cemented the believers together in a bond of love. ... and it was the bond of love that best exemplified the amazing gift of God's grace.

We do that today! This isn't stodgy, ancient theology. We are surrounded by a theology of giving.

In this season of giving we can find all around us people ringing hand bells standing next to red buckets; there are Open Door Mission ads on TV testifying to the power of recovery to bring people to the faith; and on Nov. 28 is Giving Tuesday.

We express our love for God and for one another in our theology of giving.

Two weeks ago you received a newsletter in the mail along with a yellow Financial Commitment card inviting you to share with our Finance Committee your intentions in 2018 to support the mission and ministry of Covenant.

This information is very important to the Finance Committee as they strive to be good stewards of Covenant's financial assets. Thank you to those who have already returned your sheet.

If you have not turned in your yellow Financial Commitment card yet, please do so soon. There are extra sheets on the back table. There are also additional newsletters if you didn't receive one in the mail.

Giving to Covenant's mission and ministry is part of our thanking Jesus and praising God!

Our other scripture reading was from the Gospel of Luke.

At the heart of this story is a man with leprosy ... who, along with nine of his friends had been outcast from society. A leper was segregated from all human contact. Their only sense of community was to be with other lepers.

The ten men hear of Jesus and as he passes by they call out for mercy.

Jesus hears their plea and gives them simple instructions, which they follow. Each is cured ... but only one healed leper returns to thank Jesus and praise God. The man is deeply grateful!

The man credits Jesus and praises God for his healing.

The man's gratitude came from the heart ... and that deep sense of gratitude to Jesus is what Martin Luther referred to as 'the heart of the Gospel.'

This basic Christian attitude of gratitude is embedded in our communion liturgy; in our prayers; and in our giving.

A heart-felt, sincere expression of gratitude is the primary element in our living out the good news of Jesus.

Living the good news of Jesus means ...

When we feed the hungry starving for a word of hope; we offer food out of heart-felt gratitude for what God has already given us through the Word.

When we clothe those stripped of dignity; we give in gratitude for the robe of Christ we each wear.

When we visit the sick and homebound; we do so with a genuine sense of gratitude and hope for the health and wholeness of us all.

Not giving out of obligation ... but giving out of love.

If we claim to be amazed at grace, then let's share the amazement.

When we do those things ... we open the door to a creation God destines for us.

There is one thing that's important to remember on this last Sunday of the Christian year before we begin the season of Advent.

The point is this: If we don't have the heart for being the representatives for Christ, then it probably means we don't live thankfully and generously.

CHRIST GAVE ALL to make sure those who suffered would be tended to; the hungry would be fed; the least, last and lost dignified and the lowly raised up.

When we live and breathe and have our being in synch with Christ, those who experienced loneliness will be loved; those who need encouragement will be encouraged; those who are marginalized will be included.

That is Christ's way. That is our way.

We just celebrated a day that was originally meant to be Giving Thanks for what God

gave to us out of God's bountiful garden. Thanksgiving is a time to not only give thanks, but to give as well.

Jesus hears our plea ... we are healed by grace ... and we should be rushing back to Jesus ... fall at his feet ... and say "thank you Jesus!" and "Praise God for the richness of the bounty!"

On this holiday and every holy day, as we offer our thanksgiving for all our blessings, let us also generously share food, and clothing, and peace, and love, and joy, that we may be harvesters of the very heart of Christ's gospel.

May it be so.

Amen.