

Making Church

Exodus 25:1-17

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
Gratitude Sunday – November 12, 2017

I.

At the risk of creating confusion, we have named today Gratitude Sunday.

It risks confusion because next Sunday is Thanksgiving Sunday.

There is, of course, not much difference between the two.

Today we are pausing to express gratitude to God for providing for the life of this church's local ministry and wider mission through the response of members and friends to this year's Annual Appeal.

Next Sunday, we will join in the chorus of voices offering thanksgiving to God for the harvest, for our neighbors, and for the freedoms we still enjoy.

On both occasions, we will need to resist the temptation to sentimentalize our gratitude and our thanksgiving.

To be grateful is sometimes a feeling, but it is more often a practice, a way of being in the world.

Gratitude and thanksgiving are deeper when they are practiced in the face of scarcity and doubt.

Several weeks ago, I visited our member Bob Harper on the day he was placed in Hospice Care.

Unable to remain comfortable in his bed, Bob moved to his wheelchair and asked to be pushed outside in the sunshine.

I was lucky enough to be assigned that job.

Up and down their shared driveway I pushed him in the warm glow of the day.

And he talked about the beautiful flowers in a nearby yard, and the smell of the tomato plants in the community garden, and the close-knit feeling of his neighborhood.

Bob died two days later, but not without practicing simple gratitude for little things close to him.

And Bob's practice of gratitude affected me, and others who spent time with him in his final days.

When we gather as the church, one of our primary roles is to express gratitude.

The very existence of the church is to provide a testimony to the given-ness of life.

It is *all* gift, not earned, nor requested, not conjured, nor coerced.
All of it is gift, which prompted poet Mary Oliver to ask, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

II.

Our wider culture has a hard time imagining all of life as a gift.
Instead, everything of value is a product.

Who we are is so often equated with what we own – where we live, what degrees we earned, what our job title is, what we drive, what we eat, and what gadgets we carry.

Lest we think the crunchy residents of West County are immune to this kind of valuing, consider the social capital gained driving electric, shopping the farmers' market, drinking shade grown coffee, and worshiping with crystals at the base of a redwood tree.

Nothing wrong with those things, I'm just saying they don't avoid the attitude in our culture which says that your lifestyle is the sum of your worth.

A friend of mine once showed off his new jeans.

"I bought them online," he said, "directly from the person who grew the cotton, dyed the cloth, sewed the seams, and fashioned the buttons."

His wife, overhearing our conversation, chimed in, "Yeah, but tell him how much they cost."

"\$400," he said, half sheepishly, half triumphantly.

I'm still saving up for my pair.

The church is not immune to the values of the world to which it belongs and of which it is a part and an expression.

We like our grounds to be well cared for and our website to be up-to-date and our Christmas Eve services to splurge on new candles every year and our minister to have a degree from Harvard, if possible.

While we mimic many of the values around us, the church does have the capacity to imagine the given-ness of life.

In this sense, the church's job is to take life for granted, not in the sense of lacking appreciation, but in the sense of knowing, deeply, that life is granted, never taken.

Our Confirmation Class was asked to write down questions they had on index cards, questions about Christianity or the church or whatever.

One question was, "Who wrote the Bible and why do we trust it so much?"

Really, that was two questions. The first, "Who wrote the Bible?" is not easy to answer, but my best, Harvard-educated stab was, "The Bible is a collection of writings

spanning about 1000 years. It includes different genres, such as poetry, epic stories, proverbs, songs, histories, oracles, gospels, prophecies, and others. Much of it existed in oral form before it was ever written down. And much of it was edited and compiled by communities of people rather than individuals. Therefore, the Bible is better understood as a small library than as a single book."

I could tell that my answer was not entirely satisfying to everyone there.

I could see some of them thinking, "So, did God write it or not?"

The second question – why do we trust it so much? – could be answered both individually – why do or don't you trust it? – but also communally – why has the church passed along this strange collection of writings?

Shouldn't we open up the canon again, adding writings of Walter Rauschenbusch and Dorothy Day and Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail and Marilynne Robinson's novels?

Perhaps, but the beauty and challenge of the Bible we have received is that we never would have written it or chosen it.

It has been given to us as a strange and slippery gift, and somehow this text has become the basis of who we are as a people.

We are, in this sense, a text-ed people, a script-ed people, a story-ed people.

And this text, this script, this story provides a basis for imagining ourselves, the church, and the entire world, as gift given by a gracious Giver who keeps on giving.

III.

Last week, we heard the Ten Commandments read and interpreted in a couple different translations.

In the Children's Message, we heard them called the "Best Ways."

We are asked to trust that these ways are the best ways, first, because they are given by Yahweh directly to Moses, God's chosen leader.

We are also asked to trust them because they provide the basis of a society that is an alternative to that of Pharaoh.

In Egypt under Pharaoh, everything was commodified and the people had to work without rest, making more and more bricks to satisfy the economy.

By contrast, in the wilderness, under Yahweh, everything was gift – think manna from the sky and water from a rock and the people were commanded to rest, as well as to look out for the neighborhood by refusing to be in competition with the neighbor.

Do not covet.

Do not want what belongs to your neighbor.

The Ten Commandments appear in Exodus 20.

The next four chapters spell out additional commandments that relate to establishing an alternative to Pharaoh's economy of incessant work and consumption.

And then, in Exodus 25, there is a shift.

It is a shift just like the shift we make every Sunday in our liturgy.

Liturgy is the name we give to our order, or flow of worship.

Every Sunday, we make an audacious shift in our liturgy, asking each other to open our wallets, our checkbooks, our bank accounts, our paypal apps, and to give money to the church.

My preaching professor at Harvard – how many times can I namedrop my alma mater this morning? – my preaching professor was Peter Gomes.

I once attended a service at Memorial Church in Harvard Yard that Rev. Gomes was leading.

He expressed the audaciousness of the time of offering by inviting our gifts in this way: “So that the church might survive, even thrive, it needs your money. And you need to give it. In that spirit, we will now receive the morning’s offering.”

That’s the shift that Exodus makes in chapter 25.

God instructs Moses to collect an offering from the people.

Yahweh speaks to Moses using some very gracious language: “From all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me.”

You heard what was being asked – all kinds of precious things, jewels, cloth, oil lamps, spices.

It turns out these are all of the things that will be required to build an ark and a tabernacle and all the other religious accoutrements required to worship God.

Scholars tell us that this part of Exodus was written and compiled by a priestly class who were concerned with proper and ordered worship.

For several chapters, the tools of worship are described.

Frankly, it’s a boring read, but we should not underestimate the powerful imaginative work that is found in these verses.

What is being imagined is a way to host the holiness of God in the midst of a sojourning people.

In our day of pragmatic solutions and psychological interpretations and material comforts and technological marvels, it is hard to understand why it might be important to find ways to host the holiness of God.

And yet that is exactly the purpose of the offering Yahweh asks of Moses and Moses asks of the people.

That is exactly the purpose of the ark and the mercy seat with its golden cherubim and the tabernacle and the candle stands and the curtains and the vestments and all the rest.

That is the purpose of the piano and the organ, of the choir and the hymnbook, of the acolytes and ministers, of the liturgists and the ushers, of the greeters and guestbook,

of the pews and vaulted ceiling, of the bell and the chimes, of the coffee and the cupcakes, of the Children's Message and the Pastoral Prayer.
We are creating a place in this world that would not otherwise exist.
We are creating a place that hosts the presence of the Holy One.
A presence that would otherwise be made into a product.
We are creating a place where an ancient text creates a community.
A community that would otherwise be dispersed.
We are creating a place where songs offer a word of hope.
A hope that would otherwise be unheard.
We are creating a place where people of several generations know each other's names and faces and stories.
Names and faces and stories that would otherwise be undervalued.
A place where people gather in our brokenness to be baptized into an alternative narrative and nurtured at a table of reconciliation where we refuse to compete with and compare ourselves to our neighbors.
A place where we witness God knitting back together the frayed edges of the world.
This is why church matters.
Karl Barth said it like this: "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

IV.

Or, to put it another way, against Pharaoh's version of reality, everything is gift and there is enough for everyone when we remember the neighborhood.
Our current president is a major spokesman for the Pharaonic way of constructing reality.
It is a reality in which there is only so much to go around, which is why he can say he admires one country's ability to take advantage of another country.
Against that view, the church gathers in response to the given-ness of life.
Receiving the world as gift, the work of making a church is as simple as the four words spoken by a child in our church's Rainbow Bread video.
Water - Water through which the Israelites passed over from the comfortable slavery of Egypt and into the uncomfortable freedom of the wilderness. Water to baptize into the narrative of Jesus, a narrative of fellowship with God and neighbor.
Sugar - The sweetness of the Word of Life expressed through poetry and song and dance and service and preaching and prayer and silence and simply showing up to be in community.
Bread - Bread of Life which is broken for you and for me so the life of Jesus may come into our very bodies and so that we may be sent out as Christ's hands and feet to heal a hurting world. It's interesting that "bread" is also an old euphemism for

“money.” Somehow, our money-bread must be broken and shared in order to have value, even increase in value.

And, finally, People. The church is in the people business. We are about the business of each other, building each other up, encouraging each other, practicing radical hospitality and equality so that we might become the beloved community that lives out the story of a God who is about the business of creating a people who love the neighbor as much as they love themselves.

It doesn't take that much to make church: Water, Sugar, Bread, People.

Let us pray:

Holy God, whether we feel it right now or not, we are most grateful for your gifts, for the gift of life itself.

There is not one thing we own that did not first come from you.

We thank you for the gift of the church throughout the countries of the world, including this country;

We thank you for the voice of the church in many places which speaks prophetic truth to corrupted power.

And we are grateful for our own little community of hope, which we have received as a gift.

Open our hearts so that we might generously tend to this place and to all people who will find healing through our ministries.

We thank you that we are not alone, that we have each other, and that we gather in your mysterious presence to worship you every Sunday.

We thank you that your presence goes with us into the streets, into our neighborhoods, into our schools and places of work, into our relationships and into the wider world which you so love.

In the name of the one who is our guide and constant companion, we pray, and hereby declare that your world is the one true world and that you alone are the one true God. Amen.