

# ENCOURAGEMENT TO GIVE OF OURSELVES

October 26, 2014

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalms 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

6<sup>th</sup> in the *Encouragement to be Lights* Series

**Encouragement to Give of Ourselves**

John 12:35

Job 24:13

Isaiah 60:1

Acts 13:47

2 Corinthians 8:1-12



The most difficult subject about which most any of us might be asked to talk is giving and yet that is what we are going to do today. Be assured that this is the most uncomfortable subject for pastors. Quite simply we don't want to introduce the subject because it really feels so self-serving. It feels so wrong to encourage people to give of themselves when we might benefit and frankly we do. Our salaries come from the sacrificial giving of others and to talk about this subject publically makes us feel absolutely awful. I have seen poverty. Martha and I saw it yesterday when we went down to Peoples Ministry in Christ, a ministry in the city of Rochester on Dewey Avenue. The ministry is a mission project of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley. When funds are given to the Presbytery, some of it goes to this mission on Dewey Avenue. People living on SSI (Social Security Supplemental Income), some of them homeless first gathered in this run-down building for prayer. There were children there, too.

We set up tables and then in the parking lot of a convenience store of sorts, took out donated clothing. We put out winter coats that we had brought and clothing that you had donated. It wasn't there for sale, although we thought that offering things for sale might have provided some dignity. We have wondered if making available for a small price – even \$.10 says to someone, "It wasn't handed to me, I purchased this." But, everything there was free. It was Blessing Day.

How in the world? How dare I come here this morning and file this passage in 2 Corinthians for us and encourage people to give when I am blessed and I see people who are not. Late yesterday afternoon I went out to move the grass and rake leaves and thought about the people on Dewey Avenue as I went about lawn care.

I thought that I might escape a little of what I had seen so in the evening we went to the Geva to see the play *Good People*. I really didn't know much about the play except that it was set

in urban Boston. But the play is actually about a single mother who loses her job at a Dollar Store and whose entertainment is going to a Bingo parlor. It was a contrast between those who struggle and those whose lives appear on the outside to be blessed. The play is amazingly well acted and directed. It is entertaining and may be a performance that will have those who see it want to sit down and discuss what it was they saw, really. In regards to thinking about *Encouraging us to Give*, it didn't help dissipate or relieve how uncomfortable I feel.<sup>1</sup>

It seems so trite to say that we feel better about ourselves when we share and give away our talent, but this is what has been taught from the beginning, starting with Jesus. "Why can't I do this as easily as what the Apostle Paul does when he writes to the Corinthians?" I thought. He doesn't anguish with guilt or wallow in embarrassment.

You and I are blessed. Millions of people in the world today would be thrilled to have the problems you and I have. Most of us have access to good health care, are blessed by people who love us, and we tend to secure food for our tables. It is important to note that we have the freedom to worship and that the resurrected Christ is alive in the action of so many in this room.

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<sup>1</sup> In South Boston, this month's paychecks cover last month's bills, bingo is a night on the town, and sharp-tongued single-mom Margie Walsh has been let go from yet another job. Scrambling to make ends meet, she risks what little she has left to look up an old flame, hoping he'll help her make a fresh start. Nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play, a humor-filled drama from Pulitzer Prize winner David Lindsay-Abaire about how twists of fate can determine our path. **By** David Lindsay-Abaire, **Directed by** Mark Cuddy, **Scenic Design by** Jo Winiarski, **Costume Design by** Devon Painter, **Lighting Design by** Ann G. Wrightson, **Sound Design by** Lindsay Jones, **Dramaturgy by** Jenni Werner

Maybe I ought to do what a minister in a little country church did who was having trouble with the offering. One Sunday he announced, "Now, before we pass the offering plate, I would like to request that the person who stole the chickens from Brother Martin's henhouse please refrain from giving any money to the Lord. The Lord doesn't want money from a thief!"

The ushers received the offering and it seemed that everyone in the congregation put something into it that Sunday.

Some of you have listened to Paul Harvey. Several years ago, about Thanksgiving time, he told a true story about a couple who had a left over, "we're poor" mentality rather than an "abundance" mentality. The way Mr. Harvey relayed the tale needs the back-up information that each year the Butterball Turkey Company sets up a hotline to answer consumer questions about preparing Thanksgiving turkeys.

One woman called to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in her freezer for twenty-three years! Yes, that's right. Twenty-three years! The operator told her it might still be safe to serve the turkey if the freezer had been kept below 0° degrees the entire time. The Butterball operator warned the woman that, even if it were safe, the flavor had probably deteriorated, and she wouldn't recommend eating it.

The caller replied, "That's what we thought," and without missing a beat add the words, "We'll just give it to the church." It kind of makes you cry, doesn't it? It is a story that makes your skin itch. But that is just one of the things that the skin does. Did you know that your skin is the largest organ of your body? It is also the oldest, the first one developed in the womb. It is sensitive, that is why it itches.

Its function is more complex than being just the "wrapper" that holds you together. It sends physical messages of heat and cold, pain and pleasure, and psychological messages of love and friendship, of faith and hope.

The skin has some 50 receptors per 100 square millimeters. Within these receptors are tactile points (from 7 to 135 per square centimeter). On the back of your hand you have very few of these tactile points; in the palm of your hand you have many more; and on the tips of your fingers (where you can really feel things), you have the most. From all of these tactile points you have about a half a million sensory fibers that carry messages to the spinal cord by the posterior roots and on up to the brain.

Continual breakthroughs in information about the skin have happened since serious study began in the 1940's. Since those early days it has not been uncovered that the skin can tell us about our moral well-being. - Moral in the sense of your morale. Contact with others - or the lack of it - mysteriously affects us. Contact can destroy or heal. The gospels contain a about a woman healed and a little girl raised to life through the touch of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> It occurred to me that I really didn't want to put the "touch" on anyone about the subject of Stewardship, but nonetheless recognize that unless we feel touched and spiritually moved and motivated, we may continue along the same path without any challenge for us to reconsider the nature of our giving.

Without anticipating anything unusual I consulted a large dictionary and looked up the word *touch*. There was an extensive listing under the word - fourteen full columns. The sheer enormity of the definitions stood in testimony to the influence which the tactile experience of hand and fingers has had upon our imagery and our speech.

God touched the world through the incarnation - the embodiment in skin of the Christ. Jesus, in turn, touched humanity - laying his hands on

those in need in order to heal, to give life, and to comfort. So strong was this power of contact that he even knew when power left his body for another when the woman in the Gospel merely touched the hem of his garment.

Back in 1972 anyone who worked with youth picked up a copy of a book entitled *Values Clarification* by Sidney Simon, Leland Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum. It was a handbook of strategies for teachers and students to explore moral behavior by examining their values. The book contains a series of exercises that helps you clarify your values, and what was published for use in the public school was soon adapted and improved for use in church settings.

A little later, Sidney Simon, professor of education at the University of Massachusetts published another book entitled, *Caring, Feeling, Touching*. In it he writes,

*There is a deep seated hunger within us that no amount of food can satisfy. It is hunger for the touch, the feel, the concrete reality of human contact. Quite literally, it is "skin hunger."*

*In a class I teach at the University of Massachusetts, I emphasize these premises:*

- 1. Every human being comes into the world needing to be touched, a need that persists until death.*
- 2. Being touched in tender, caring ways can be healing, therapeutic.*
- 3. In many homes children are fortunate enough to have their skin hunger satisfied; in many others, touching takes only the form of spanking. (Some of us believe there are children who deliberately misbehave just to establish even this painful skin contact.)*

It is not hard to tell the difference between types of homes. Young people whose skin-hunger needs are satisfied tend to be open, warm and relaxed. Those who have been rarely touched at home often seem to be more withdrawn, prone to

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<sup>2</sup> The sermon entitled, *Touché* was preached on June 26, 1988 at Central Presbyterian Church, Downingtown, PA by b. g. Boak. The sermon also looked at Mark 5:21-43 and used this illustration of skin as the largest organ

living in a fantasy world, even hostile. I am convinced they have a diminished sense of their own worth.<sup>3</sup>

Have you ever thought about what you have touched? What your hands have squeezed. In the comic strip, "Peanuts" Linus is eating a sandwich and makes this observation: "Hands are fascinating things. I like my hands! I think I have nice hands! My hands seem to have a lot of character. These are hands which may someday accomplish great things.....These are hands which may someday do marvelous works. They may build mighty bridges or heal the sick, or hit homeruns, or write soul-stirring novels! These are hands which may someday change the course of human destiny!"

Then Lucy, looks at these marvelous hands of Linus and offers this observation, "They've got jelly on them."

I took out my hands for a while this week and wondered what they had touched - money, computer keyboard, buttons, baseball, Sophie – the poodle next door, some doorbells, the button on the microwave and the TV. I thought about who they had touched. They had touched a number of children at Pittsford Cooperative Nursery School, Scouts, wife Martha, a new baby held by a family that was visiting here in worship last week, some hands at Highland Hospital, people on Dewey Avenue. So many people floating into the office, some in the hospital, those who grieved, and some not just touched, but hugged, risking it all from a person who does not touch others easily or naturally. These hands had shaken hands with men that I didn't know and because of their background, had even thought to distrust. Then I raised the question, "What had these hands healed?"

That movement of human development which some of us called "the touchy - feely" movement has long waned. There were whole weekends where people would go away to be verbally

abused and attacked, and later stroked, walking through fields holding hands as a group, lifting each other, developing trust. I suppose that I was taken a little back by it all because I came from a loving home, but one in which there wasn't a great deal of demonstrative touching.

I remember people from my childhood, like Winnie Jones, bless her soul. Winnie loved to sing and at one time had a beautiful contralto voice. Winnie was a big woman who taught Sunday School with gusto and those young bucks who sat at the back of the class used to take guesses on her size. Winnie hugged and kissed everybody and would embarrass her husband, Wilbur in front of all by enveloping him with those hefty ham-hock arms of hers, grabbing him, lifting him off the floor about three feet until he started to turn blue. Sometimes, I would by-pass Winnie just so I wouldn't have to be lost in the folds of her print dress with one of those, "How are 'ya darlin'" hugs of hers.

But, Winnie blessed so many folks and hugged those who never were hugged or touched by anybody else.

Much of the success or failure of Christianity depends upon touch. It is like ringing a doorbell. Only one thing is required - that the bell button be sufficiently touched to cause two pieces of wire or metal to contact one another. When contact is made, the bell rings. We can admire the bell, listen for the bell, paint the bell, polish the bell, but until someone touches it properly, nothing happens.

So much of me has been wondering, how we might be touched by God's word in a way that would encourage us in our giving. We read today from a letter in the Bible where the author wrote, "I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others . . ."

Here he quit preaching and went into meddling. He compared what is given to others with what has been given to us. We understand the

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<sup>3</sup> Sidney B. Simon. *Caring, Feeling, Touching*. Argus Books.

comparison game because we've participated in it. Usually we compare what other have to what we have. Seldom do we compare what others give to what we give.

*Forbes* magazine estimated that there are 1,125 billionaires in the world. That's three times as many as three years ago, meaning that there are three times as many people that others love to hate — what with their Telecom takeovers and their oil-sheik daddies.

It may take money to make money, but for many billionaires, posh and privilege came from hard work and not heritage — and we're not saying that there's anything intrinsically wrong with being born into money. In a surprising number of cases, the mega-rich have sprung from impoverished roots and not lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Consider Kenny Troutt. This bartender's son grew up in the housing projects of Mt. Vernon, Illinois. He put himself through college selling life insurance and working construction. At one point, he was a racetrack groom, named the "Worst Job in Sports" by *USA Today* due to the \$20,000 salary and the volume of horse manure a groom hauls. But fortunes changed when he began relentlessly buying up and reselling long-distance phone time. Eventually his blue collar turned into blue blood after he sold his 10-year-old company Excel Communications for \$3.5 billion in 1998.

John Anderson grew up in a meager barber's home, but played hockey well enough to earn a scholarship to UCLA. While there, he worked two jobs to cover expenses, including a factory graveyard-shift job operating a metal oven. After an MBA and a law degree, Anderson made a risky purchase of a failing beer distributor ... turns out the company was the sole distributor of Budweiser in Los Angeles. Fifty years later his molten- steel-turned-icy-beer story makes him one of America's 400 billionaires.

Humble beginnings have grown into gaudy returns for a number of blue-collar billionaires.

Leonard Del Vecchio (net worth: \$10 billion) was an orphan working in an eyeglass factory. Dennis Washington (\$3.4 billion) was a crane operator with just a high-school diploma. Sheldon Anderson (\$26 billion) was a college dropout who delivered newspapers. IKEA owner Ingvar Kamprad (\$31 billion) hawked matches, fish and Christmas ornaments by bicycle.

Hearing these rags-to-riches tales makes it a bit easier to accept the news that these blue-collar blokes are not white-collar billionaires. But is there anything that would cause us to say, "They deserve all that money"?

Only one thing could help for sure: Ridiculous wealth seems justified when matched by jaw-dropping charitable giving.

Few complain about Oprah's \$2.5 billion net worth. She was born to unmarried teenage parents — her mom a maid and her dad a coal miner. Growing up in rural Mississippi, her mother was so poor that her grandmother made dresses for Oprah from potato sacks. She was molested as a child, skipped two grades in elementary school, did part-time television newscasts in high school, and was a talk show megastar by age 32. In other words, Oprah's ghetto to glam rise is as unlikely as it is meteoric.

But the striking difference between Oprah and some of her billionaire compatriots is her unmatched reputation for generosity. She is a charter member of the new philanthropists. She rewarded her entire staff and their families (over 1,000 people) with paid Hawaiian vacations in 2006. She's funded the college costs for 250 African-American men. She covers the administrative costs of Oprah's Angel Network so that 100 percent of the hundreds of millions in donations go toward justice issues and education for the world's poorest. And she has yet to be dethroned from the top spot on any list that examines celebrity philanthropy.

Quite simply, Oprah remembers her roots. She gives to causes that should have been there to

take care of kids like her. She's *the* cultural model of moving from poverty to riches to poverty alleviation.<sup>4</sup>

However according to the new book, *A Path Appears* by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, Oprah is clearly an outlier. Their research has uncovered that in the United States, the larger the income, the smaller the percentage of giving. But, it has always been that way hasn't it. It was Jesus who told the story about the widow who put her two copper coins into the Temple Treasury, virtually all she had. The book also says that self-esteem is not improved when we receive accolades and honors. Self-esteem improves when people give and share. What a contrast to the messages of "reality TV" and the message of so many commercials pleading for us to acquire more stuff.<sup>5</sup>

How many of us have gushed with philanthropic dreams when seeing the Power Ball jackpot total? How many have told God that if God made us rich, we would take care of the needs of countless others?

We're sitting here in this beautiful church. Do you think we could have this wonderful facility if other people had given only their second best? Do you think we would have what we have today if other people had given only what was

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<sup>4</sup> Ana Veciana-Suarez, columnist for the Miami Herald points out that Bill Gates has used his fortune to eradicate smallpox and polio and Warren Buffett, who has already donated \$23 billion, has pledged to give away 99 percent of his fortune. Some of the extremely wealthy are enormously generous, many of the moderately wealthy are far less so.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf) 2014- 382pp. A review of the book by Paul Collier appears in print in the New York Times, October 19, 2014 on page BR14 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: *Give Better*. Paul Collier is a professor of economics and public policy at the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University and is the author of "The Bottom Billion."

left over? We have the blessings we have because others before us sacrificed, did without, and gave of their very best.

Back in September of 2005, on the first day of school, Ms. Martha Cothren, a social studies teacher at Robinson High School in Little Rock, Arkansas did something not to be forgotten. With permission of the school superintendent, the principal and the building supervisor, she took all of the desks out of her classroom. The students came into first period and there were no desks. They looked around and said, "Ms. Cothren, where're our desks?" And she said, "You can't have a desk until you tell me how you earn them."

They responded, "Well, maybe it's our grades."

"No," she said.

Then they suggested, "Maybe it's our behavior."

And she told them, "No, it's not even your behavior."

And so they came and went in the first period, still no desks in the classroom. Second period, same thing, and third period too. By early afternoon television news crews had gathered in Ms. Cothren's class to find out about this crazy teacher who had taken all the desks out of her classroom. Then during the last period of the day, Martha Cothren gathered her class, and indeed a number of other students who had study halls, got permission to return to Ms. Cothren's room. They were at this time all sitting on the floor around the sides of the room. And she said, "Now I'm going to tell you."

Martha Cothren went over to the door of her classroom and opened it, and as she did 27 military veterans, wearing their uniforms, walked into that classroom, each one carrying a school desk. And they placed those school desks in rows and then they stood along the back wall. And by the time they had finished placing those desks, these students, for the first time perhaps,

in their lives, knew more about how the desks were earned.

Ms. Cothren said, “You don’t have to earn those desks. These guys did it for you. They put them here for you, but it’s up to you to sit here responsibly to learn, to be good students and good citizens, because they paid a price for you to have that desk, and don’t ever forget it.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout history there have been people who have given their all, including their very lives that the Gospel might be preached in this place. Some of us want a free ride on their devotion, and friends that just won’t do. And so, 2 Corinthians contains yet another call for us to excel, especially in our giving. There we are reminded of what others have given in our behalf.

Then the Apostle Paul adds the ultimate comparison. He reminds us of what Christ gave in our behalf. He writes, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich . . .”

Christ has made us rich. He’s given us the great gift of life eternal. But he paid an awful price in order for us to be granted the offer. This is the message of the cross, and when it comes right down to it, this is the most important motivation for giving. It isn’t how you feel about the pastor or the Session or the economy or even about how life is treating you. The Bible says we give and share because God first gave to us.

Some of you will remember from your school days the Frenchman the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette was an extremely rich French general and politician. He was sympathetic to the cause of the American colonists and assisted George Washington in the American Revolution. Then he returned to France and resumed his life as the master of several estates.

In 1783, the harvest in France was a poor one, but the workers of Lafayette’s farms still somehow managed to fill his barns with wheat. “The bad harvest has raised the price of wheat,” said one of his managers. “This is the time to sell.”

Lafayette thought about all the hungry peasants in the surrounding villages. Then he said, “No. This is the time to give.”<sup>7</sup> And that is what he did. He shared his wheat with those who had none. Marquis de Lafayette fed France for Lafayette understood excellence in giving. He was undoubtedly conscious of all that had been given to him and he opened his hands and heart to others.

There are some who will look at the uncertain times we live in and say, “This is a time to look out for myself.” Other will look at these uncertain times and, like Lafayette, will say, “No. This is the time to give.” Guess which of these has the heart of Jesus?

You know the needs that surround us in our community and you know how important your faith in Jesus Christ is to you and how grateful you are for your salvation. That is all that matters when it comes to giving. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich . . .”

In response to such love, how can you not excel in your giving? For your giving is one way that you can touch others with healing hope. We can give our touch and care that will heal souls and we can give our resources to provide for similar healing. Your giving touches lives when children and adults join together to sing. Your giving not only builds orphanages in Kenya but sends people to hug the children. Your giving provides space for Scouts to meet and a place where people of all ages can study the Bible.

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Daniel Liroy, *International Bible Lesson Commentary* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 381.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com/newsletter/step1.aspx>.

Your giving provides compassionate care and worship of Almighty God. Your giving enables people to be touched by fellowship and nudged to wholeness with prayer. I encourage us to give. I encourage us to give of our time, to share

the gifts of talent and ability that God has given each of us, and I encourage us to give of our money and invest in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ.