

“Being and Receiving a Blessing”
November 22, 2009

Colossians 3:12-14
Matthew 22:34-40

I had at least two reasons for asking members of the First Congregational Seeds of Learning work group to speak this morning about why they went to Nicaragua. One reason is that God has called us together as a congregation to learn from and with each other and to grow in the Spirit together. So I asked members of the work group if they would be willing to speak this morning because I knew they had stories and truths to share that would teach and bless all of us.

I also asked them to speak because the very question of why any of us does any particular thing always fascinates me. I asked them because I want to invite all of us to ask, “Why would anyone ever go out of his or her way to try to help someone else?” I want to invite all of us to ask, “Why in the world would anyone freely offer his or her time, money, creativity, hope, or prayers to someone or something else ... to a church, for instance, an animal shelter, a food bank, or a community in Haiti, Brazil, or Nicaragua?”

How *does* it come to pass that, despite our innate and powerful instinct for self-protection and self-preservation and despite the *billions* of dollars poured into creative advertising for everything from clothing, cosmetics, and computers to Volvos, vision quests, and Viagra, advertising that tells us over and over again that our individual comforts, conveniences, and desires should be the central focus of our lives ... how does it come to pass, in the face of both our innate and our culturally-fed senses of self-importance, that we human beings can still let someone else’s needs matter at least as much as ours? How does it come to pass that we can become willing to sacrifice some of who we are and what we have, in order to offer it in service to someone else?

Well, for better or for worse, one source of that willingness throughout human history has been either a desire for a divine reward or a fear of divine punishment. Whether in terms of heaven or hell, good karma or bad, eternal life or eternal torment, many religions and many cultures have embraced a quid pro quo framework for human behavior. As Marcus Borg has described it, this framework gives us a God who lays down the rules and then says, “If you do what I’m telling you to do, I’ll welcome you into heaven for eternity. But ... but if you don’t do what I’m telling you to do, well, I’ll send you to that other, nasty place forever.”

From what I have heard from this congregation over the last 3 ½ years, this kind of carrot and stick, reward and punishment vision of God leaves most of you cold, even repulsed, but, before you push that vision out of sight for good, I invite you to think about it for a moment. Look into your own hearts and your own lives, and see if you discover a time or two when you were just about to do something “wrong” – lie to a spouse, take money or property that didn’t belong to you, cheat on your taxes – and then hesitated because you were afraid of the consequences if you got caught. Look into your own hearts and lives, and see if you discover some “good deeds” you’ve done at least in part because of the appreciation, the kudos, the recognition you hoped you’d get.

Living with a sense that negative consequences will flow from our dishonesty and selfishness and that positive consequences will flow from our integrity and generosity is

not a bad thing. Living with some fear of the harm that may come to us if we live a self-centered, self-aggrandizing life and with some hope for the benefits that may come to us if we live with open hearts and open hands may actually prompt us to live more compassionately, justly, and faithfully. So perhaps *fear* of punishment or penalty and *hope* for reward or benefit do have a place, a useful role, even in progressive Christian theology.

But fear and hope don't go far enough to explain why we have, not simply the *capacity*, but the *longing* to offer ourselves in love and service to others. Fear and hope don't and can't fully explain the kindness, generosity, and self-sacrifice that I've seen here in this church and that I saw in Nicaragua. There's something more, something more at work that moves people to give a few weeks, a few years, or their whole lives in service of God's vision for the world, God's vision of *Shalom*.

This morning's reading from the Letter to the Colossians and Jesus' answer to that pesky lawyer's question point to that something, that something *more*. Paul writes that love "binds everything together in perfect harmony," and Jesus says that the greatest commandments are to love God without reserve and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now, I realize that it's possible to understand these readings as calling us to live love because good things will come to us if we do and bad things will come to us if we don't, but there is another, deeper call in these words from Scripture. In and through Christ, in and through the Christian story, God is calling us to live love because the life of love is what makes us human. God is calling us to live the life of love because that is the only way we can be truly, fully alive.

Our readings this morning teach that self-giving love, forgiving love, living love is what binds everything together. They teach that love isn't simply *at* the heart of the commandments; it *is* the heart of the commandments. Love of God, love of neighbor, love of self . . . this interrelated, intertwined love is the very core of human life, and the expression of that love in generosity, service, solidarity, and care comes from the very core of who we are. In seeking to be a blessing in someone else's life, yes, we may be hoping to receive a blessing in turn. But we also can find ourselves seeking to be a blessing simply because there's a "rightness" to it, a sense of discovering who we are, a sense of opening ourselves and our world to the blessedness of life.

Time and time again, we can discover that if we open ourselves to *being* a blessing, we will *receive* a blessing in return. Instead of thinking of this flow of blessing back and forth as part of a reward and punishment, carrot and stick divine scheme, I invite all of us to think of it in the same way we think of the role of breathing in our lives. If we breathe, being alive isn't a *reward* for breathing, and if we quit breathing, dying isn't *punishment* for not breathing. Instead, breath and life are intimately, inextricably tied together. So, too, *being* a blessing in the world and *receiving* a blessing from the world are intimately, inextricably linked.

In this morning's reading from Matthew, Jesus reminds us that love of self and love of neighbor are tied together. In this morning's reflections from members of the FCC Seeds of Learning work group, some of our neighbors reminded us that as we seek to be blessings, to be gifts of grace to others, we find ourselves receiving more blessings than we even realize. The Spirit's invitation to love and to serve isn't an invitation into earning rewards and avoiding punishments. It's an invitation into the heart of life, the fullness of life, the holiness of life. It's an invitation that is ours, to accept or to ignore.

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I have one more question this morning to explore before I take my seat. It's a question I've heard some of you ask, sometimes directly and sometimes subtly. The question is this: Why Central America and building schools with Seeds of Learning?

Here in this congregation, in this valley, in communities throughout this state and this nation, many of our brothers and sisters struggle to get enough food for their children and themselves. Many children don't have access to good, safe schools or quality health care. Here in Sonoma, there are many people who do not have a roof over their heads and who are wondering and worrying about how they'll keep warm and dry in the winter months ahead.

So it's reasonable to ask why I as pastor of this congregation would urge us to make a commitment to Seeds of Learning to send a work group to El Salvador or Nicaragua every two years. It's reasonable to wonder, in the face of the deep human need for love, blessing, and justice here in Sonoma and around the world, why choose Seeds of Learning and Central America?

The most honest answer I can give you is that it is the Spirit's doing. You see, the Spirit of God has seen fit to bring together in this church, this particular expression and incarnation of the body of Christ, the co-founder of Seeds of Learning, veteran Seeds of Learning work group leaders and participants, people who have long sought to stand in solidarity with the people of Central America, and people who speak Spanish or want to speak Spanish. The Spirit has also seen fit to bring together in this church teachers, professors, parents who have worked hard to improve education for their own and other children, and people who simply love learning and want all children to have their own chance to fall in love with learning, too.

I look at this congregation, I listen to its stories – to *your* stories – and what I encounter is a congregation formed and called for this particular ministry, among others. I encounter a congregation with existing relationships near and far that we are called to honor, nurture, and celebrate. Just why God has formed and called the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, United Church of Christ, for a ministry with Seeds of Learning may always remain a bit of a mystery. As we seek to bless and be blessed through this ministry, we may discover clues that suggest why us, why now, and why this work, and yet the clearest answer we may ever find could well be that it is simply one of the ways we follow Paul's exhortation to clothe ourselves with love and to follow God's commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. The answer may simply be, it's who we've been created to be.

May this church always be a community clothed in love and service.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
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