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Wisconsin Conference UCC
May 16, 2021

The Rhythm of Generosity

Years ago, back when I served a local congregation, we faced a challenge in worship. The children would come up front for the kids' time, rambunctious. My colleague, Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels, now at Union UCC in Green Bay, one Sunday had the children join her in prayer. She taught them to breathe in and to breathe out three times as they said together, "Holy Spirit bring us peace."

Prayer worked. The children settled down and engaged the conversation with Bridget. So we kept beginning children's sermons with that prayer. And soon we heard from parents how their children made use of it at home. Like the boy who said it when a sudden storm scared him. And the girl, sitting in the shopping cart at the grocery store, concerned when her parent started picking out brussel sprouts; "Holy Spirit bring us peace."

I found myself thinking of that prayer and those breaths at many times in my own life. The breath prayer calms me, changes me. I ask you to try it with me at the beginning of this sermon. Put your hand on your chest so that you can feel your breath. As you breathe in, say to yourself, "Spirit." As you breathe out, "Peace." Deep breaths, three times. Amen.

For me, praying this way connects me to my body and the whole arc of life. Rev. Bob Ullman, part of the Tending the Soul Initiative of the conference, once pointed out the very first act of life: we breathe in. As the baby moves through the birth canal, their body and lungs squeeze tight and then the head comes out, a first breath in. And our very last act of life: we breathe out. As a person dies, the lungs relax, and you hear it; a final exhalation. We begin life by receiving. And we end by sharing back. It's not just the rhythm of our breath, but the whole pattern of our lives. Receiving. Sharing. Spirit. Peace.

What the Gospel would teach us about generosity can be found in our breath. We know generosity in the depth of our bodies. Receiving. Sharing. Spirit. Peace.

As I grow in my practice of generosity, I keep coming back to these embodied lessons. I've come to realize how much I've received. From the first moment, receiving life as a gift; and all along the way receiving friendship and love and grace. And I'll spend the rest of my life responding to those amazing gifts, especially that of grace from God. Receiving. Sharing. Spirit. Peace. Generosity is the rhythm of our lives.

In our reading this morning from Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul calls the believers in Corinth back to the practice of generosity. Paul writes out of concern for a problem. Earlier, the congregation in Corinth made a pledge towards Paul's campaign to support people experiencing poverty in Jerusalem, an international relief mission. But the Corinthians never fulfilled their pledge. This is a delicate moment: two thousand years ago and today, people are sensitive

around issues of money. Paul's letter could trigger feelings of shame, defensiveness, guilt. We may have all felt those same emotions in conversations about money and church. But I appreciate, particularly in this section, the way Paul makes generosity not a demand but a call, not a bill but a way of life, not an invoice but an invitation.

That call to generosity comes mostly clearly when Paul says, "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." But that rendering of Paul's language seems unnecessarily convoluted to me; so I'd translate it more simply as, "God makes grace abound, more than enough, so you may do every good deed abundantly."

I want to look closely at the two halves of what Paul says. First, God makes grace abound, more than enough. Second, so you may do every good deed abundantly. It's that pattern of our breath. That rhythm of life. Receive. Share. Grace enough. Do good.

The Corinthians back in Paul's day, like many Americans today, believed in self-sufficiency, the "self-made person." But in contrast to the myth of being self-sufficient, Paul points to the ways God blesses our lives - God makes grace abound.

In an earlier letter to this same church, Paul said, "what do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7). I know in my own life, I've received ever since that first breath as a baby. The world itself echoes with abundance.

This last year, my husband and I moved to a cabin near Shawano, Wisconsin. The previous owners cultivated a large garden - dozens of fruit trees, berry bushes, asparagus, rhubarb, onion, garlic - so much came up that we hadn't planted. We gathered what another had sown.

Our cabin sits on the traditional lands of the Menomonic People. Some of my neighbors are Menomonic. They're teaching me about the land. One neighbor walked me through the woods, showing me where to find ramps to eat. His wife pointed out a plant with healing properties. She said, "If you get a bad insect bite, gently bruise these leaves and put them on the bite; it will heal up faster."

Whether in my garden or out in the woods, I'm learning how much grace abounds. But there is more abundance than what we see in a garden or the field. We're born into a world of relationships: with God, with nature, and with each other.

Martin Luther King - offering a contrast to the myth of self-sufficiency - often said, "We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

Do you feel the abundance, the blessing, the grace in that inescapable network? I certainly know the pandemic made me realize my longing for community. This last year of living socially distant, of connecting virtually, of not hugging - it all left me aware of how deeply God made me for community. Certainly I've realized that I'm not self-sufficient, not alone in this world; but instead, I'm connected, interdependent, caught in relationships - all of which is grace.

And whether it comes through nature or friendships, all of that grace comes ultimately from God. I hold close to my heart the words of an English theologian who once spoke of all the ways we experience abundance, noting, “from all this we can see that the only God we know is a God who is an immense movement of giving. [The Divine] is a verb ‘to give,’ conjugated in every possible mood.” Those words remind me that God - the giver - first gave us life and then gave us new life through Jesus, the one who embodied the generosity of God; the same Jesus who said, “this is my body, given for you.”

Paul wants us to breathe in this abundance, to fill our souls with the awareness of this blessing, so that our minds expand with the knowledge that God’s grace abounds, more than enough. That’s the first movement of generosity - to realize how much we’ve received.

But we can’t just hold our breath. We can’t just receive and keep it. We breathe in; and then we release it. Receive. Share. We give back; that’s the second movement of generosity.

This is where the Corinthians struggled. They didn’t face a resource problem, but a heart problem. They didn’t want to share. Paul alludes to it, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Too many stewardship talks quote that last phrase - God loves a cheerful giver. It might seem like a groaner of a comment now. But think about what it means. God would rather a cheerful giver than a five-figure giver. God cares about the change in our hearts instead of the cha-ching in the plate.

Many people describe this heart question using the distinction between a mindset of scarcity and a mindset of abundance. A mindset of scarcity makes us think there will never be enough - we must compete, one against another, because there is not enough to go around. Scarcity thinking names all the things we can not do; all the things we can not share. But Paul speaks of abundance - that there will be “more than enough.”

When we realize how much we have received, we can begin to ask, “how do I share?”

Now sometimes this question of sharing becomes a question of “how much?” As if the money is ours but we need to give God a cut. Which sounds less like charity and more like taxation, as if God were a cosmic IRS agent, auditing your gross adjusted income to tabulate what you owe.

But God doesn’t run the divine version of the IRS. Instead of asking “how much?”, we can ask a better question, “how does our life reflect the generosity of God?” Or, “how does God’s blessing of our life get shared beyond us?”

The way we answer that question depends so much on our awareness of abundance. Earlier I pointed to how Martin Luther King spoke of our interconnectedness. The more aware we are of this interconnectedness, the more we share.

Paul, fully aware of God’s grace abounding, saw the interconnectedness of life. We often overlook the way that Paul speaks of people experiencing poverty and need. That’s our scarcity

way of talking, to describe people by what they lack, what they don't have. The poor. The hungry. The homeless. But in his letters, Paul never uses those phrases. Instead, he talks of the saints. As when he describes his collection for desperate people in Jerusalem as a "ministry to the saints." Elsewhere he talks of sisters and brothers. No wonder Paul couldn't hold onto anything, because who would hold back help from someone you dearly love, a sister, a brother, a saint.

I grew up outside of Washington, D.C. When I was a child, an awful plane crash took place. During a winter coldsnap, a plane from Reagan National Airport took off but almost immediately struck the 14th Street Bridge and crashed in the Potomac River. Only a few people made it out of the plane. They clung to the outside of the aircraft, in freezing waters. A rescue helicopter dropped a line. One of the men on the wreckage, Arland Williams, passed the rope to another passenger. Each time a lifeline was thrown to him, Arland passed it to another passenger. Five people were saved; then the cold overcame him and he slipped below the water.

When I think of generosity, I remember that image of Arland Williams passing the rope to another. He gave til his last breath.

His generosity imitated the generosity of Jesus.

I'm no Arland Williams; but his example and that of other courageous generous people makes me ask, "how can I share in ways that reflect God's generosity?"

To me, the practice of generosity involves two movements. First the realization of God's abundance, the awe in the face of all we've received. And second, the question of how I can reflect that generosity, the courage to share of all we've received.

That's the rhythm of generosity. Receive. Share. Spirit. Peace.

Alleluia and Amen.

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