

Sermon Sunday, January 17, 2016**“How Good Are You Willing to Have It Be?”**

What would it be like if we were willing to receive as much goodness as there is around us at any given moment? I ask myself that regularly. What if we appreciated and used all the gifts that people around us have to share, nay, are eager to share? What if instead of struggling with some house repair that I clearly don't know how to do, I picked up the phone and called for help? Would that be too easy? Or maybe too complicated to coordinate? It does complicate my life to get other people involved! Shouldn't I work out my own problems?ce.

Many of us would be quick to say, no, no, we need each other; we cannot possibly supply all the support we need. Yet, my friends, don't we tend to live that way, especially in New England? If we are going to ask someone for advice, counsel, physical assistance, we are going to be vulnerable and open. And we will need to receive what they have to give in the way they give it.

Paul's letters address, for the most part (not Ephesians, as I mentioned two weeks ago), very specific challenges in the very human church communities Paul had established. “When Paul arrived in 51 CE, the Corinth he saw was little more than 100 years old, but was five times as large as Athens and the capital of the province. Ancient Corinth, the original Corinth, founded in the 10th Century BCE, had been the richest port and the largest city in ancient Greece”. In this first letter to the faithful in Corinth, Paul's purpose was to name and admonish the immorality and divisions that had arisen, e.g. the envy, the jealousy and the competition for being the most holy (or the wildest and craziest?).

If you have ever had a long distance love relationship of any kind, you know the challenge of staying connected. All of Paul's relationships that we know about were long distance and he works at staying connected. His letters are brimming with love, even when he is really annoyed. His message to the church in this letter: *you* are the body of Christ. Each one of you has gifts that you all need to be a resilient, faithful community. There are varieties of gifts and services and activities, but the same God and Father of us all has given them all life.

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (Side-bar...surely not the grumpy ones? You can't mean the ones who find fault with everyone and everything. The disorganized ones? Even the control freaks? Gifts? I just try to stay out of their way.)

Paul would say we are not trying to see through the eyes of Christ or looking beyond the surface presentation. How attached we become to our opinions of others and how we close down the richness that we might all enjoy.

Stephen Levine, an author of many books on living well and dying well, wrote: “Giving up suffering is the hardest work we will do.” Giving up our claw hold on past offenses or guilt is a key factor in forgiving self and other. We get comfortable with being upset. Miserable. Limited. Hampered. Tired.

One of the many gifts of having Max come into my life six months ago is letting go of having to have things the way I want, when I want them. Dog hairs on my furniture and clothing? Yuck. Have to walk him in the rain and the snow? Double yuck. I can’t pick up and go away on the spur of the moment. (There were a couple of times I remembered the night before I was to leave for a few days that I had made no arrangements for the dog. Thankfully, I have found a kennel each time that had room.) Strangely, the constriction of having Max has made me practice living in the present. I have had to ask for help. I have had to depend on people. I have survived. I have been gifted by others. My past opinions of *myself* have changed.

Thank goodness we are wired so that we remember things. We do not have to relearn daily where the doors are and what green and red street lights mean. However, past decisions and experiences, if we attach ourselves to them, can make us unhappy for a long time.

How does the past get in our eyes? Not long ago I had an experience of grace where I did not expect it at all. Earlier, after maybe two conversations with a woman, I formed an opinion that she was troubled and in need of attention. One day she called me and asked if she could take me to lunch. I tensed as my opinions popped up. I just thought automatically that she was going to ask for my help in some fashion. She declined to tell me on the phone what she wanted to talk about which just “confirmed” for me that I was going to get into something difficult.

When we met, she started talking clearly with some effort and anxiety that someone had spoken badly of me and she had listened and believed. She apologized for harboring bad thoughts about me having realized that what she heard about me was not true. She wanted to start the new year with a clean slate. She asked my forgiveness which I gave her. It would not have served her to say there was nothing to forgive because for her, there was.

Maybe she is troubled. Maybe she is needy. But that is not *all* she is.

This meeting was not what I expected at all. It was a God thing, a terrific reminder that I was getting ready to be burdened. I was “burdened-waiting-to-happen.”

If you are interested in creating something new in your future, if you would like to have the good wine saved for you at the end of the party, you will want to take up at least these three practices.

1. Start noticing when you are predicting that something unpleasant is coming your way. Just practice noticing without criticizing self.

2. Enlist like-minded supporters, a village, a church small group, to keep you on track.
3. Get accustomed to throwing yourself on God's mercy to pull you out of the most recent hole you have made.

Now, to end with the words of a man we remember this weekend. A fallible man. An imperfect man. A man who kept asserting that life could be so much better for everyone if we made some serious changes in our culture.

How good are we willing to have it be? In 2016?

The evening of April 3, 1968, the night before he was shot, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke these prescient words to a crowded room:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”

AMEN