

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
March 26, 2017 - LENT #4
John 9:1-41
“Giving” / The Blind Man

On this 4th Sunday in Lent, following the shape of the liturgy, we arrive at “Giving.” Looking at the dictionary definition of the verb “to give” is really helpful. The three meanings given are: 1) to freely transfer the possession of (something) to (someone); 2) to provide or supply with; 3) the capacity to bend or alter shape under pressure. What’s interesting is that “to give” involves exchange or relationship. One needs someone to give something to; or to supply; or to be changed by. When we think of ourselves as separate individuals, we lose sight of the meaning of “giving.” We think it’s a one way gesture. But if you remember an exercise I did with the young people during the Children’s Talk soon after I arrived here at St. Mary’s, giving is intrinsically tied to receiving. In that demonstration, I held up a mirror and asked a person to hold back and cross their arms. Looking in the mirror, what did was reflected back to them?

Then I had the young person extend their arms and look in the mirror. What happened then? The reflected person was extending their arms in return. Who was giving? Who was receiving?

In the Divine flow we call the Holy Trinity, we have this kind of giving/receiving. Where the interchange is mutual and ongoing. And the nature of the continual exchange is LOVE. The nature of the Holy

Trinity is the outpouring of love in continual exchange. Nothing is held back. Nothing can be. It is the nature of love to give and receive without distinction. The person who developed Nonviolent Communication, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, the form of communication I teach, uses the image of a small child feeding a hungry duck to talk about this kind of exchange. He asks, “Who is giving, who is receiving?” And who is getting more joy??

When I give workshops, I often ask a simple question to address this idea. SO let’s try it here: “How many of you here like to help?” (hands go up). “OK, now another question, “How many of you like to receive help?” (usually much fewer hands go up). OK, so we have a problem. The mutuality of giving and receiving is off kilter. Why is this? Why do we have problems receiving?

Our reading today from the Gospel of John addresses this issue. We hear the story of Jesus healing the man who was blind from birth. Now this story is so rich with images and ideas but I have to keep focus on our theme today.

So to start, with John we continue with theme of two different ways of considering something: from the earthly perspective and from the spiritual. And today the theme has to do with seeing. We have our eyes that we know as providing one of the five senses. And then we have a different way of seeing; a spiritual way.

Jesus points this out when he answers the disciples’ question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus responds with, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” This harkens back to last week’s theme about brokenness. Often God speaks through our brokenness, our limitations, our challenges when we think the opposite is true, that God speaks through our strength, our determination, our own plans.

So what is truly amazing in this story, is that Jesus heals the blind man, giving him his sight. And listen carefully now.... the man received his sight. Jesus gave, the man received. The word “received” is used twice in this passage.

I was really struck by this in this reading. How often does Jesus give direction, guidance, the truth and his followers do not receive what he offers them?

Jesus gives endlessly to anyone who will listen; his healing, his wisdom, his compassion. Yet, unless people are willing to receive, he is helpless. Yet he does not give up. He persists, right until the end. When he gives his life for us, without condemning, blaming or punishing us for what injustice has been done him.

Giving. Giving all. This is the kind of God we have. How can it be that we don’t see, refuse to receive, believe we are alone? It is amazing. The truth that our God gives abundantly, without condition, without end seems to escape us most of the time.

I found the perfect story for this week which captures the kind of giving our God is up to:

“The Giving Tree” by Shel Silverstein:

Once there was a tree.... and she loved a little boy. And everyday the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree.... very much. And the tree was happy. But time went by. And the boy grew older. And the tree was often alone. Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said, "Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy." "I am too big to climb and play" said the boy. "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money?" "I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy." And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy. But the boy stayed away for a long time.... and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back and the tree shook with joy and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy." "I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy. "I want a house to keep me warm," he said. "I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house ?" "I have no house," said the tree. "The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy." And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree was happy. But the boy stayed

away for a long time. And when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. "Come, Boy," she whispered, "come and play." "I am too old and sad to play," said the boy. "I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?" "Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree. "Then you can sail away... and be happy." And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy ... but not really. And after a long time the boy came back again. "I am sorry, Boy," said the tree, "but I have nothing left to give you - My apples are gone." "My teeth are too weak for apples," said the boy. "My branches are gone," said the tree. "You cannot swing on them - " "I am too old to swing on branches," said the boy. "My trunk is gone, " said the tree. "You cannot climb - " "I am too tired to climb" said the boy. "I am sorry," sighed the tree. "I wish that I could give you something... but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry...." "I don't need very much now," said the boy. "just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired." "Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, "well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." And the boy did. And the tree was happy.

Today when we approach the altar rail for communion, we will be given the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which has been blessed and broken for each one of us. If you can imagine a gift more amazing and humbling than that, I don't know what it could be.

In turn, we are asked to give in a way we can't imagine; trusting that we will not run dry, or run out. That like the living water, when we engage in the divine exchange of love, there is no scarcity. It's like having a second child and wondering, "How can I love another child as much? Will I have enough love to go around?" and discovering, "Wow, I have more than enough love to go around?" Your heart simply expands through good and thorough use. We mustn't be afraid.

And so with new eyes, can we begin to see how lavish our God is? How God gives life, and if we are open to receive, there is no end to what God wants to give.

As on every Sunday, we offer up our lives, we are blessed, we acknowledge how Jesus walks with us in our brokenness and today, we especially acknowledge how much we have been given. We open our hearts to receive what God yearns to give us so we too can enter with God into this endless flow of love, giving as eagerly as we receive. And saying, "Amen"