

Squamish United Church  
Rev. Karen Millard  
Second Stewardship Sunday

November 4, 2018

Scriptures:  
Acts 11:27-30

### **Partners in the Gospel**

Last week with the children in gathering time we talked about saying thank you. We talked about having a life overflowing with gratitude. Today we are going to talk about sharing. It seems like the most natural thing. Neither saying thank you or sharing are rocket science. They say we were taught them in kindergarten. My experience is we are taught about thank you's and sharing even earlier than that. So you would think it would be natural.

But, there is a reason things need to be taught. Human nature often leads us to be concerned about ourselves first and foremost. We forget that as we share it gives us and others life and abundance. We forget that sharing and showing gratitude can change the world.

After all there are so many things we can do with our time and our money. We can save, invest, build, hoard. We can choose not to share at all. Isn't it amazing, given all the choices we can make with our time and money, that sometimes we do share?

Sharing is a historic, foundational principle of Christianity, a cornerstone of Christian life from the very beginning. And for Christians, the way we share is important. The apostle Paul could have just advised the early Christian communities to take an individual approach to sharing. But in addition to individual acts of generosity, he advises them to take a weekly collection to divide proportionally. To the Corinthians, Paul writes: "Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made."

Christians have been pooling resources since Paul's request. For two millennia, we've been sharing.

In today's Scripture we read about a time of famine. The Roman historian Josephus confirms that the famine was the result of a series of bad harvests and the province of Judea was particularly hurt by it. So they begin to take a collection so that it can be sent to the mother church in Jerusalem to be distributed appropriately.

(pause...) I imagine that was not that easy to give in that time.

According to a Statistics Canada report, in 2010, the average Canadian gave \$446.00 annually to charity. The average donation of those who attend religious services regularly is \$1004.00. More than double. There are likely many ways to interpret this statistic, perhaps it's because we've been sharing for so long that generosity is bred into us. We expect to give. We understand that generosity

and compassion and care for the "least and lost" is what it means to live a Christian life. If our faith affects our life sharing/giving is the spirit in which we travel on the road of life, the road

that runs through our homes, our workplaces, our hangouts, the road that runs through the heart of our relationships.

It's why the children from our children's church are going to take a lantern walk this Saturday afternoon. To remind us of St. Martin who willingly helped a person in need. It would be amazing if you would join us. We have made some lanterns but you could bring your own. A symbol to remind us that generosity lights up the dark places of our world.

Christians also give out of a sense of compassion and wanting to do good in the community. But Christian giving goes deeper. The framework of giving for us is deeply theological; it is more enduring than feelings that lead to giving, like guilt or even compassion. When we call God "creator" and call ourselves "stewards," we are making the claim that God is over all, the giver of all, and that we hold the gifts for God and use them to God's glory and service. That's why we use the language we do around the plate. It's not just a collection plate – it's an "offering" plate (or bag in our case ;). We don't take a collection, we take an offering. When we put money in, we aren't just collecting for charity, we're making an offering to God. We don't just give to a budget, we give in response to the deep sense that we have been richly blessed.

Can we sit with that for just a moment. What if our mindset around the offering changed from that of a collection or a budget fixer to a gift of offering, a thanksgiving for all God has given, a response to the deep sense that we have been richly blessed.

Do you see the difference?

When we use our gifts to act compassionately, we don't just act compassionately because it's a warm feeling and a nice thing to do. We are compassionate because we are disciples of Jesus, we are his "hands and feet" in the world. In our giving, we aspire to be like him and to make the Kingdom (kin-dom) that he spoke about come into being.

Unlike some charities where the highest level "gold" donors are invited to banquets and top givers have power to influence the direction of the organization, the church is strongly committed to the ideal that each one of us gives according to our ability. Some of us can give a lot and some can't, but everyone who gathers here has equal say on how our resources are allocated for the mission of the church. That's partly why we hold our donation information in private – because whether you give a lot or give a little, you are -to use scriptural language- "equal partners in the gospel" as it is lived out through our community. In our church, there is no room for capitalist values that give way to power.

That is the same premise Community Christmas Care lives on. Give as you can, share as you are able so that at the same time all receive equally because no one is hirer or better than the other. We genuinely share.

In the United Church I long for us to come back to the understanding that our financial giving, isn't just about economics. It's about a sharing, caring, generosity. For many Christians, giving is theological, a spiritual discipline grounded in a radical sense of oneness and equality within a community of faith. In the United Church we don't dare ask people to tithe 10% because the idea is that is offensive and we don't do anything to pressure people and yet if we turned our giving thoughts around to service and giving thanks to God most of us would give more generously. Not out of the obligation it seems to have become but out of thanksgiving, gratitude, offering.

We've been talking about financial giving so far, but the same principles and history apply to our giving of talent and time. When we look back to Jesus' earliest followers and the earliest church members, we see a dazzling array of skills and talents. There were fishermen, seamstresses, business owners, tent makers... In the book of Corinthians, Paul affirms that all of the gifts people have been given--such as prophesying, teaching, and evangelism--are required in order for the body

of Christ to function. Whether you are most comfortable behind the scenes (in the kitchen, working outside, quietly taking minutes or planning) or are most at ease front and centre on Sunday mornings or at the Council table or leading small groups or studies, the gift of yourself is crucial. Thank you for making of yourself an offering to God.

We have or will be giving you response cards this may upset my treasurer but in all honesty I hope that your response isn't so much prompted by an "ask" or a perceived desperation for funds as it has been inspired by the mission of the church and the great vision of the holy we've witnessed in our stories of faith and giving and sharing. None of us gives to the church as though it is separate from ourselves because we are the church. In the deepest sense, we are giving to each other, to our community and to our world so that we can live out our collective mission as Jesus' disciples. We stand in a 2000-year-old tradition as we do this. As Paul puts it, "We are partners in the Gospel."

May wise and generous hearts continue to guide us as we partner in God's mission on the road of life.

Amen