

PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

June 24, 2018

Pentecost 5

[Luke 21:1-4](#)

[Acts 11:27-30](#)

(prayer)

Grace.

Gratitude.

Generosity.

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For the past couple of weeks, I have found inspiration for the themes of the Sunday church services from the [Loving Our Neighbours](#) resource provided by the philanthropy unit of the United Church of Canada. The language of the material is painstakingly *positive* and *encouraging* in addressing ways that communities of faith can examine how they can match their ministry aspirations with their capacity and potential.

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Grace.

Gratitude.

Generosity.

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These words are the touchstones that I had in mind when planning this worship service for the final Sunday of June - the first worship service of the summer of 2018.

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But... I struggled (more than usual) this week, trying to formulate some notes for a sermon.

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The truth is: I've been pretty *cranky* this week.

I'm not bothered by anything major at home or here in the life of the church.

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My crankiness seems to be rooted in current and recent stories of humanity's callous inhumanity: **three examples...**

1. I saw a news report that [Suman Virk](#) has died. Suman and her husband, Manjit, have been tireless anti-bullying advocates in the 20 years since their daughter's murder. I was reminded of how (in 1997) fourteen year old Renna was lured by a group of *friends* to drink and smoke under a bridge near Victoria only to be savagely beaten (in two separate waves) and finally drowned in the gorge. After some confessions (and at least one highly contested court case), eight teenagers were convicted for either the beating or murder. It was depressing to be reminded of that sad history this week with news of the unexpected death of Renna Virk's 58 year old mother.
2. Then, more currently... there is this whole immigration-asylum situation in south Texas that gets more shocking each day. What has aggravated my crankiness lately isn't really the *zero tolerance* policy of prosecuting **all** people accused of the misdemeanor of *jaywalking* across the border without a valid visa (although that policy deserves all of the negative press it is getting). What has really gotten my goat is that - in *religiously* following the letter of the law - the

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authorities have been separating migrant children from their parents without a clear system to keep track of whose kids belong to whom.

Speaking of “religiously”, don’t get me started on the abuse of scripture by claiming that government actions must be accepted because God has ordained the “caesars” of the world with the divine right to rule without question.

What truly horrified me were the reports that some asylum-seeking adults have been [deported](#) back to Central America before they were reunited with their children. It is nothing short of government sanctioned kidnapping!

Tangentially related: to have a *former fashion model turned first lady* (whose clothes budget must rival the GDP of most developing nations) mock her own photo-op compassion event by [flaunting](#) an ugly \$40 jacket with the ugly message “I don’t really care, do u?” - a jacket she wore on an 80° day in DC, by the way.

Hypocrisy like this... makes me cranky!

3. But... I was **most** disturbed this week by a certain viral internet story and video.

Last week, the story that trended in cyberspace was one about a resilient urban raccoon that managed to successfully scale a 23 floor building in Minnesota. Nothing cranky about that.

But... on Thursday, people started sharing a video of a priest trying to calm a crying baby during a baptism. ***Did you see this?*** It is presumed to have happened somewhere in France because French is being spoken. Not a lot of other details are known.

The clergyman in question seems to be trying to explain to the parents what he will be doing. The translation I read had him smiling and saying: “*I’m going to put water on the forehead, and after, I’ll embrace the young fellow*”. But the toddler’s mood did not improve with this information. As the crying continued, the priest’s countenance changed; his voice got harsher: “*Stop crying, calm down. Calm down. [SLAP]. CALM DOWN.*” It was not a tap. It was a full handed slap to the cheek!

There was shock on everyone’s face in the vid, especially the man I presume to be the dad. An assistant (unsuccessfully) tries to intervene with the priest, who (perhaps realizing how inappropriate his actions were) brings the child in for a face hug saying: “*He’s calming down. He’s calming down. There you go.*” He wasn’t. The crying was louder than ever.

The video ends with the *dad* forcibly taking the child out of this *man of god’s* arms.

I don’t know if the christening ever took place.

I do hope that the bishop has paid this guy a visit.

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I can’t claim innocence here.

On more than one occasion (many more than one, to be honest), I have let frustration and anger get the better of me. But... I can say without reservation that my volcano has never come close to erupting anywhere near the baptismal font.

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The video of the slapping priest has to be disturbing to anyone who watches it (I will add a [link](#) in my sermon notes on the website, if you haven't seen it), but I think it hit *me* in a special way... because I am a person ordained with the humble privilege of performing baptisms in Christ's church.

Personally, I have never thought of holding a child's mood-of-the-moment against him or her as I participate in the oldest of Christian rituals.

In fact, I try to alleviate a worry that many parents may have before baptism, (that their child won't "behave") by saying that it is my (and the church's) attitude that the *only* expectation is that everyone "acts their age".

This standard line (that I use often with children in wedding parties, too) is an attempt at *calming humour*, but it is a loaded phrase that is even more restrictive than the true hope I actually want to espouse... **God accepts us, even if we *aren't* acting our age.**

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We call Baptism (and Communion) *sacraments* - from the latin for "holy mysteries" - because we proclaim that God is uniquely present (especially present) as we take part in those rites.

I believe that (in that sacramental participation), we are welcomed into the holy mystery of God's presence.

God is there. Not because of us, but because of God.

We are not inviting God into our presence; we are welcomed into the holy mystery of God's presence.

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Now, I'm back on topic, because... that *is* the definition of grace.

Grace!

God is here: not because of us, but because of God.

God's presence is a gift, not a reward.

Grace.

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As Janette said earlier, a little over a month ago, the church launched a stewardship campaign (we have dubbed) **Heart of the Community**. Through goal setting and storytelling, people involved and connected to this congregation have been encouraged to be thinking about the power and impact of **Generosity**.

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Today, I want to walk things back a bit and talk about how generosity is *not* the first step in embracing the call to discover our capacity to be a healthy beating heart of the community.

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I see my three touchstones for today's sermon as being in a specific order.

As with all things 'faith', it begins with Grace.

Grace can be a hard concept for a people, who have been brought up on the ideology that there is no free lunch; that benefits must be earned; and that anyone telling you different is selling something.

So, it is not uncommon for people to question *grace* with a self-assessment of "unworthiness".

But... when humility allows me to set that self-deprecation aside, the only response that remains is **Gratitude**.

The most appropriate response to grace is... *wow; thank you.*

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I have come to believe that **Grace** and **Gratitude** are prerequisites to heart-felt **Generosity**.

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One of the worries that ministers (and church boards) have when moving through a focused financial stewardship campaign is that we will run into an uncomfortable opposition that is sometimes expressed with statements like:

- *They shouldn't talk about money in church.* or...
- *All the church cares about is money.* or...
- *I am being made to feel guilty about my giving, even though I am doing as much as I can.*

I completely agree with these last two. Money must always be seen as only a means to an end, not the end itself. And... The touchstones for me are Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity, not Grace, GUILT, and Generosity.

But... as far as talking about economic realities in church goes, if we don't want that, we need to take it up with Jesus and the authors of the new testament because it comes up more than almost any other topic.

It is fair to reflect on a quote of Jesus in Matthew 6:21 - *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

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I have been part of gatherings of this church's finance committee, the church council and the ad hoc stewardship committee and I can state - without word of a lie - that guilt is not a fundraising technique that the leaders of this congregation have any interest in employing.

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As we heard from the book of Acts, chapter eleven earlier, there was an active early christian ministry in Antioch (southern Turkey).

In fact, Acts tells us that Antioch was the first place that followers of Jesus were first referred to as "Christians" - probably originally an insult that the group eventually took on as a badge of honour.

The expansion of Christianity to places like Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch seems to have been not out of international missionary zeal, but because - after the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem - some of the Judean followers of Jesus scattered away from Jerusalem. They were fleeing persecution and violence, seeking refuge in new communities (sound familiar).

At first, these new arrivals in Antioch preached their gospel exclusively within the local Jewish communities. But with the addition of other followers of Jesus from Cyrene and Cyprus, they began to share the gospel with the greek-speaking gentiles.

Acts says that "the hand of the Lord was with them, a great number became believers and turned to the Lord". This news reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, so they sent Barnabas to Antioch. Barnabas saw the grace of God among these Christians of the diaspora. Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Saul to Antioch and the two of them stayed with the new believers of this new church for a year. They stayed until they heard of the impact a devastating drought was having on Judea.

Grateful for the ministry of Barnabas and Saul and the **Grace** of God they engendered, the Antioch Christians **Generously** raised relief funds for their founding elders in Jerusalem in their time of need.

No one was guilted into giving beyond their means. The text of Acts is very clear that each donor gave "according to their ability".

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Not... Grace, *Guilt* and Generosity.

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Grace, *Gratitude*, Generosity.

- We take note of holy mystery among us.
- We appreciate the gift of that presence.
- And we respond with a desire to be part of what God is doing.

Grace, *Gratitude*, Generosity.

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Before I move on I need to add my two cents on the improvised parable that Jesus came up one day. As Jesus and his disciples watched people placing their offerings in the temple treasury, one particular giver caught their eye.

An older women in worn, modest clothing, put in a relatively meager two copper coins. Compared to the long line of wealthy donors, this poor widow's was quite literally inconsequential.

The point of Jesus' parable was to highlight the juxtaposition between the poor widow and the typical wealthy donor.

Jesus is not challenging the generous attitude of any one putting gifts in the treasury. But to point out that, although the rich man's gift was consequential to the treasury, it was inconsequential to the giver. On the other hand, the widow's mite was inconsequential from the perspective of the temple bookkeepers, but... extremely consequential to the woman.

*They contributed out of their abundance,
but she gave out of her poverty.*

I assume that neither Jesus or any of his disciples actually knew any of these donors personally. Jesus filled in the spaces of what they were observing to tell a teaching-story pointing to the nature of the Kingdom of God.

They didn't really know how much more money any of the givers still had after making their offerings. The statements that these particular rich people's financial options were not impacted at all by their offerings (*out of their abundance*) and that this woman put in *all she had to live on* do not have to be literally true for Jesus' parable to be true.

Generosity, Jesus tells his disciples, is *not* defined by the amount, but the attitude.

The King James translation of the Mark version of Luke 21:4 uses the phrase that the woman gave "all her living" (Mark 12:44).

Usually, we hear that as her 'emptying her bank account', but - at the metaphoric level of Jesus' parable, which is always, the most important level - I hear it referring to being an expression of all that is valuable to her.

She gives not simply out of her livelihood, but out of her life. She is committing far more than money.

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I was reading a sermon series written by Rev Trish Elliott where she points out that *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, we genuinely share.*

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Every gracious and grateful response to the presence of God in our midst is honoured. That includes every range of non-financial gratitude.

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Stewardship Committees will often point beyond money as the only means of generosity: *time*, *talent* and *treasure* are offerings... and they are. But so is prayer, and so are attitudes of kindness, empathy, a passion for justice and good old fashion *love of neighbour*.

All of these are ways that we give of ourselves to take part in what God is doing.

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The **Heart of the Community** campaign will be a dismal failure if all that happens is we balance our budget.

If St. David's is to be an authentic Heart of the Community, it will because we *seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God!*

A balanced budget is just *a means to that end!*

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Mission and Ministry are drawn out from within the *living* of the faithful.

Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus tell a teacher of the torah that the central holy hope was that people would love the LORD their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their might.

Loving God is not defined by any level of financial gift: consequential or not.

It is measured by how deep we allow holy mystery to penetrate our heart, soul and might.

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I firmly believe that when we invite God into the depth of our living, things like "budgets" (that give us the capacity to do ministry in the 21st century) will be met.

I believe that the Grace of God is *that* powerful!

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We are having a coffee house concert in the church two Fridays from now. The proceeds *will* help the budget of the church, but I hope people will not be coming for that reason, but because the music might touch you at the level of your heart and soul.

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Our financial giving, then, isn't just about economics. It's about a Christian philosophy of life. For us as Christians, giving is theological, a spiritual discipline grounded in a radical sense of oneness and equality within a community of faith.

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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 First 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 center on Sunday mornings or at the Council table or leading small groups or holding up the needs of individuals or the world in the quiet of your own prayers, the gift of yourself is crucial.

Thank you (each of you) for making of yourself an offering to God.

We stand in a 2000-year-old tradition as we do this. As Paul puts it, "We are partners in the

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Gospel.”

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

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Now, that is a cure for crankiness!

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Let us pray:

Holy One, may you continue to inspire our wise and generous hearts to live as faithful followers of Jesus. Amen.

#567VU “Will You Come and Follow Me”

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