

November 4, 2018  
Philippians 4:18-20  
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**“Gifts, Graces, and Gratitude”**

Good morning! I had an experience this week which seems to be increasingly common for me -- I re-connected with an old friend. It didn't happen through Facebook, there were no faces involved, it was just a book. A book which had been important to me years ago, which I went looking for because I remembered an illustration which I thought would work for this sermon. The book is called *Everyday Sacred* by Sue Bender, an artist and author and lecturer. I realized as I re-visited it that this book was important in shaping my attitudes about art and gratitude and imperfection. And I found the story -- a cluster of stories, actually -- which I remembered.

Sue is from Berkeley, CA, across the bay from San Francisco. I lived in Berkeley one summer when I was a kid, and it's a beautiful setting: bay views, steep hills, mild climate, lots of natural greenery. Unfortunately, these conditions make it prone to wildfire, and the community has been devastated by fire on several occasions. Sue met Helen just after Helen and her husband's home had been destroyed in the Oakland-Berkeley Hills fire.

Helen said, "I loved your first book. I kept it in my bedside table, and I'm going to re-read it when my life is normal again. There aren't many people I can say this to -- I certainly can't say it to my husband, who is devastated by the fire, but I think I can say it to you: I think something good will come out of this." Everything -- every family photograph, quilt and all her hand knit sweaters were gone. But in the midst of that grieving Helen said "the fire forced me to look at *what really matters.*"

Months later, after Helen had moved into her new home, Sue sent her a copy of her book and invited Helen to her house, and they talked for two hours. Here's some of what Helen told her. Helen said:

After the fire one of the things which pleased me so much was that all my favorite recipes came back to me. Just a few days ago I went out with a friend who said, 'I was thinking about you last night because I made your lemon ice cream.' Oh, you have that recipe?" Helen asked. She thought it was gone forever. Helen was a pattern-drafting teacher in an adult education program and had recently retired. When she was teaching, if she saw something stylish on a friend -- a wonderful coat for instance -- she would borrow it, draft a pattern and share it with her class. Right after the fire, several of her students called and asked, "What patterns do you want?"<sup>1</sup>

Sue gave a talk at a book club in Oakland. All of the members had lost their homes, lost everything in the same terrible fire.

One of the club members described having given a precious object as a gift to a friend. It was a porcelain piece she treasured, and she almost didn't give it away because she loved it so much. After the fire, her friend returned it to her. Another woman told the group that she gave away things she didn't like, and after the fire, those things were returned to her.<sup>2</sup>

These stories made me wonder about gifts and how we think about them -- especially in the church. Are gifts *from* God or are gifts *for* God? What if the only things we really have are the things which we are willing to give away? This idea is hardly unique to me, naturally. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 16.25: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Jesus wasn't just talking a big talk, he actually lived this out by giving up his life on the cross so that every person since that time would have an example for giving up their life -- their ego, their own desires, their own agenda -- in order to be part of God's purpose. There's overwhelming testimony to this in the New Testament, but

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Bender, *Everyday Sacred: A Woman's Journey Home*. Harper Collins: New York, 1996, p. 122-123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

one of the loveliest statements is the early Christian hymn found in Philippians chapter 2. I recommend it to your reading -- I'm not going to read it to you because I want to be sure to talk about Philippians Chapter 4. It's one of my favorite chapters in the Bible, and we're going to stay here for the next three weeks while we talk about gifts, graces, and gratitude. I want to begin at the end of the chapter, just before Paul's closing. Paul says, "I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied."

Can you say that? Do you have more than enough? Are you fully satisfied? Having enough and being satisfied should be closely related -- but somehow they often are not. You'd think that people who have more than enough -- money, toys, stuff -- would be the most satisfied. But that is not always the way the world works. Sometimes people who have the most do not think it's enough; they will not be satisfied until they get more, and even more. Remember the character Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*? The poor tailor who wants to marry Tevye's daughter says, "Money is the world's curse" and Tevye replies, "May the Lord smite me with it. And may I never recover!" Money makes everything simpler, right?

I think it's worth noting that when Paul writes "I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied," he is writing from prison. Prison has never been a place -- not in the 1<sup>st</sup> century nor any century since -- where satisfaction rates are especially high. So either Paul is not telling the truth, or he knows something we should learn about satisfaction. I'm going to go with the latter of those two; because I believe that satisfaction is connected to having enough. And further, I believe that our definition of enough is connected to our attitude about gratitude. If we don't believe that we are enough -- good-looking enough, smart enough, spiritual enough, respected enough, deferred to enough, whatever -- it is pretty unlikely that we will be satisfied. But if we can give that gift away -- the gift of affirming others and respecting them and deferring to them because of the qualities they have, we change the equation. Instead of competing for a limited amount of affirmation, which is never enough for what I deserve and people ought to give me, we create more and more generosity in the system so that there's an abundance of gratitude. It begins with what we give away, not with what we try to keep for ourselves.

Let me tell you, friends, I know this can be tender territory, and it plays out in some real-world setting in the church. I have heard both of these statements at Creekside, and I believe I understand them both: "I want the church to tell me how much I should give," and "I will never fill out a pledge card -- my giving is between me and God" Somewhere in between those two statements we need to find a different way of defining what is enough: because neither of those statements creates much satisfaction. The Bible has guidelines for tithing ten percent, but that's not intended to be a limit on how much you *can* give, and it doesn't take into account things like your time and your prayers, and many other ways which people give. Discussions about tithing, in my experience, devolves pretty quickly into splitting hairs about gross versus net income and other details which take us toward legalism. Mandating giving creates obligation, but not necessarily generosity. It probably won't surprise you to know that in general, people with lower to middle incomes are more likely to tithe than people who make a lot of money, who can't afford to tithe. Some of the people who share the most are those who have the least. Generosity is about attitude, not arithmetic.

And of course, your giving is between you and God -- no one at Creekside is ever sent a past due notice, or told that their prayer line is being shut off. This is a community of faith that is actively seeking ways to share God's love with others. That is a ministry which takes commitment from everyone, and we need all the gifts we can bring to it. It's ministry which takes cooperation and planning; a church where people who are hedging their bets and waiting to see if they approve of what other people are planning is not a church which is going forward in faith; it's a church which is acting like there's not enough, because we're always waiting for someone else to step forward.

I want to tell you that Creekside is enough for me. You are good to me and my family in so many ways -- I couldn't name them all even if I had the time. I am fully satisfied with what I receive financially and spiritually. I don't know how many pastors would say that, but I am grateful to have enough, and blessed to know it and to give glory to God, because it is not my work. When I see an outpouring of support like you shared with the Miller family yesterday, I am so touched by

**how much you have shared, and over decades of time. Your generosity is evident in so much that we do. God has given us enough -- not just as individuals, but as a congregation. We need to affirm that God's gifts are enough to do God's work: to comfort those who are grieving, to sing with those who are joyful, to pray with those who need strength. God's gifts are enough for us to reach out into our community and show our neighbors that there are no limits on Christ's love, only on our willingness to share it. We need to show our community that we have enough -- because people need an abundance of hospitality and acceptance and care. Nobody comes to a church because they're needed to make the budget. Having enough is a testimony to God's faithfulness, but most importantly, it shapes our attitude to other people. And most of all, knowing that we have enough is the first step in allowing God to show us more.**

**Gifts, graces, gratitude. You'll be hearing more about these in the coming weeks. Feel free to read Philippians 4 on your own. God bless you.**