Giving to Support Thriving

On this Giving Sunday, let's wonder together about the ways in which we give in order to support thriving. Our congregation articulates this vision: *We envision an ever expanding safe harbor where we thrive together as we work with God toward love and justice.* I have used this word, "thrive" often across this month of November in connection with our church tagline: *Connect, Grow, Love*. Of the synonyms for "thrive," here are my three favorites: flourish, prosper, bloom. To flourish feels full of life. To prosper feels like growing. To bloom feels like opening and facing toward the sun.

Who do we envision thriving, expanding as a safe harbor, and committing to love and justice? I envision us thriving as this congregation as we stretch ourselves by living out our core values. I envision a wider us thriving as a local community by building collaborative partnerships. And I envision each of us thriving as the life of our congregation impacts the way we live the many other waking hours of each week in other spaces and company.

As we enter into this time of reflection, we recognize with gratitude our freedom to be gathered for worship – on our live stream and on this land loved across the ages by First Nations and others and where we are now practicing our way of community. I invite you to join me in a moment of prayer – closing your eyes if that helps to ground you in the present moment.

Holy, loving Spirit – we experience your abundant presence in our lives – through the friendships we are building here with one another, through various ministries to which we offer our skill, physical strength, empathy, and moral conviction; and as you enfold us in the quieter rhythms of worship amidst challenging and painful circumstances we are each weathering in our personal lives. Help us today to open ourselves further to ways you may be calling us to manifest your abundant love such that we all thrive more fully. We ask this as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

Do you know the origin of this saying? *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."* It is one of only a few times the Apostle Paul, a prominent New Testament author, claims to quote Jesus. You might be familiar with the story of Paul's conversion experience in which the risen Jesus appeared to him, asking Paul to stop persecuting Jesus' followers. Aside from that life-altering supernatural experience, Paul did not meet Jesus before Jesus was executed. Here is the thought within which Paul utters that famous saying within a letter to the early church in Corinth:

"You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

I suppose it is possible that Jesus uttered something like that, but Paul would have made the quotation more convincing by offering the context of Jesus's purported words. Here is a saying I might create out of the stories people remembered in the gospels and have passed down to us across the ages – stories in which Jesus, time and again, crossed boundaries, shifted course, offered healing and received hospitality from those on the margins, and engaged in respectful debate around faith an ethics (all in order to embody God's love to the fullest extent of his capacity) – I would say the saying might go like this: **It is more blessed to give and receive freely than to give and receive under pressure.**

To give and receive under pressure requires fear and faith in the power of obedience. To give and receive freely requires honesty, courage, and above all, faith in the power of love.

To give and receive under pressure conveys a belief in scarcity.

To give and receive freely conveys a belief in abundance – trust that there will be enough for all <u>if</u> we share resources with one another.

Before we dive into the gospel reading to notice the movements made by Jesus, his disciple Andrew, and the young boy, I invite us to hear again an excerpt from Ana Lisa de Jong's poem, "Yeast." Listen for how she describes the expansive power of generosity shared with creative freedom:

"Everything costs us," she writes,
"but that which is given,
like all generous gifts
expands beyond itself
to become more
than the sum of its parts…
Creation asks for our collaboration"

What I hear rising out of de Jong's beautiful words is the power of possibility. If I were to meet the poet, I suspect I would meet a kindred optimist!

Now let's consider how Jesus responded to his hungry neighbors with faith in the expansive power of generosity when creatively and freely shared.

"Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'"

As the story flows in the gospel of John, earlier that day Jesus healed a man, then engaged with religious leaders who confronted him, disturbed by him doing healing work on the sabbath. He then preached about his sense of calling by his Father God to show people the way of life eternal. He sounds like a hard-working church! He was finally heading up the mountain to rest with his closest disciples. Yet a crowd of neighbors followed him as they so often did.

Jesus could have stuck to his plan and scurried away, afraid that he did not have enough words or healing energy to offer. But he must have trusted that he would find time and space for rest. Instead, he faced toward the people with compassion and curiosity: "*Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'"*

Sometimes the miracle is that we pause, breathe deeply, and respond to one another and to our neighbors. And that posture of responsiveness opens us to the recognition that we are not alone in facing a given challenge.

Just look how Jesus' openness encouraged the young boy to bring forward exactly what he could offer.

How will we follow Jesus and the young boy in a way of abundance, trusting that there will be enough if we share our resources with one another and with those who we have yet to meet?

I return to our question of thriving. Will we give freely of ourselves to support thriving?

I wonder today how each of us will participate in thriving as a congregation, in thriving as a local community, and thriving as individuals.

I invite you to take out of your bulletins the sermon response sheet that I placed in there for you. It is one of the things that you might bring forward to the giving basket. If you'd like me to follow up with you or to at least know that it is you who shares a thought here, then please note your name. There's no need to if you don't wish to. This is a prayer to offer up to the love of God today:

Holy Spirit, help me to freely give of myself in this way…
(I encourage you to think about your closest relationships, or one of your commitments. Where is it that you would like to more freely give of yourself?)

- *Is it your energy, skill, time, resources?*
- *In what space or with whom do you want to give of yourself?*

And in closing, I'm going to ask you to repeat after me:

It is more blessed to give and receive freely than to give and receive under pressure. Ready? **It is more blessed to give and receive freely than to give and receive under pressure.**

Love is counting on us giving and receiving freely. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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John 6:1-14, "A Poem: Yeast"