

**Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn**

Theme: "Gratitude"

Sermon: "**Give It Away**"

**November 22, 2015 (Reverse Offering Service)**

**Call to Worship**

The prophet Mohammed was asked

"What actions are most excellent?"

And he replied:

    "To gladden the heart of a human being.  
    To feed the hungry.  
    To help the afflicted.  
    To lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful.  
    To remove the wrongs of the injured.  
    That person is the most beloved of God  
    who does the most good to God's creatures."

Let us join together with all those who pray for peace, who give thanks for this life, who seek to do good. Let us strengthen our hearts with worship, with gratitude, with the gifts of the spirit.

**Reading: "Praise Song" by Barbara Crooker**

Praise the light of late November,  
the thin sunlight that goes deep in the bones.  
Praise the crows chattering in the oak trees;  
though they are clothed in night, they do not  
despair. Praise what little there's left:  
the small boats of milkweed pods, husks, hulls,  
shells, the architecture of trees. Praise the meadow  
of dried weeds: yarrow, goldenrod, chicory,  
the remains of summer. Praise the blue sky  
that hasn't cracked yet. Praise the sun slipping down  
behind the beechnuts, praise the quilt of leaves  
that covers the grass: Scarlet Oak, Sweet Gum,  
Sugar Maple. Though darkness gathers, praise our crazy  
fallen world; it's all we have, and it's never enough.

## Sermon: Give it Away

Praise our crazy fallen world, it's all we have,  
and it's never enough.

“Love is something, if you give it away,  
you'll end up having more.”

I think the natural end point of gratitude is generosity.

Counting my blessings leads to me wanting to give some blessings away,  
it's all too much for just me to hold.

Even though the light is waning and days are shorter:

how grateful I am for the thin sunlight that goes deep into my bones.

How grateful I am for the beautiful architecture of trees, for dried weeds,  
for the blue sky that has yet to crack into a shower of snow.

That gratitude needs somewhere to go.

Blessed with abundance, we want to give.

Scholar Walter Brueggeman says:

Blessing is the force of well-being active in the world,  
and faith is the awareness that creation  
is the gift that keeps on giving...

It's a wonder, it's a miracle,

it's an embarrassment, it's irrational,

but God's abundance transcends the market economy.

A rabbi friend of mine, Ilana Garber, who I met twelve years ago when we were both  
hospital chaplain interns at the Brigham, recently underwent treatments for cancer,  
lymphoma.

She's a mom my age with two little kids.

As part of her treatments, she had to have a blood transfusion.<sup>1</sup>

Ilana wondered about whose blood now ran in her veins. She wrote:

Who is she?

What possessed her to give this gift of life?

Was it a drive in honor of a friend?

Was it a national tragedy?

Does she give regularly just because she can?

Did she ever think about the person who might receive the blood?

Maybe, though obviously she has no idea where the blood is going.

But because healthy people do not receive blood,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ilanagarber.com/?p=647>

she had to expect she was giving to someone in need.  
Anonymously. No way to thank. No way to reciprocate.

My friend kept wondering:

...What personal story is now entwined with mine...?  
...What if we met on the street?  
What if the blood came with a detector so that if we were to meet,  
[we] would know and we might look each other in the eyes,  
I might thank her, she might proudly acknowledge that her blood is working?  
What if we are already acquaintances?  
What if we don't like each other?  
What if we're already friends?  
All of these "what if's" simply to remind me that I will never know exactly where  
this life-saving blood came from.

There's the potential that every person, every soul out there, could be a person  
who [saved her life.]

Praise our crazy fallen world; it's all we have, and it's never enough.  
Sometimes we even need the very blood that runs in another person's veins.

She is now in remission.

"Love is something, if you give it away, you'll end up having more."

In describing the person who gave blood,  
Ilana reminded me of the Jewish teachings  
on the levels of generosity.  
The ancient doctor rabbi named Maimonides,  
in the Mishnah Torah,  
described eight levels of charity  
that have been discussed and debated for a thousand years.

This text is ancient, subtle and complex, so please forgive me as I butcher it.

Here is a simple ways to understand these levels of giving. As Maimonides put it, the  
levels go from "least meritorious" to "most meritorious,"  
least to best.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My imperfect over-simplification, with nods to Rachel Naomi Remen and  
<http://www.jewfaq.org/tzedakah.htm>

I need some props for this one. I need some hats.  
And Hillary.

**8) Give begrudgingly after being asked.**

At the eighth and lowest level of giving to others—the least best way—a person begrudgingly buys a hat for a cold shivering person who has asked him for help, gives it to them in the presence of witnesses, and waits to be thanked.

*(Hillary interrupts, says she is cold, asks for a hat. I say okay. Then I remind her to thank me. She thanks me.)*

**7) Give begrudgingly without being asked**

At the seventh level, a person gives without waiting to be asked for help, begrudgingly giving to someone in the presence of witnesses, and waits to be thanked.

*(I say with annoyance that Hillary still looks cold. I give her a hat. Then I look pointedly at her. She thanks me.)*

**6) Give cheerfully**

At the sixth level, a person gives to someone in the presence of witnesses, without waiting to be asked, but this time they do it open-heartedly instead of begrudgingly. And they wait to be thanked.

*(I kindly say Hillary still looks cold, give her hat and hug, we smile, she thanks me without prompting.)*

**5) Give before being asked**

At the fifth level, a person openheartedly gives in private and before being asked—no one sees.

*(We turn our backs to congregation. I pass her a hat and she puts it on. Side-hug. We turn back around.)*

**4) Give when you don't know the recipient's identity, but the recipient knows yours**

At the fourth level, the person openheartedly gives her own hat to another, and the giver has no idea who has received it. But the person who receives it knows to whom they are indebted.

*(Turn back on congregation. Toss hat back like wedding bouquet.)*

**3) Give when you know the recipient's identity, but the recipient doesn't know yours**

At the fourth level, a person openheartedly gives her own hat to another who does not know who has given him this gift. But the person who gave the gift does know the person who is indebted to him.

*(I say to someone in front row who I gave a hat to hold—“is that a hat in your hand? Where did that come from?” they say don't know. Hillary takes it and says “thank you to whoever gave me this hat, I know you are in this room.”)*

## **2. Give when neither party knows the other's identity**

At the second most high level of giving, a person openheartedly gives his own possession away without knowing who will receive it, and he who receives it does not know who has given it to him.

*(Hillary says she doesn't need any more hats. In fact she is very warm. And she is so grateful she wants to give away some hats. Laura Maltby (?) or Claire says, the knitting group makes lots of hats to give away each year, in fact they just gave away 50 hats and socks to people in Paraguay and Kazakhstan. We don't know who they are and they don't know who we are, but we are glad to share some of the warmth and wealth in our life. Hillary can take off her hats.)*

## **1. Enable the recipient to become self-reliant**

And at the highest level of giving, the greatest and most meritorious generosity, the gift enables another person to become self-reliant.

*(Laura Maltby puts her arm around Hillary and Claire and says, I'm going to teach you two to knit. End scene.)*

So, that is an ancient idea about the different levels of generosity. One writer, I love, Rachel Naomi Remen, writes about how her grandfather, an Orthodox rabbi, explained those levels to her when she was five.<sup>3</sup>

It was very important to little Rachel to be good and to do things right, so she listened very carefully.

Then she assured her grandfather, "I will only do it the right way, Grandpa."

He tenderly replied,

"Ah, little one. Here we have a special sort of thing.

Suppose we all gave to those around us as the first person does, begrudgingly offering a gift in the presence of witnesses to someone who has need and who asks us for help?

If we all did this, would there be more suffering or less suffering in the world than there is now?"

Rachel thought about this for a long time, the need to do it *right* battling within her with the simplicity of her grandfather's question.

"Less suffering, Grandpa," she finally said, a little confused.

"Ah yes," he said, beaming. "This is true.

Some things have so much goodness in them that they are worth doing any way that you can."

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted/adapted from Rachel Naomi Remen's *My Grandfather's Blessings*, "Getting it Right," pages 86-87.

Rachel reflected on this lesson years later, saying  
“it is better to bless life badly than not to bless it at all.”

Praise our crazy fallen world; it’s all we have, and it’s never enough.  
“Love is something, if you give it away, you’ll end up having more.”

In this congregation, there are a lot of ways our gratitude finds an outlet in generosity. Our Volunteer Service Network is filled with dozens and dozens of folks who are willing to step up with rides and meals when asked. Our lay ministers are here to listen and care. Our covenant groups are a place for spiritual friendship. Our many support groups create places where folks with specific struggles can find a safe place to share their story.

And, there is the Minister’s Discretionary Fund. This fund is money given openheartedly and without the expectation of thanks, by you, the congregation, to an unknown recipient who has not yet asked for the gift, and to whom I can privately pass on your generosity when someone makes their need known to me. Sound familiar? That is one of the highest, most meritorious levels of giving. Nicely done.

Having a Minister’s Discretionary Fund is a longstanding tradition in a lot of churches. And I am blessed to be the middle man. People come to me and say they have a need, and through your generosity just waiting in the bank, I’m able to literally change their life for the better.

The money in the fund tends to flow in at regular times: first, the month of December, the offering every Sunday is for the Fund; and recently the Caring Congregation Committee has started holding a fundraiser in the spring so that the Minister’s Discretionary Fund has some specific additional funds set aside for parents of children with special needs. Children with special needs often need treatments that are very necessary, very expensive and very not covered by insurance.

This congregation is incredibly generous. And so often, there are more gifts than there are requests, and the money builds up. Well the Discretionary Fund is not meant to be a savings account, it is meant to be dispursed in the same openhearted, generous spirit in which the money was given. And it almost feels selfish to be the only person who gets to give that money away. So now I’m going to give you a chance to be the middle man, to use your discretion, to take part in the spiritual exercise of giving away money from the Minister’s Discretionary Fund.

We are going to do a reverse offering.

I didn’t think this up, and we aren’t the first church to do this. So I got lots of good advice on how we can do this well. But it all comes down to a really simple charge.

“Use this gift for good. Return and tell the story.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.wbur.org/2013/12/03/a-ministers-challenge-use-this-gift-for-good>

So now our ushers are going to pass out the offering; our reverse offering will be both given and received. Don't open your envelope yet, let's wait to open them all together. Yes, please, no matter who you are and no matter how old you are, please TAKE from the offering plate. In each envelope is an amount of money for you to give away. The amounts are different, some have more, some have less. If you take an envelope, you are making a promise to do something meaningful with this money.

Praise our crazy fallen world, it's all we have, and it's never enough.  
"Love is something, if you give it away, you'll end up having more."  
*(Hillary will help us sing the song until offering is complete.)*

The options for your generosity are really, endless. Maybe you give it directly to someone; maybe you buy something with this money to give away; maybe you, yourself, really need some grocery money and didn't want to have to ask for help, and now you have it without asking; maybe you pool your money with others; maybe you use it as seed money for a larger venture; maybe it lets you pick up an extra tag on the Giving Tree next Sunday; maybe you buy coffee for whoever is behind you in line. You could give it away this week or wait however long you need until you figure out what you want to do. Do what feels right to you. And then, come back and tell your story. You can post your story on the Follen facebook page, and I'd love it if you emailed me your story at [minister@follen.org](mailto:minister@follen.org). You can also write up your story and post it to the bulletin board at the side entrance of the church.

I'm curious, also, to hear what it all felt like to you.  
Good? Awkward? Weird? Fun? It's all part of your story.

A simple charge:  
Share your gift.  
Share your story.

Praise our crazy fallen world, it's all we have, and it's never enough.  
There's always more we can give.

"It's a wonder, it's a miracle, it's an embarrassment, it's irrational, but God's abundance transcends the market economy."  
"Love is something, if you give it away, you'll end up having more."

*May it be so.*  
*Amen.*