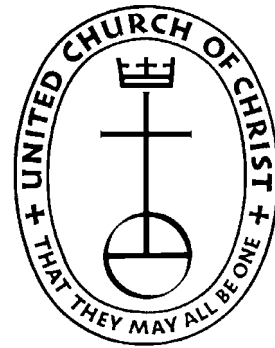


# Saints, Solar Ethics and *The Giving Tree*

A Sermon By —  
JERALD M. STINSON  
November 1, 2009



Giving as a way of life is not about meeting others' needs, reaching church budget goals, pleasing God or impressing others. Giving simply brings human fulfillment, brings genuine meaning to our lives, and as such it is at the core of our faith, the ultimate expression of our gratitude and our response to God's love.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

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First Congregational Church  
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## Saints, Solar Ethics and The Giving Tree

On the liturgical calendar, today is All Saints Day. As early as the second century, Christians began giving special honor and recognition to those who had died as martyrs for their faith – calling them saints. Gradually the definition of “saint” expanded to also include those marked by exceptional goodness or piety.

The anniversary of a saint’s death became that saint’s day and folks would gather to honor the saint. But over time, people couldn’t celebrate every saint’s day, so one day was designated for remembering all saints.

Six years ago, Libby and I did a shared sermon about All Saints Day. She researched over 100 uses of the word “saint” in the Bible and found that a saint was usually someone pious or kind, someone who sought to live out his or her faith. And Paul, writing to the early churches, would greet “all the saints” in a particular church – all those who honor God and seek to live faithfully were regarded by Paul as saints.

Now the Puritans, our congregational forebears, shared that same understanding. In 1648, the Cambridge Platform was a theological statement that came from the first gathering of all the Puritan churches in New England. It said, “A congregational church ... consists of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant.”

So on All Saints Day perhaps we ought to think about what ordinary people, the saints of the church, need to do to be faithful. Today, I want to look at just one element of that behavior – giving. I think a faithful life calls for continual giving in the broadest sense.

Let me tell you about giving in what were perhaps some of the earliest Christian churches. The Didache is an ancient text referred to by many early church leaders. But it was assumed to have been lost centuries ago until in 1873 an archbishop browsing in the library of the Greek Convent of the Holy Sepulcher in Istanbul found a hidden copy from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The Didache is a collection of oral material passed down for use when a Gentile wanted to join one of the Jewish communities built around the Jesus’ movement. After Jesus’ death, two kinds of communities arose in his memory. We all know of the Gentile

churches started by Paul and others, churches that tried to bring the stories of a Jewish messiah into the Greco-Roman culture. Those communities turned Jesus, the messenger of God, into Jesus, the message itself. Jesus, the peasant teacher, became the Christ, the anointed one, the divine Son of God.

But we know there were other churches that arose within Judaism. Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, led such a church in Jerusalem. Their members were faithful Jews who observed all the ordinances and rituals of Judaism just as did Jesus himself. And some of these Jewish communities of the Jesus Way were made up of Jews and some Gentiles who lived outside ancient Israel. The Didache was a training manual for what a Gentile would need to learn and do to join one of those communities – communities that saw Jesus as the human servant of God, not the divine son of God; communities that saw behavior as more important than belief.

And part of the training focused on giving. Giving was seen as a vital practice for one who followed the human Jesus. So listen to these words from the Didache:

*To everyone asking you for anything, give it and do not ask for it back; for to all, God wishes to give these things from God's own free gifts. Blessed is the one giving according to the rule; for that one is blameless.*

*Do not become someone on the one hand, stretching out your hands for the purpose of taking, on the other hand withdrawing them for the purpose of giving. But if you should have something through the work of your hands, you will give something ... You will not hesitate to give nor giving will you grumble ... You will not turn away the one being in need; you will partner together sharing all things with brothers and sisters.*

Now that spirit of giving was apparently very challenging to the Gentile followers of Jesus. Roman society placed great emphasis on the sacredness of private ownership. Romans apparently felt no moral or civic obligation to share with anyone, no need to aid the poor or destitute. Even the public benefactors who subsidized festivals or provided short-term relief in the face of emergencies did so in order to promote their name. So the rule of giving in the Didache sought to break down and replace those Roman instincts.

Now I think the kind of giving linked to being faithful to the teachings of Jesus is a broad kind of giving. It certainly includes sharing our financial resources, which is what my annual stewardship sermon is supposed to be about, but it is more than that. It is crafting a lifestyle rooted in generosity – sharing the gifts we have received, our talents, our time, our money, everything with others – others in our community of faith, others in our family or neighborhood, others in need throughout the global community.

Let me tell you about Don Cupitt's notion of solar ethics or solar living. Cupitt is a British Anglican theologian. He doesn't believe in a personal God or in life after death. His theology is even more radical than mine. So with no hope of future reward or fear of future punishment, why not live in complete selfishness, taking from this life everything we can before it ends?

Well, Cupitt said that if we do that, we won't find meaning or purpose in life, and thus we won't be happy or feel fulfilled.

Using the metaphor of the sun burning itself out, he draws an analogy between the sun and the way to create a meaningful life. He says "we should live as the sun does ... it simply expends itself gloriously and in so doing gives life to all." The sun gives life to our solar system, even at the same time it is gradually burning itself out. The process by which it dies and by which it lives are the same. Now you don't have to agree with Cupitt about God or life after death in order to appreciate his notion of solar living.

For our lives to be meaningful they must be centered around giving out warmth and love to others. That broad sense of giving is not just part of a meaningful life; it is the center of a meaningful life. And therefore, it is what ultimately fills us with true joy.

Let me share with you my abridged version of the text of Shel Silverstein's famous children's book, *The Giving Tree*.

*Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy. Every day the boy gathered her leaves and made them into crowns and played king of the forest. He climbed up her trunk, swung from her branches and ate apples. When he was tired, he slept in her shade. The boy loved the tree and the tree was happy.*

*But the boy grew older and the tree was often alone. One day the boy came to the tree and the tree said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk, swing from my branches, eat apples, be happy."*

*"I am too big to climb and play," said the boy. "I want to buy things and have fun. I want money."*

*"I have no money," said the tree. "I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy." So the boy climbed up the tree, gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy.*

*The boy stayed away a long time. The tree was sad. Then the boy came back. The tree shook with joy and said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk, swing from my branches, be happy."*

*"I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy. "I want a wife and children; I need a house. Can you give me a house?"*

*"I have no house," said the tree. "But you may cut off my branches and build a house." The boy cut off her branches and carried them away. And the tree was happy.*

*The boy stayed away a long time. When he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. "Come and play," she whispered.*

*"I am too old and sad to play," said the boy. "I want a boat that can take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?"*

*"Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree. "So the boy cut down her trunk, made a boat and sailed away. The tree was happy ... but not really.*

*After a long time the boy came back again. "I am sorry, Boy," said the tree, "but I have nothing left to give you. My apples are gone."*

*"My teeth are too weak for apples," said the boy.*

*"My branches are gone," said the tree. "You cannot swing on them."*

*"I am too old to swing on branches," said the boy.*

*"My trunk is gone," said the tree. "You cannot climb."*

*"I am too tired to climb," said the boy.*

*"I am sorry," sighed the tree. "I wish I could give you something but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump."*

*"I don't need much now," said the boy. "just a quiet place to sit and rest."*

*"Well," said the tree, "An old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down and rest." The boy did and the tree was happy.*

That which made the tree happy was giving herself to the boy. Giving is what provides meaning to our lives.

Winter D. Prosapio wrote a *Christian Science Monitor* article about the problems with Shel Silverstein's book. She said:

*I have always disliked "The Giving Tree." What bothers me is that the guy never once utters a single word of gratitude. Yet, at every turn the Giving Tree is "happy." In my opinion, that tree clearly needs some therapy and that boy should receive hard-core sensitivity training.*

*Yet as a mother, there are days when I feel like I'm the Giving Tree – running around and serving as waitress, cook, nurse, and cruise director. I referee disputes, manage egos, and bite my tongue letting only a few inappropriate things slip through.*

*In the morning, I carry down the stairs a child who runs up them each night. I rescue toys from under a bed that either daughter could crawl under without getting stuck.*

*I attend to the needs of my family members, who spend the day roaring their demands until about 9 p.m. when, at last, they are all asleep, and I ... I am a stump. And sometimes I am so not "happy."*

*I'm ready to pick up my roots and skedaddle to some other orchard where I'll be watered and cared for: a place where my fruit will be prized, my long branches admired, and my thick trunk appreciated.*

*I'm not good at this Giving Tree thing. I thought it would come naturally to me as a mother. But I had no idea how much I'd need to give. My cluelessness is undoubtedly the result of a long life without children.*

*No other generation has had so much "me" time before becoming parents. Our generation has had the luxury of choosing the commencement of parenting. For those of us who delayed, we now contend with habits and natures built on a foundation that does not involve a great deal of giving.*

*We focused on things with all of our energy and resources, and these things seemed very important before children: cars, hobbies, designer clothes and careers.*

*When children arrive, those seemingly vital activities fade from our lives until we find ourselves behind the wheels of minivans wearing anything that came out of the dryer in reasonable condition, talking on the phone about soccer schedules and boxing up our old collections to set them out at the next yard sale.*

*Now it's our turn to become the Giving Tree. Some of us are better at being Giving Trees than others. I struggle more often than I like to admit with the role of "relentless giver."*

*Then it happens. My daughters, perhaps sensing impending root rot in their Giving Tree, suddenly transform the orchard. They make me laugh, help fold clothes, put away dishes, and cover me with hugs and kisses. They take my spirit in their hands and toss it into the air like leaves, giggling as they catch me in their arms.*

*I've come to realize that "happy" for a Giving Tree and a [parent] is not about comfort and relaxation. Happy is about having my little ones run beneath my branches, sheltering them in my shade, tossing out a few apples, and, in the end, giving all that I have.*

*Slowly I am learning to be a Giving Tree. As I'm trying to teach my children a sense of gratitude for all the giving that surrounds us, I am learning that this level of giving is not something parents know how to do the moment our children arrive. Like gratitude, giving is something we have to learn.*

We have to learn to give – and giving, as a way of life, can be really difficult.

Giving is what the Didache tried to teach new Gentile followers of the Jesus' way. Giving is what Don Cupitt's solar living is all about. The giving tree and the harried mother learned that giving is what brings happiness.

Giving as a way of life is ultimately is not about meeting the needs of others. Giving is not about reaching goals for the church's budget. Giving is not about pleasing God or impressing others with our generosity. Giving is not about duty or obligation.

Giving is simply what brings human fulfillment itself. Giving is what brings genuine meaning into our lives, and that is why it is at the core of our faith and why it is the ultimate expression of our gratitude and the ultimate response to God's love.

Amen.