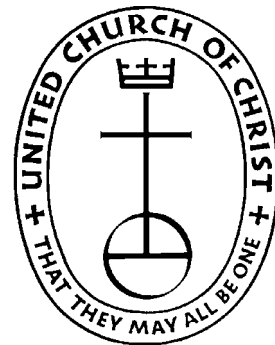


A Healthy Balance

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
June 27, 2010



This sermon discusses the important of maintaining a healthy balance between giving and receiving. All too often we are more ready to give to others than to allow them to give to us, but this is not only out of balance, it also refuses to allow others to have the joy of giving.

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

Rev. Jerald Stinson
June 27, 2010 (#1405)
Reading: John 13:3-8

First Congregational Church
(Long Beach, California)

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Today's reading comes from the Gospel of John and it clearly reflects the theology of John's community. It is supposed to have happened not long before Jesus' death.

During supper, Jesus – knowing that God had put all things into his own hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God – rose from the table, took off his clothes and wrapped a towel around his waist. He then poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and dry them with the towel.

When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said, "Rabbi, you're not going to wash my feet, are you?"

Jesus answered, "You don't realize what I am doing right now, but later you'll understand."

Peter replied, "You'll never wash my feet."

It was hard for Peter to accept Jesus' act of kindness and humility. It was hard for him to accept Jesus' gift. It would have been far easier for Peter to wash Jesus' feet than to be the one receiving the washing. It was easier for Peter to do things for Jesus than to receive things from him.

Now I understand that. I find it much easier to give than to receive. I am often uncomfortable accepting the gifts of others.

One day when Methodist minister Darren Cushman arrived home from work, his wife told him their neighbor Andy had dropped off a present. Cushman said, "The last thing I wanted was a present from Andy. But there it was, wrapped in a grocery bag, a cassette of *The Three Tenors*."

He said the gift made him uncomfortable – uncomfortable that Andy spent money he couldn't afford, uncomfortable that Rev. Cushman would have to tell Andy how much he enjoyed the tape even though he had no intention of listening to it, uncomfortable at encouraging a friendship Cushman really didn't want.

Andy was a difficult person – an army veteran living on disability, always angry. He thought his neighbors were stealing his mail and he disrupted community meetings.

He occasionally attended Cushman's church, most recently when he dominated a Bible study with accusations that churches weren't doing enough for people like him.

Cushman didn't want that gift. But one afternoon – when it was over a 100 degrees and Cushman's car air conditioner had broken down, he finally tore open the plastic wrapper and stuck the tape into his car stereo. As he continued driving, listening to Placido Domingo sing *Grenada* his spirits were lifted by the music. At a stop light, he cranked up the volume and hollered along with the three tenors. Andy's gift, the gift he didn't want, was a cold drink for his parched soul.

Tony Robinson, who helped with our planning process a few years ago, recently wrote that congregations should affirm a healthy balance between giving and receiving. He said many congregations prioritize giving – using maxims like, "It is better to give than receive" or "God has no hands but ours." But he feels the giving and receiving should be balanced.

As I thought about Peter's reaction to Jesus' washing his feet, I thought about Jesus himself. He seemed to have that healthy balance about which Tony Robinson wrote.

Jesus was constantly giving. He and his disciples lived simply so they could give generously to others. He reached out to help all sorts of people in need. He would often change his plans, go out of his way, in order to help someone. And his teaching spoke of the importance of giving.

But his teaching also affirmed receiving. Perhaps the story that makes that most clear is Luke's story of Mary and Martha. Martha was busy hosting Jesus at her home, caught up in the details of hospitality while her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching. Martha asked Jesus about why he hadn't sent Mary to help in the kitchen. But Jesus said they were both doing good things – it was good to give as Martha was doing with her hospitality, but it was also good to receive as Mary was doing as she learned new things.

And there was balance in Jesus' own life. He gave a great deal, but he also graciously received the gifts of others. There are three different versions of a story about Jesus being anointed with expensive oil or perfume. They probably reflect a common story with a complicated history of oral transmission.

In all probability, the original story was about a woman intruder anointing Jesus during a men's-only dinner. The story indicates that some of Jesus' followers criticized him for accepting her lavish gift. The money used to buy the oil could have fed hungry people. But Jesus said, "It's okay. This is a good thing." He received the gift; it made

him feel good.

Or there's the story of Jesus anticipating his own death. He knew, after his civil disobedience in the temple, that it was a matter of time until Roman soldiers came for him. So he wanted to go away and pray. But he didn't want to be alone. So he asked three of his disciples to go with him. He seemingly had no problem asking others to help him, just as he himself helped others.

Jesus seemed able to balance asking for help and offering to help others. He balanced giving with receiving.

In previous sermons, I have talked about my friendship with a Roman Catholic nun, Sister Carol Antonellis. Let me tell you more about Carol today.

We met in the summer of 1971. I was 25; she was about ten years older. I had finished my second year at Harvard Divinity School and enrolled in a summer Clinical Pastoral Training Program at Boston City Hospital. Carol was one of the instructors. The program was designed for students at Andover Newton Theological School and Boston University School of Theology. Carol was assigned a small group of us who came from other institutions.

On the first day of that summer program, those of us who were Carol's students introduced ourselves. I shared my name and the school I attended, at which point Carol stood up, shouted at me that I would undoubtedly fail and threw her high-heel shoe at me. Not exactly what I anticipated from an instructor. She said no one from Harvard could feel anything, we were much too cerebral, thus there was no way I could minister to the needs of patients so I might as well drop out of the program.

Well, I didn't drop out, but I did struggle with learning to deal with emotions and feelings. Her perceptions of Harvard were not all that wrong. If you remember two weeks ago in my sermon I talked about walking right past a patient in need because I was so intent on reaching a particular goal, and losing Sister Carol in the process because she stopped to meet that person's need.

In spite of the strange beginning of our relationship, the shoe throwing, Carol and I quickly became good friends. I would bring a bag lunch each day and so would she. We often ate outside on the hospital steps. I vividly remember a day when Carol wanted an ice cream cone from one of the vendors. A nun, she had no money. Her basic needs were met at the convent, but she didn't even carry a purse. So she turned me and said, "I'd like an ice cream cone. Buy me one." She knew I had money and she didn't. She had no trouble offering others the opportunity to help her, even as she was willing

to help them.

Long after I finished that summer program, I invited Carol to be part of my ordination at the First Congregational Church of Cambridge. The center piece of a UCC ordination is the ordination prayer during which the candidate kneels and all the clergy put their hands on his or her head while a very special person offers the prayer. I asked Carol to do that prayer and she decided she needed new clothing appropriate for such an honor. She asked her sister, who had a paying job, to buy her a new dress. They went to Filene's bargain basement where Carol selected a beautiful black cocktail dress. An excellent seamstress, she soon converted it into a striking nun's habit, complete with veil. Again not afraid to ask for what she needed, not embarrassed at letting someone help her.

I remember the first time Carol invited me to come to dinner at the convent. What an occasion! This was forty years ago and there was a high wall between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Having joined her religious order as a teenager, Carol was from a large working class Italian family – two brothers became priests, she became a nun, the other brothers were fire fighters and police officers. And virtually all the nuns in her convent were from similar backgrounds. From Irish or Italian Catholic homes to Catholic schools to the convent – most had never interacted with a Protestant, little alone one soon to be a Protestant minister. As I talked that first night with Carol in the convent living room, I saw nun after nun peeking in just to see what I looked like.

But after several visits to the convent, my presence was accepted. Most of the nuns in that convent worked at making ceramic figures – that's how the convent was funded. Some of the ceramic figures were religious, but most were sports figures, primarily small statues of Bobby Orr and Phil Esposito, two heroes on the Boston Bruins hockey team.

Carol was an artist. She made the requisite ceramic figures, but she also did beautiful paintings. She was always giving me paintings she had made. She expressed her heart's feelings through her art and then gave that art away.

In order to advance as a supervisor in that clinical training program, she needed more education. So she enrolled at Andover Newton Theological School, where she was as much an oddity being a nun as I had been at the convent. In a Hebrew Bible class, she was moved by the stories of Moses and the liberation of the enslaved Hebrew people. On the final day of the class she took in what was supposed to be her term paper, but was instead a large canvas with an amazing seascape showing a wild, raging sea with dark clouds, but off in the distance some light, some hope. The painting expressed her feelings about the Moses' story. But the professor didn't care what she felt; so he

failed her.

Now one final story about Sister Carol. One day, as she was walking home from the hospital, she encountered some other nuns, also artists. A small group of sisters lived in an old house that Carol passed daily without her knowing it was a convent. She was quickly invited into that convent. She was impressed with their ceramic work – that’s how they supported themselves too. She especially liked a cross, perhaps six inches long, fiery red for Pentecost. They insisted she take it. And of course, Carol was delighted to take it. She didn’t fuss saying, “Oh, no, I can’t take that from you. It is too special.” No, she thanked and hugged them and took the cross. She let them give her a gift. She offered them the opportunity to feel the joy of giving.

Now that same evening I had dinner with Carol at the convent. With great excitement she told me about the cross. She raced to her room to get it to show me. I admired it, and she spontaneously said, “Well, if you like it, take it, you can have it.” I felt terrible. She loved that cross, and had owned it just a few hours. I tried to talk her out of giving it to me. I reacted exactly opposite of how she would. I tried to block her joy at giving away something of value. But she didn’t let my behavior get in the way of her giving, anymore than Jesus let Peter’s resistance get in the way of his washing the disciples’ feet.

With joy, she passed her gift on to me, and for several years it hung over my desk, a reminder of Carol’s spirit of giving. But then one day, I felt I should pass it on, and I did so. I don’t know if the recipients kept it and still have it, or if it has gone to yet more people. But that cross’ journey is a reminder that life is a constant exchange of gifts – physical gifts, gifts of spirit, of time, of talent. We all give, and we all must be open to receiving.

Our lives must be lived with a healthy balance. There will be times when we are strong. We can enjoy leading here at the church, creating new programs, serving on boards, helping feed the hungry and minister to the needs of children and youth. But there will also be times when we are in one of life’s dark valleys or when age has caught up with us, and we can no longer give as much. At those times we end up receiving more, letting others help us, accepting the gifts of others with grace and gratitude.

All of us are givers and receivers – and what we need is a healthy balance. Amen.