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Boomerangs and Blessings

Luke 6:37-38

The same passage of scripture was read twice this morning. Though the versions of the Bible differ, the passage was the same. It was intentional. It seems to me that we can become indifferent to scripture. We half listen, aware of the words, but resistant to the power those words have for our living.

“Give away your life, you’ll find life given back, but not merely given back – given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”

In a culture where shrill voices of judgment and negativity surround us, we are called to focus on the generosity of God and allow that generosity to influence our own living. Take a deep breath of grace this day. Breathe in the love of God that surrounds you this morning and know - not just intellectually, but at the level of heart and soul - that you are blessed.

Let us pray.

I confess before you that part of the reason I am in the church is to find refuge from the world. I come here, in part, to hide, to be renewed, to get away from the harsh realities of the world around us. Randy and I went to the Covered Bridge Festival in Rockville this week and on the way we saw an Amish man driving a horse and carriage. I had a twinge of envy for one who is so separated from the world. Of course, I would not last a week in his culture. I have grown far too dependent upon the comforts of my culture. And yet, to live apart from the harshness and the demands of this society does appeal to me. For in living apart, one would be able to truly focus on the essentials. Living apart, one would not be so distracted by the tremendous volume of the inconsequential in our culture. I find myself envious of a people, who have so immersed their lives in their faith that when tragedy strikes, like that of the murder of the Amish children in Pennsylvania a year ago, their response is rooted in their faith. Their response was forgiveness; their response was generous even in the midst of such an atrocity.

Living apart like the Amish or cloistered disciples of Christ has always held some appeal for me. However, I am United Methodist through and through, and like you, we are all called to live out our faith within the mess of the world around us.

That world has become so...loud and so negative. I suppose it has to do with the political campaigns that are raging right now. The level of intensity, name-calling and criticism always increases during a time of elections. But there is also the ongoing harping of some pundit or other, spewing their venom on this subject or that on the television or the internet.

Ours is a culture that continues to grow less and less civil, more and more harsh and deeply judgmental. The result is a din of negativity twenty-four hours a day.

We just cannot seem to ignore the negative, the judgmental, the shocking because it sells and clearly it holds our interest.

As a part of the WOW study of Brian McLaren's book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, the class resonated with the author's statement that in the harsh criticism one segment of society makes toward another, the ones making the accusation "compare[ed] their own best to their counterpart's worst." What follows is one volley after another of judgments based on the same kind of flawed foundation. My best is compared to your worst. Your best compared to my worst. Though loud and obnoxious, this form of, and I use the word loosely, "communication," leads us nowhere.

"The world is awash in divisions rooted in the human compulsion to believe our differences are more important than our common humanity." [p. 108 Clinton, Giving]

In the Gospel of Luke we find judgment and generosity connected to each other. Judgment, we are cautioned, leads to a hardening of the heart. Continuous criticism, blaming, and judging create a hard shell around the heart. That lack of flexibility causes not only a hard heart, but is also has a boomerang effect of creating a hardened life. Over time as we send our negativity into the world, we shrink. Over time our own critical, judgmental practices toward others come back around to shape us. Our own life becomes negative, shriveled, and small. In our negativity, we shrink back from our opportunities; we live out of fear rather than hope. We see life as a burden to be endured, rather than a blessing to be celebrated. Though our days will grow in number, our spirit will diminish until like our heart, it too becomes hardened and inflexible.

That boomerang has actually returned with a negative affect to the Christian church in this country. According to a research study conducted by the Barna Group, a research firm based in California, the church's attitudes about people in general and gays in particular are driving a negative image of the Christian faith among people ages 16-29. "The Christian community's ability to take the high road and help to deal with some of the challenges that this perception represents may be the...defining response of the Christian church in the next decade," according to David Kinnaman, author of *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity.* Adelle Banks Religion News Service

The boomerang is headed back our direction and it is bearing the negativity that the greater church has already put into the culture.

Jesus says, "Give your life away." Take in a deep, deep breath of holiness, release fear and venture out into life trusting God. Our opportunity to live life to the fullest is God's great dream for us. In so doing, in moving beyond the need to criticize others, in moving beyond the need to offer judgment and blame, we begin to focus on life not as burden, but as blessing. We release ourselves from the boomerang effect of negative words and actions and

open ourselves to nurturing a generous spirit. Henri Nouwen once stated, "Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know I am moving from fear to love."

Why would we not move from fear to love? God has already generously lavished love upon us. We are blessed not only with a life of comfort, but far more importantly, God calls us God's own. Our physical comfort means little compared to the love that God holds for us. We are a people of the Resurrection. We are the beloved children of God! Ours is blessing in this life and in the life beyond this life. What have we to fear? Why would we need to sit in judgment of others?

Our calling is to share the love of God with others. This day and every day is filled with opportunities to offer a generous word to others. This day and every day is filled with opportunities to offer generous acts toward others. Those words and those actions are the direct result of our confidence in the love that God showers upon us.

To quote the words of the Gospel of Luke, "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap."

To truly understand this image, we would all need to be dressed as Jesus was dressed long ago. In those days, one wore a robe that was cinched at the waist with a rope. You could tie the robe in such a way that a large pouch was created. The pouch was used to carry goods. One could carry produce or grain. In so doing, you would be able to transport much more than if you were just using your hands to carry the items.

The image then is this large apron-like garment, overflowing with goodness. Now that is the life I truly seek. Living out the love of God in such a way that our heart grows larger, our spirit soars and generosity abounds. And here is the beauty of our relationship with the Divine: we have the power to choose. We choose a life of judgment or blessing. We choose how we will order our days, our faith experience and create our world-view.

Roberto Assagiloli, an Italian psychiatrist wrote this parable. Three stonecutters who were building a cathedral in the fourteenth century were interviewed about their experience, about their work as stonecutters.

The first stonecutter said with bitterness that he was cutting stones into blocks, a foot by a foot by three quarters of a foot. With frustration he described his life as repetitive, doing the same thing over and over and over again. With a sense of misery, he relates that this drudgery will continue until the day he dies.

The second stonecutter, who is doing the exact same job, cutting stone into blocks of a foot by a foot by three quarters of a foot, replies that he is earning a living for his beloved family and that through this work he is providing for his children and he and his wife have a home filled with love.

It is the third stonecutter whose response gives us reason to pause and ponder. With a sense of joy, he tells of the privilege of participating in the building of this great cathedral, so strong that it will stand as a holy lighthouse for a thousand years. He claims his place in the process of building this mighty edifice.

You and I choose how we will shape our existence. We can choose to allow our judgment and criticism not only to damage our relationships with others, but to also ruin the days we have been given. We could also settle for a modest life with little in the way of expectation of our God or ourselves or we can root ourselves in the love of God and see life not only as an opportunity to be a part of the great endeavor of Christianity, but also to partner with our God as we fashion a future of generosity and grace.

This is a powerful passage of scripture. "Jesus is making the official proclamation of the way life is inside and outside the reign of God. ...the arrival of God's reign will be marked by a complete reversal." p. 88, Craddock

Fear is replaced with joy. Judgment gives way to generosity. These reversals take place in a life or a community that is committed to living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It will not be enough for you or for me to merely take refuge in this sacred space. Our lives will only hold meaning when we take our faith out into the world. As we forge our future together, we will continue to partner in ministries here in the church, in our community and around the world. We will build upon our strengths and grow ever more courageous as we share openly the power of God's presence to change lives, to re-shape our culture and to assist us in building our lives on that which is essential. We will walk with each other, encourage one another, and act in the name of Christ out in the world as we offer hope to a world in desperate need. We will refuse to add our voices to the negativity that is already so deafening. We commit our lives to more than merely maintaining this sacred space, but also in building a community of faith that will continue to be a beacon of light for Jesus Christ for another thousand years.

Meridian Street has a place of significance in this community. We will be known for our generous spirit. We will be known for our generosity of word and deed and we will be known for our great hearts. And in the process, little by little, never as a goal, but certainly as a result, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and overflowing will be poured over us.

Feel it, that good measure, the gifts of grace and love, poured over us, running over, inspiring us as the disciples of Jesus Christ? That good measure flowing all around us is the gift of our most generous God.