

Ah the season of thankfulness and giving is upon us!!! The season of gluttonous feasting... of mall parking lot traffic jams - complete with four letter words and middle fingers... of crammed schedules, visiting inlaws, and maxed out credit cards. The season of thanksgiving and generosity...

Presbyterians by nature are progressive people — a denomination devoted to giving ourselves to God and making the world a better place.

Tis true with all faith traditions, though each sees this call to give in a different way.

So I start with a simple question in recognition of the many diverse communities that are worshiping simultaneously in and beyond Palo Alto this morning...

*'What faith tradition is the most generous... or authentic in their generosity.'*

I haven't the answer to this; however, a homeless man in San Francisco recently had the same question and might have figured it out.

Sitting on a street corner he placed nine begging bowls before him — Each boasting a small label bearing the words 'Muslim', 'atheist', 'Jewish', 'Buddhist', 'spiritual', 'agnostic', 'pagan', 'hindu' or 'Christian'.

He then scribbled the question, "which religion cares the most about the homeless," across a cardboard sign and watched his experiment unfold.

At the end of an evening sitting silently on the sidewalk, he was surprised to find the atheist bowl more than doubled the donations of any other...

There is something refreshing about an altruistic atheist...

While 'giving' boosts the buddhists class in their next life, counts toward the Christian's 10%, and makes good of muslim tax and tithing obligations... the blessed atheist lives and gives in the present. Theirs is an almsgiving unattached to after-life.

...Opposed to their 'faithful counterpart's' rapture or reincarnation rooted reciprocity, they demonstrate a generosity driven by compassion rather than karma.

I was picturing this homeless sociologist while listening to an npr podcast last week and a line in regards to holiday charity season giving set me aback—

*"giving makes us vulnerable."*

Indeed it can — if what you are giving away is limited.

In the past I'd thought of the vulnerability of the begger, but not so much the giver...

From the Christian perspective, the proverbial words of Matt 6 bear relevancy to our homeless researcher and our vulnerability:

*'When you give to the needy, do not sound a trumpet (literally... it was a custom in the Persian region during the time for a poor beggar to have a trumpet or horn so that they could call attention to any passerby's who bestowed him with a gift.)*

No, the text continues, *'do not sound as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be praised by others. (actors in Greek... not quite as harsh as our English understanding of hypocrite) Truly I tell you, they already have their full reward.*

*When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your creator, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you....*

This is a pretty well known proverbial reflection in and outside the Christian context; however, a more modern predecessor of Matthew, Maya Angelou, adds a new vantage point to the perspective.

*“As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands, one for helping yourself, the other for helping others.”*

As an aspiring Presbyterian Yogi, two things struck me upon my reading those words.

1st: In Sanskrit, the word ‘Maya’ means the false illusion of independence. We are interdependent, Not dependent (that’s restrictive,) our interdependence is rooted not so much in giving as empowering. A hand-up not handout mentality.

2nd: building off that 1st point, if there is such a thing as oneness, there can be no such thing as selfishness...

So whereas many read Matthew’s words as a call to give in secret, Maya and the yogi’s see a call give of and to ourselves, self and social simultaneously, as part a larger whole...

The word Matthew’s text uses for giving is ‘almsgiving’... it is one of three tenets of the Christian faith (almsgiving, fasting and prayer) and one present in the corpus of religious faith traditions:

In Buddhism, alms or almsgiving is the respect given by a lay Buddhist, monk, nun, spiritually-developed person to another being. ‘Total willingness to give is the wish-granting gem for fulfilling the hopes of wandering beings.’

This Buddhist perspective is essential. So many times, despite our best intentions, giving can enhance division.

Dropping change in a hat or serving soup over the barrier of a cafeteria table to a homeless/nameless neighbor can enhance the socio-economic divide. But the Buddhist perspective on alms is different, it is a gift of empowerment and requires the humility of the giver.

Aboriginal activist Lila Watson spoke of this when she declared, “If you have come here to help me, to give pity, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

There is a difference in generosity and reciprocity in in this sense... a recognition that ‘the other,’ the recipient, has an equal value to the giver and acknowledgement that both have much to receive.

That doesn’t fully address the earlier allusion to vulnerability, however, vulnerability is a byproduct of generosity if what your giving is limited.

Faith — the root of our gifts — is limitless. Faith — not of any one tradition or directed to any one entity — but the essence of faith — is overflowing. If it is authentic....

And when we are rooted in faith, the flowers and fruits of its harvest mirror that abundance!

Ever noticed how the word *Abundance* sounds positive, but *excess* sounds gluttonous. These terms are of relevancy as we look at today’s theme of ‘enough’.

Let us travel from organic fields to the extravagant edifice of Donald Trump’s Central Park library where a Proverb of sorts, transformed into a self-congratulatory slogan, is murals on the wall: ‘The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.’

It is a quote of the late poet William Blake who further wrote “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.” Though Trump’s interpretation may differ from Blake’s initial intentionality; maybe it can indeed provoke wisdom...

We know excess, but when our faith falls to fear we fail to know ‘enough.’

Do you know that in this world's harvest is abundant enough for every human being to consume 7 pounds of food per day. Every-day.

I wouldn't have thought much of that until I watched (in a strange mix of awe and disgust) one of the guys at the sobriety home I oversee in Santa Cruz unsuccessfully attempt to consume a 5lb gummy bear this past halloween.

Excess... Yep- we know it well; however, the 20% of our country who go to bed hungry every night might disagree that "the road to excess has led to a palace of wisdom" ... nor generosity for that matter!!

Stomachs aren't growling because the harvest is inadequate, but because we fail to extend an invitation to the table.

Here in the ol' US of A 150,000 tons of that excess food finds its way to a dumpster everyday. Notably, dumpster often locked up and fenced off so no one can 'steal' our waste.

Is it a sign that we've let fear overtake faith... or maybe a consequence of our viewing the harvest as ours to allocate.

I had an unfortunate interaction with a bee while wandering the fields of our farm earlier this week. Following a short stream of non-church appropriate language my focus fell to my feet where the fallen bee reminded me of an old fable.

*It had been a dry spring and the queen bee was stricken with fear as she flew over barren flower fields. 'God make it rain,' she prayed, "so that the flowers will bloom and we may make honey.'*

*Just then the roll of thunder sounded in the distance and the queen returned to her hive just as the clouds above opened over the drought-layden fields.*

*Sun and shower danced over the days to follow left in their wake a wall of colorful flowers, and thanks to the work of hungry honeybees, a hive overflowing with honey.*

*Proud of her abundant harvest, the queen made an offering to the Greek God Jupiter, who, in return, offered to grant the queen bee any wish that she desired.*

*"I would like a sting" the queen proclaimed upon peering across the fields at her animal neighbors whose taste buds beckoned for a hint of honey.*

*"A sting so that all those who come to take my honey will feel my wrath."*

*Jupiter — true to his word — granted the queen her sting. "You shall have your request,' he said, "but at your own peril,' he added under his breathe. "For if you use it, the sting will remain in the wound and you too shall perish."*

*The queen initially went to Jupiter in thanksgiving, but her pride and fear spoke louder than her faith and gratitude...*

*In order to share the surplus and not our sting we must overcome our fears of inadequacy...*

*And maybe that starts by asking "when did the honey, the harvest, become ours to protect?"*

-----

Faith is unlimited and when authentic it is indeed enough...

However, we hinder faith through hesitation, restrict it with reservation, and confine it when we lack confidence (self, social, or spiritual.)

Having referenced ol' Donny Trump, even things out with the words of Marianne Williamson...

*“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.”*

What if the root of faith we are called to regain is not in the harvest that surrounds us, but the potential of the one within us?

After all, it is ourselves that we are first called to give.

I've found one foolproof way to revive one's faith is to wander in wonder during a Santa Cruz sunset on an Indian summer evening!

Let me set the scene:

*It was one of those divinely synchronistic moments where the celestial balance scale teetered perfectly between moonrise and sunset.*

*You know the type— that antique looking tool that weighing two values against one another.*

Picture it. Two outstretched arms from which two plates, one holding a setting sun and the other a rising moon, hang on congruent copper chains.

Humans have internal version of these scales that we use to weigh our decisions — our giving.

We like to weigh the consequences in an attempt to be rational in our generosity (an oxymoronic statement.)

God knows we don't want to give too much or too little... so we stare at our scale. Vulnerable.

'Will the impact outweigh the effort? The ramifications justify the resources? Will we receive adequate accolade and appreciation for our engagement?'

Yeah, we like to be recognized! That's not bad, it's human.

I wonder if when Jesus dropped the line, 'let not the right hand see the left hand's giving...' there wasn't an allusion to the right and left arms of our internal scales.

Over the years I've come to label that internal balance as my 'Risk-Reward Ratio,' and if the possible reward outweighs the perceived risk then watch out!

So back to the scene at hand-

*With the divine scales of the sky balanced between setting sun and rising moon — each enhanced by the crispness of coloration found in only in a fall sky- I lied sprawled in awe across my surfboard.*

*Stared out across the horizon the silhouette of a wave began to take form. Slowly swelling, it encroached upon the shallowing shoreline.*

*I started paddling, watching the wall of water over my left shoulder until I felt the wave's energy grab ahold my board and lift me to its crest.*

*It was the perfect wave — a 10 ft glassy mirror reflecting an equally perfect sunset. A perfect moment.*

*I grabbed the sides of my board and shifted my weight forward letting the wave take control as I leap to my feet. But just then, a quick glimpse down the steep wall caused me to second guess myself.*

*My awe and appreciation of the saltwater gift was overcome by the fear of the deep drop that loomed ahead.*

*I pulled back — just for a split second — but that was long enough for a cold white cloud of water to form overhead. What happened next was far from perfect.*

*Wipeout.*

*I surfaced after a string of somersaults — depleted, beaten, and disappointed.*

*God had gifted me with something abundantly beautiful... but my fear of inadequacy — the doubt that I had enough... enough skill, agility, etc — took me out of the flow.*

-----

*I leave you with two simple statements of two unique to ponder over the week to come but unified traditions:*

The first, a quick but familiar verse of Psalm 23...

*'The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.'*

*This is an English mistranslation, the Hebrew vernacular addresses this idea of 'enough' in reading, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not need.'*

*You have everything you need to reflect the sun 's light to the world...*

*And it is our continual WANTing to give of our excess... our abundance, that makes our faith complete.*

The second is from a poem of the Persian Hafiz, alluding to our intentions in giving—

*'Even After All this time The Sun never says to the Earth, You owe me. Look what happens with a love like that, it lights the whole sky.'*