

101 Gifts (Flower Communion)

May 18, 2008

Ellsworth, Maine

There's been a lot of depression going around lately. I, myself have been depressed for the last four days. This is a triumph—in years past it might have been four months before the fog was lifted--and yet today already I can feel that grey veil peeling back to reveal a world in full color. I mentioned my depression to a friend who said that it was happening to everyone she knows—not usual for early May—and she suggested that the earthquake and the cyclone and the continuing war are creating a collective weight that is pressing down on all of us, too much death and destruction for our mere humanness to bear.

She could be right. Spring may have arrived, but there are so many people struggling for the threads of their lives that we can't help but be affected; we can't help but be pushed. We are not living in isolation, and while we never have, technology brings the crises closer than ever. From here there is so little we can do—and it calls up memories of other similar times: Columbine and the tsunami and riots and cults and we are stuck in our comfortable lives wondering when the weight of the guilt will paralyze us for good. It's not a hard leap from there to feeling helpless and from there we slide easily to hopeless and from there it's just a hop, skip, and a jump—or a slump—to depression. When we add our own personal losses to the mix this puzzle of depression's surge is no longer a puzzle. The puzzle then is, what are we going to do about it? See the trick to depression is that it's not a thing to be fought, because it feeds on negative energy. It's not a thing to be pushed back against. It's a condition to be managed, to be worked around, to be slyly evaded. Brute force rarely works; what works is a clever and persistent underground resistance.

Some of that resistance is medical—rearranging the chemistry that causes the slump either by medication or by conversation. Some of that resistance is routine—making easiest the things that are best for us. Some of that resistance is educational—when we shine a light on depression it shrinks a bit. And some of that resistance is social—using the power of community to keep us in good health.

Community has power. It has tremendous power. People who don't have any idea why else they come to church come to church to be in community, because there's something about it that we can't get by ourselves. Even when we don't understand it we want it—in fact, we crave it. Humans are built to be social animals and we respond to the presence of others.

When we come to church we come bringing ourselves, bringing the gift of whoever we are, however we are. Whether we think we need it or not, someone needs it—someone needs us—perhaps to hug, perhaps to reject, perhaps to reflect, perhaps to educate, perhaps to soothe. When we come here we come here as 101 people bearing 101 gifts, and we give those gifts to each other.

And nothing helps us feel unpinched like giving it away.

If we believe in abundance; if we believe in strength and hope and joy; if we are having a hard day and believe in nothing; if we are fearful; if we are inspired—what we bring to the community makes the community. We are the community. And when we feel the depression grasping our hearts we still have something to bring. Even weeds flower. Even the weeds in our own yards flower. We always have something. And the community, the transforming power of community, means that we will find a way to use it—but for that transformation to occur, we must be willing to let go.

One of the hardest things for institutions is being given large financial gifts with long lists of restrictions. Organizations have been disbanded while holding major gifts that were entirely unusable, like a huge organ endowment for a church that is desperate to fix its foundation. What good is an organ if the roof leaks and the pews are sinking through the floors? The institution can best use what is given if it is freely given. Other gifts have the same story. If you bring us your energy, your commitment, your passion; if you bring us your despair, your fear, your anger—you must let it go. You must give it up. You must give it to the community freely. You must be willing to be transformed here, or you will spend all your time with us in fear.

When Capek created the flower communion he was looking for a ritual that was really, truly, exclusively ours, not rooted or borrowed elsewhere. What he made was a ceremony celebrating community, and the beauty that we bring when we are all here. We have that beauty available to us every day, all the time. What ritual does--what this ritual does—is make present and visible what is already true. It does not create or destroy; it does not alter reality; what it does is alter the truths of our hearts by showing us more clearly what is around us.

We carry some fear about having that kind of spiritual heart surgery—we have, most of us, learned to trust our hearts the way they are. Opening them up and letting them be transformed by forces outside of our control is like suggesting that magnetic north needs to be adjusted. It invites profound change.

But by regular adjustments we can avoid the wild swinging of the needle that dramatically alters landscapes and ecologies and starts the whole world over. We can take it in increments and adjust as we go. Thus annual and monthly and daily ritual. And we have to trust it—thus ritual with theological underpinnings—ritual with reason, not against or despite it. This is who we are. This is who we have made ourselves to be.

These flowers are symbols; they represent something of you, something that you have chosen to bring here, to us. They are more than themselves when we gather them here—they share color and beauty with each other—and when you take one, you are changed. It is no different from other Sundays, but the flower reminds you.

By giving we are reminded what in ourselves is wonderful and worthy to be given; we are reminded what our gifts are, what our abundances are. We are reminded what we have that is valuable to others which may remind us what is of value to ourselves.

How do we know—how do we really see what flowers are growing in our yards until it's mid-May and flower communion is upon us, and our flower beds are not yet blooming? It is only then that we see the dandelions, the forsythias, the wild violets, the grape hyacinths. It is only then that we see the apple blossoms and consider all the possibilities.

There is so much richness, so much beauty all around us; it is faith, religious practice, and community-need that help us see what is already here and make deliberate choices about how best to use our resources.

we're made to be generous.

we want to be gods like Prometheus with the best gift ever to give the world.

We want to have our own needs satisfied so we can look to the needs of others.

[We like to watch Oprah and Extreme Makeover Home Edition because, to the extent that money can make people happy; to the extent that things can make people happy, they and shows like them devote some of their considerable resources to giving people what they need and we all have a fantasy about doing that, about being able to make things happen, good things.]

Generosity is hardwired into our brains and soaked into our bones, because without giving, without sharing, we would not survive.

We are humans, with big brains, no fur, no claws, nothing built in. What we have is intelligence...and the ability to function in social groups—the ability to cooperate. Generosity, giving, sharing what we know and what we have is a product of thousands of years of evolution. If you don't share and aren't shared-with, you die. You're gone from the gene pool. All these generations later we're designed to give. We're made to give. it's who we are.

And we give even at the expense of our own best interests. That's what Prometheus suffered for, chained to a rock and cursed with the power of regeneration; doomed to be picked to death but never to die. He gave us fire that we might become who we are, but we know that generosity is not always easy; giving is not always free. Sometimes we risk being chained to a rock and having our livers pecked out, if we know that the world will benefit from our sacrifice.

It's a striking story, the opposite of Stone Soup and just as odd. Most of us are neither that profoundly generous nor that profoundly stingy most of the time. We live our lives in the middle ground, between clutching fear and bleeding hearts. We want to make things work; we want to bring life into the world and help people out, but we want to do it easily, with as little personal disruption as possible. That's why it works to give to charities from unexpected bonuses and tax returns—if you weren't planning on having the money anyway, then it won't hurt you to give it away.

But that doesn't really satisfy the need to make meaningful our participation in community. We make our presence meaningful by doing things that *do* disturb our daily routines—by giving time that we need for other things; by giving money that we would otherwise know just how to spend. We don't need to sacrifice our livers to the vultures, but we do need to feel the giving as a part of our lives.

Once upon a time in this country, each person had one community, and only one. You were born, lived, and died there.

Things have changed, of course. Now we have charities around the world and right here at home; we have causes, we have schools that are nowhere near our homes and that are not populated by members of our congregation, and striking a balance is a major feat, not a casual given. Today we gave so that people on the other side of the world might have shelter and food and medical care in the wake of a natural disaster. In the coming months we may choose civil rights or Loaves and Fishes Pantry or the Emmaus Shelter or better sidewalks in Ellsworth or a partner church in India as places where we want to put our time and energy and joy and conviction...and faith. Because these are acts of faith. Giving and generosity are acts of faith. As a religious congregation we have received so many generous acts of faith this year. We have received a year of volunteer leadership in our children's religious education program; we have received thousands and thousands of dollars for our new kitchen; we have received countless hours of coffeemaking and greeting and program and newsletter folding and typing and drawing and cooking and discussing. We have a new bell to ring in honor of our sacred times; we have a new roof, funded by a number of generous gifts over the years, to keep the rain and snow out and the heat in; we have had not one but two thrilling celebrations: one of ordination, one of installation; we have been gifted with preaching and music and worship services from people who are giving them from the goodness of their hearts, because they believe in us...and because they believe in themselves.

Such generosity is in our marrow and hearts and guts. And yet we fight it. And yet.

And yet it's hard when you're hungry to give up what little you have—the handful of potatoes or the bit of broth. It's hard when you believe yourself poor to give away money, even a little of it.

It's hard to set aside time for your spirit in a life that demands more than 24 hours for the business of your day. It's hard to be generous with anything when we're feeling pinched. But the fact is, nothing helps us feel unpinched like giving it away. Nothing helps us know our own limits like stretching toward them. Nothing helps us take care of ourselves like doing the work to which our hearts call us. And that work, that stretching, that giving can grow what we have and who we are to feed not just us, but an entire community or an entire world.

Barbara Kingsolver wrote an essay in 1995 called *Stone Soup*, in praise of so-called "alternative" family arrangements. She points out, of course, that the isolated, nuclear family of which some leaders are so fond has its unlikely and recent provenance in the post WWII era and a need to find jobs for returning soldiers. But she speaks one critical truth: not only is that family structure new, it is relatively unstable because it is so small. An extended or forged family of one kind or another is much more likely to get through hard times, to support its children, and to flex rather than crack under the pressures of our lives.

Now a church is not a family—we are bigger than a family, we are not as intimate as a family, we are more specific and more flexible than a family—which is as it should be. We don't all love each other the way we love our children and our partners and our dear friends. We have events and services which welcome those who need a community of spirit and heart and thought like this one. We try much harder to let people in. Churches that say they are "close-knit families" are usually in decline, because their doors are too closed; their identities too fixed. And yet there are things we, and all healthy churches, have in common with family—when we are growing, when we are expanded and extended, we have more wisdom and more possibility. We are more flexible, more resilient. We are better able to bend; we are less likely to break. When individual presence is important as a small part of a whole, rather than as one of three table legs, we are more stable. We are stronger. And we can do more for ourselves and for everyone else. We have more gifts, which means we can give more gifts. We have acres of flowers.

And why, after all, are we here? Do we exist merely to serve ourselves? Is this path to spiritual enlightenment a self-serving space for a self-serving journey? Or in the process of our development do we find, like so many others, that spiritual growth, that personal deepening, that community widening calls for reaching out as well as reaching in? Does our presence here indicate an interest in something larger than ourselves?

It does. The existence of religion, that the presence of spiritual community in this struggling and busy world is the best possible indication that no matter how bad things get—indeed, the worse they get—the more we need these larger connections. We come here to connect, and we come here to share. We come here to give.

We are wired for giving. It is planted deep within us. This is our place. This is our time. Let us celebrate always the gifts we give and the gifts we receive. And let us honor the glory around us.

Once upon a time there was a family of three bears

Once upon a time there was a little girl who lived in the woods with her grandmother

Once upon a time there was a poor woodcutter

Once upon a time there were three sisters

Once upon a time there was a poor traveler

Once upon a time there was a gentle and sympathetic god--

The story of giving and the story of gifts, the story of the flower communion and the story of our faith are the story of fairy tales, of dreaming, of the telling of stories themselves, spinning yarns

out of nowhere to make something of nothing. It is the story of creativity and the very story of creation which rests in our hands.

We all want to be like gods. We want to create, and we want to give.

May it be so.

Blessed be
and amen.