

St. Thomas Lutheran Church  
October 21, 2018 – Stewardship Sunday  
Marie F. Fleming

“More than Enough”

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 10:35-45

The Mexican town of Fortin de las Flores sits along a major cargo rail line that carries sugar cane, coffee and auto parts from Central America to the United States. It has also, over the years, carried hundreds of thousands of economic refugees north looking for the chance to earn a rudimentary living in this country. Journalist, Amy Frykholm, tells of her visit to Fortin in an article she wrote for the “Christian Century” magazine. She writes, “Most of the people in Fortin are not wealthy or even middle class by Mexico City standards – let alone, US ones.

“Most people live in tiny homes built close together. Families support themselves by running small businesses or teaching or working for the government, farming, shining shoes, maybe a little construction.

She says, “Though their resources seem limited compared to the rest of North America, the people of Fortin welcome the strangers who pass through on the trains and share whatever they can. When the train stops, residents often go down to the tracks and chat while handing up fruit, sandwiches or water.

“I asked them how they can afford to give to the migrants day after day, year after year, and one of them responded, a little puzzled, ‘Right now, we’re eating. When we are finished there will be a little left over. That we can pass along.’”

It is as if the people of Fortin don’t consider what they have to be theirs at all. They take their fair share and pass the rest along.

Hugo Perez, who manages a resort kitchen near Fortin, returned to Mexico after 6 years in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he washed dishes on a work visa. He came back to Fortin because he felt that, despite the good money he made in the US by Mexican standards, life here offered another kind of abundance. “The central value of this society,” he said, “is ‘compartir’ - to share.”

With so many thousands who are born south of the border seeking a better life up north, this man's decision to return seems striking. But perhaps we should not be surprised. How many of us have traveled to places without the material riches we take for granted, and returned with a wistfulness for the deep sense of community, the extravagant hospitality we experienced there. I know I have.

Someone here at St. Thomas recalled that during one of the Sister Parish South-to-North visits, a member of the Chichipate delegation observed that many of us, although we have many things, are impoverished because, with our artificial, built environment which includes our climate-controlled houses, stores, schools, businesses, and cars, we are isolated from one another and from the source of our life, the Earth itself.

It is jarring to see myself and my way of life through the eyes of one who has known little by way of material comfort but has been steeped in community and connected to the Earth: Feet bare upon the ground, chickens roaming freely throughout the grounds and rudimentary buildings today, while they could become supper any time; Grinding corn by hand, every morning, for that day's bread. Waking and sleeping with the sun. Every person in the community, from the very young to the oldest, has a chore to do, or some role that supports the common good. There is a mutual rhythm marked by relinquishment and the expectation of reciprocity: Giving what one has, receiving what one needs.

So, the practice of Sharing is a part of membership in community. Note that, to give of material blessings is always coupled with the sharing of oneself.

Remember the Fortin story, that "when the train stops, residents often go down to the tracks and chat while handing up fruit, sandwiches or water." This is neither an impersonal nor efficient act of food delivery. It is about making connections which, though they may be brief, must be as refreshing to weary travelers as a cool drink of cool.

On this third and final Sunday of the St. Thomas Stewardship emphasis, it is good to consider the nature and source of our Sharing.

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is often reduced to a sermon on financial stewardship. Indeed, Paul is asking the church at Corinth to contribute to the mother church in Jerusalem which has suffered for decades under Roman persecution and is impoverished by its care of widows and children.

He reminds them of an apparently unmet pledge of assistance, saying in so many words, “Look, even the churches of Macedonia – historically, the “poor side of Greece”– are doing their part.”

More than financial stewardship, however, Paul here is writing about the peace and joy that comes from sharing.

In that context I think of our Parents Café, which gets underway next Sunday. We will be exploring ways to raise spiritually healthy children, one way being to instill within them the practice of sharing, including the sharing of one’s self. This might mean visiting folks who live alone; asking people to tell stories from their childhood or volunteering at Shalom Center on Thanksgiving Day.

One of the sources we will rely upon is a great little book by Child development and veteran Family Ministry expert, Marilyn Sharpe. *For Heaven’s Sake! Parenting Preschoolers Faithfully*. Minneapolis, MN: Quill House Publishers, 2010 Spoiler alert: The following will come up in Parents’ Café. But it’s too good to not share here.

All of us, but especially children and teens, need people in our lives whom Sharpe calls “Triple A Christians”. No, she’s not talking about a Lutheran travel club. “They are the adults who transform the lives of children by being present and passionately involved in their lives.

A ‘Triple A Christian’ is someone who is

- Available,
- Authentic, and
- Affirming.

An example of such a person comes from the writer, Eric Hoffer, who tells the story of a Bavarian peasant woman who cared for him after his mother died and during the years that he was blind. He writes, “And this woman, this Martha took care of me.... And this woman, this Martha, must have really loved me, because those eight years of blindness are in my mind as a happy time. I remember a lot of talk and laughter. I must have talked a great deal, because Martha used to say again and again, ‘You remember you said this, you remember you said that...’ She remembered everything I said, and all my life I’ve had the feeling that what I think and what I say are worth remembering. She gave me that...” Calvin Thomkins,

*Eric Hoffer, An American Odyssey* (New York: E>P> Dutton & Co., 1968) pp.9-10

An Available person is, well, available! Simone Weil said it best, “Love’s first step is Attention”! An Authentic adult doesn’t pretend. They take their faith seriously, have rituals and traditions that are God-bearing, they know how to have caring conversations, and they are genuinely passionate about kids.

An Affirming adult may not approve of every behavior, but they see each child made in the image of God, beloved and forgiven.

This Available, Authentic and Affirming approach well-describes Jesus’ own way with relationships, with his propensity for hanging out, his honest response to those around him, and his refusal to throw stones when someone is already down. Remember last week when we considered the Rich Young Ruler who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life? Remember, he’d followed all the rules of faith from childhood and still he sensed something was missing. Do you remember that upon hearing the young man’s request, scripture says, Jesus looked at him and loved him? Jesus the Available, Authentic and Affirming saw right through him and loved him. He saw that the man’s riches were a stumbling block for him. And told him so. But above all, remember, *Jesus loved him*.

So we get to this week and here are a couple of siblings, jockeying for seats of honor. Does this sound familiar???? Their request betrays something wrong in their souls. And Jesus knows what it is. His answer is not unlike the one he gave to the rich young ruler:

Give up what you think you think you need the most – in this case, power over others – and become servants.

Friends, we’re only human. Our natural orientation is toward serving our own needs or thinking ourselves unworthy of grace.

The purpose of the church is to move prideful ones from self-interest to self-self-denial, such as we see in the rich young ruler and the brothers in today’s Gospel lesson. The purpose of the Church is to move those with not enough pride from selflessness to fully-expressed agency (think the woman who, at Simon’s feast, anoints Jesus’ feet with her tears and dries them with her hair, or the woman whom Jesus defends from stoning).

Through baptism we acknowledge God's love in spite of our tendency to turn toward ourselves either in pride or self-negation. God looks upon us and no matter what God sees, God loves us.

Our gifts of time, talent and treasure come not out of a sense of obligation but out of a gratitude for this wholly unmerited grace. Today we acknowledge that there are vulnerable men, women and children traveling a dangerous journey from South to North, looking for a better life. And there are those saints along the way who greet them with food, drink, and a chat.

May such hospitality, such open-handedness, be our practice as well.

For in God's economy,

There is always. Always. Enough to share.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.