

September 27, 2020 Sermon – Matthew 6:1-6

When I was much younger, I grew up in a farming community in South-Western Ontario where people from Lutheran, Mennonite, and Roman Catholic denominations of the Christian faith made up most of the community and children from all those denominations attended the one-room school that had been part of the community for many years. I don't remember anyone ever having any issues about the different denominations or getting into any arguments or fights over it. I continued to live in the same community for a long time as did many of my schoolmates and the different practices of the various Christian denominations is still not an issue for me. I'm glad to see that people of other faiths have now also made their homes in this community. Diversity is a good thing in my opinion.

My Mennonite friends try to follow the practice of pacifism and non-violent behaviour that their denomination promotes, and I remember watching a hockey game between a couple of Mennonite young men's teams one time and was surprised by how much heavy hitting or checking (violence) there was during the game. Players from both teams ended up in the penalty box a few times and I kidded some of my Mennonite friends later about how everybody seems to need to find a way to take out their frustrations and aggression and it looked like they did so in a "friendly" game of hockey. They kidded me right back and said they were only following the biblical teaching that it is better to give than to receive.

The bible verse they were quoting can be found in the Book of Acts, chapter 20, verse 35, where the Apostle Paul writes: "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Because of the pandemic we are now living in, the churches I serve have been finding it a bit more difficult to give in the ways they did just a short time ago. Like many churches, the people of these congregations would hold fundraisers, potluck dinners, and other events to raise funds and accept donations that would be forwarded to the missions branch of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and non-profit organizations such as the Canadian Food Grains Bank, Food 4 Kids, Toronto Sick Kids Hospital, local food banks and resource centres, Canadian Lutheran World Relief and others. We did this with the goal of helping people who are in need and to be a church that is "in mission for others" as our ELCIC's mission statement says. Our hope when this pandemic began was to be back into our churches by this time and back to doing our mission work as before.

However, it appears we will not be doing that anytime soon and so it was wonderful for me to hear that our church councils are looking at ways to continue to raise funds and collect donations to ensure we can continue to be "in mission for others" and provide much needed funds for non-profit

organizations and people who are in need at this time. In my opinion, a church is not a church in the truest sense of the word unless it is reaching out with love to people beyond our own church community. That love can be with prayers, comforting words and encouragement but it should also be with tangible acts of kindness and generosity.

Why is it important to give and not just receive? Obviously, I'm not talking about the coronavirus or any other kind of disease or something that is harmful because nobody wants to give those sorts of things to anybody or receive them from somebody. But there are many other kinds of things we can give to others that we might not do on a regular basis because we think that if we do so there might not be enough of those kinds of things left for ourselves. Or we may be feeling so rundown ourselves that we think we don't have the energy to give more of ourselves to others because it will leave us feeling even more rundown. However, that does not have to be the end result.

For instance, there is a story by Dr. Gerald Jampolsky in his book Teach Only Love that goes like this: "In just a few moments, my father demonstrated to me that even when we give of our health and strength, the results are not that we have less of them but more. I was having lunch with my parents, who were living in a retirement home, when the following incident occurred. My father had Parkinson's disease. His symptoms included tremors, difficulty in gait, and a masklike facial expression. On this day, he also seemed depressed. Sitting with us at the lunch table was a man the same age who was more severely impaired by the same disease than my father. He couldn't walk without help, and when his wife didn't come to assist him, he grew impatient and asked my father to help him to his room. My father took the man's arm and, with both of them shaking a great deal, they began to walk. Suddenly my father straightened up and his tremor decreased until it was almost invisible. And he began to smile. About ten minutes later he returned. Once again he was walking in a stooped manner. 'What a remarkable demonstration,' I thought. When my father was completely absorbed in helping, he was detached from the symptoms of his own helplessness. While he was giving strength and stability, he had noticeably more of both. In addition, he was happy. Once he no longer perceived himself of any use, he returned to a feeble self-concept. And unquestionably all of this happened without his consciously seeing the connection." (Teach Only Love, Beyond Words Publishing, Inc., Gerald G. Jampolsky, 2000, page 92)

I share this simple but profound story with you because it is not about some grandiose act by some well-known public figure but about actions that can be carried out anytime by anyone. All of us know at least one person and likely several people who could benefit from a simple act of kindness on our part. We can pick up groceries for someone who cannot get to the store. We can help clean up someone's yard or clean the driveway when it is covered with snow, which is unfortunately not that far away with the month of October beginning this week. We can visit a shut-in, even though it is more difficult to do so at the present time due to current restrictions on long-term care visits. But that

doesn't mean we can't phone those people instead. We can hold the door open for an elderly person or move off the sidewalk when someone is approaching us so that person doesn't have to. We can pick up a few extra groceries and donate them to a local foodbank. We can put aside some of our income and give it to a charity or other worthy cause. Even a little bit given by a whole lot of people will make a difference to people who are struggling because of financial challenges. There are so many small but important things we can do every single day that won't take much of our time or resources but will make a positive difference in the lives of others. The good news is that by doing so, we will benefit as well, especially when we do these things without thinking about what we might gain in the process.

It seems that many of us struggle with giving of our time and resources unless we can see a benefit for ourselves in doing so. We give our time and labour to an employer so that we can receive a wage in return. We give our money to a financial institution so that we can receive a good return on our investment. We give our love to our spouse, children and other family members hoping to receive their love in return. We give our vote to a politician so that she or he can be elected and give us what we want from the government in return. We give our money to a church or charity so that it can carry out its mission and purpose so that we can feel good about our donation in return. We all give in some ways and to some degree hoping for something in return and there's really nothing wrong with doing so. We all need to receive a decent wage, a good return on our money, love from others, a government that serves the people, and charities that help those in need. It may be more blessed to give than to receive but it is also good to receive good things from others at times for our own physical and mental health.

However, it is those times that we give without any need or expectation of a return on our investment of time, money, labour, or resources that will often provide us with benefits that we will not receive otherwise. The surprising thing is that we may not even be aware why we are feeling good about ourselves and enjoying life more. Perhaps this is why Jesus recommends that when we do our good works we should do so in secret and without letting others know about them (Matthew 6:1-6). For some reason, when we publicize our kind acts or generous donations, it keeps us from receiving something important even though those acts and donations continue to help others.

I think many people in Ontario are feeling a bit down this week, partly due to the announcement that public social gatherings have had restrictions put on the number of people who can gather for events because of the increase in COVID-19 cases. After going through a spring and summer with numerous restrictions in place our hope was that cases would continue to stay low and we could continue to gather as we were doing for the past month or so. Many people were looking forward to Thanksgiving dinners and family celebrations after having to cancel Easter celebrations and numerous other family dinners and social gatherings for the past six months. Nobody is looking forward to a fall and winter with more restrictions in place.

November is often one of the dreariest months in the year and many people suffer from bouts of depression or feel emotionally anxious in mid to late October as November approaches. Even though we are not there yet and this time of the year as the leaves turn colour and begin to fall is one of the most beautiful times of the year, I am concerned that this year may be worse than most for mental health because of the pandemic. I encourage everyone to take care of themselves this fall and to look out for one another during October so that we can recognize the signs that someone we know is beginning to feel a bit down.

One of the best ways I know of to take care of ourselves and others is to be involved in unconscious acts of kindness and generosity. To be healthy we need to think of others and not fall into the trap or pattern of focusing solely or mostly on our own needs, wants, and desires. There can be something good about looking inward and understanding ourselves but too much navel gazing can also be harmful for us.

Some of my young male Mennonite friends found a way to release the pent-up feelings and energy that many young men experience through the physical action of ice hockey and the occasional hard body-check to a player on the opposing team. The truth is that my Lutheran and Roman Catholic friends did so as well.

All people need to find ways to deal with pent-up feelings and I think one healthy way to do that is to do good things for others, without any thought as to how that might benefit the person doing the good deed. If we can do that at this time, maybe we can fend off a season of discontent and dis-ease and get through the Fall and Winter seasons feeling good about ourselves and others.

It is more blessed
to *give* than to *receive*.
Acts 20:35