

The Rev. Kerith Harding
Sermon - Nov 11, 2018

In 2007 I was an intern at St. John's Episcopal Church in Waterbury, Connecticut, doing essentially what Kalani does with us here: participating in every part of the service that the priest allows me to and getting used to liturgical leadership. The priest was a bushy haired white guy who bore a striking resemblance to Jerry Garcia. He called himself a dinosaur because he did priesthood the old fashioned way, never behind a desk. He knew only enough about a computer to log into his AOL account. Of course, I loved this about him, but it also meant that I never knew what was coming next in my internship. One morning with no more than 2 minutes to go before the opening hymn he said, "Why don't you lead the first half of the service today?" I don't know if my face betrayed my panic, but inside alarm bells were going off. Note, he *didn't* say, "Why don't you lead the first half of the service today— I'll walk you through it real quick" No, he just expected me to figure it out in the next two minutes, and he wandered off to talk with someone else.

As I flipped through my prayer book trying to figure out where the Collect of the Day was located (and even, what day it was), a young woman who looked older than her years and weary came through the big heavy brown church doors and walked right up to me. "Can I get a bag of food?" she asked. Somewhat taken a back and already overwhelmed I responded, "I'm sorry. The foodbank is only open Tuesday through Friday." She nodded and moved into the sanctuary and sat down a few pews from the back.

Later in the service, for some reason I found myself back in the narthex as the ushers were taking up the collection. I watched as the plate reached this young woman, and she dropped in a handful of coins.

At that moment it hit me... I was a self-absorbed, rule-bound jerk. Or at least, I felt like one.

I was limiting my ability to give, and the churches giving, according to rules and hours and orderliness. And this woman came for something she needed, was denied it by a rule bound seminarian, and gave anyway!

She had the reason to not give and gave.

I had the reason to give and didn't.

In church.

I figure if there is something redeemable about this story it is that at least I learned my lesson within about the span of about half an hour. Most lessons I have to learn in life take much longer! And you better believe, these days I will give someone a bag out of the food pantry almost no matter what I'm in the middle of doing and no matter what the "rules" are. Our rules are not God rules.

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The widow and her two coins in today's gospel are not supposed to function for you the way the woman in Waterbury functioned for me.

It's not about what you *don't* do and she does.

She is not meant to make you feel like a jerk.

The Gospels do not peddle in guilt.

Stewardship season does not peddle in guilt.

Truthfully, I think a lot of us already can feel we aren't "doing enough" way too frequently. You look around and someone is painting the hall, someone is planning an entire sit down dinner for 80, someone is setting up the altar flowers, someone is teaching church school — and maybe you think, "OH ugh, I should be doing more."

And my message is this to all of you: only give out of deep gratitude.

Give because giving is a graced experience.

Do not give out of guilt or obligation. Rumi, the great Sufi mystic and poet says, "If you are here among us unwillingly, you are doing terrible harm."

Instead - - give out of love. Give out of gratitude.

St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, believed that generosity — our ability to give fully and freely — was dependent on one thing: our experience of gratitude. He formulated it this way:

“Ask for interior knowledge of the great good you have received, in order that being entirely grateful, you may be able generously to love and serve God.”

This is so true for Ignatius that if he were asked to identify the “cause, beginning and origin of all evil and sins” in our world, Ignatius would say this: it is the simple failure to recognize the good things, the graces, and the gifts received from God; simply not to know that here is a God who loves us and who is unceasingly, even this very day, bestowing gifts of love upon us.”

He also understood that daily living makes it hard for us to dwell in gratitude, a problem not exclusive to the 21st century. He lived in the 16th century! It’s in human nature to miss it, to be focused on our problems, and not give attention and time to the gifts in our life.

So Ignatius invented a prayer called the Examen. It’s simple, and you can do it while driving, or walking the dog, or even making dinner. It has a few steps.:

1. Ask for God’s help. If humans were naturally able to see God’s presence all the time we’d live in a different world. We need God’s help to do that.
2. We reflect on our day and all that happened sequentially. How were we feeling when we woke top? In the morning? What were we doing? In the afternoon and evening? It asks us not simply to reflect on what we did but how we felt. It asks us to delve beneath the surface.
3. We name the shadows and the darkness and bring them to God, asking God to light and warmth into them.
4. And finally, it asks us to name the graces and gifts, and thank God for them.

You will find this kind of prayer is simple and effective, and often surfaces gritudes you did not see in the moment. Do it often enough and you’ll see that everyday — even the bad ones — are full of grace. Exuberant, excessive grace. We will sooner tire of receiving God’s gifts, Ignatius said, than God will of giving them.

Every day of the year I wish for you all that God's abundant goodness to you, personally, is felt in your heart.

That you'll know a generosity that will lead you to the God in others and that you will know a deep peace.

That God's goodness not obligate you.

But that it compel you in love and gratitude to give to others.

Generosity borne from love is our way of participating in the great chain of grace.

Amen.