

Paying it Forward

A Sermon by Lynn Murray in Rev. Ruth's Absence when ill, February 5, 2017

Scripture: John 6:1-13

I have started a new holiday tradition. Actually, the idea came from something I witnessed two years ago. I was leaving the grocery store and loading my car shortly before Christmas, when I saw a mother drive up in front of the entrance, and her young teenage daughter hopped out of the car. I thought the girl was just running into the store while mom parked the car, but what I saw next will always be engraved in my memory. The girl walked up to the Salvation Army bell ringer, which isn't at all unusual in front of stores in December, but it was what she did before dropping money in the red bucket that got my attention. She looked the bell ringer in the eye, then handed him a hot drink in a Dunkin Donuts cup, along with a bag that contained a treat. I found myself smiling all the way home as I thought about the amazing lesson that mom had just taught her daughter: that what we are meant to do is to take care of others. And I confess to tearing up when I think back on that simple event. Now I look for the opportunity to follow suit, even when I don't need groceries. The look on the bell ringer's face is all it takes for me to want to repeat the act again and again. I can only hope that when someone else witnesses this act of kindness, they will be inspired to find an opportunity to do the same.

I sometimes read a book with my 8th graders called Pay it Forward by Catherine Ryan Hyde. In it, a teenage student, Trevor, takes very seriously an extra credit assignment given by his 7th grade teacher, Mr. St. Clair, to come up with a plan that will change the world, and to put that plan into action. You may also be familiar with the movie starring Kevin Spacey and Helen Hunt, but the reading teacher in my will tell you that the book is always better. Trevor's pay it forward plan, which he maps out on the blackboard in a pyramid of circles, is to do an act of kindness for three people, and they, in turn, will each pay that act forward to three other people, and so on, and so on, as the acts expand exponentially. (Someone once calculated that only 27 rounds of paying it forward would reach the entire world. That seems manageable, doesn't it?) Trevor comes up with his plan and puts it into action. He first invites Jerry, a homeless man, into his home to shower, sleep, and have a hot meal. So what if he doesn't check with his mom first? Trevor gives Jerry his paper route money so he can buy clothes and get a job. But Trevor is soon disappointed to learn that Jerry has gone to jail. Next he mows the lawn and tends the garden of his elderly neighbor, Mrs. Greenburg, and she assures Trevor that she will pay it forward. But Mrs. Greenburg dies, and Trevor thinks he is back at square one. The third project in his plan is to fix up his single mom with his teacher, Mr. St. Clair. However, he didn't check with either of them first. As Trevor sees one of his attempts after another seemingly fall through, he becomes discouraged and is convinced that he has failed. It isn't until much later that it is revealed just how wrong he was, and how far his acts of kindness had reached.

In real life, not fiction like the novel, an interesting and noteworthy phenomenon has been sweeping across the United States: drive-through generosity. Fast food workers are seeing kindness that they've never witnessed before, and it's becoming more and more common. People are paying for their own meal and paying extra for the car behind them in the drive through.

You can imagine what being the recipient of such generosity looks like: after placing your order, you drive up to the window, and are told that your order has been paid for. By someone you never met. So simple, yet so powerful.

Pay it forward...repay a kindness by being kind to someone else, rather than paying back the person who was kind to you. And pay it forward to a person who will not be able to pay you back, or even say thank you.

In the past, paying it forward in drive-throughs occurred maybe once or twice a year; now fast food operators say it might happen several times a day. According to a recent NY Times article, the largest outbreak of drive-through generosity occurred last December at a Tim Horton's in Winnipeg, Canada, when 228 consecutive customers paid it forward. Last April, a string of 67 cars paid it forward at a Chick-fil-A in Houston. And in July, a Heaven'ly Donuts in Amesbury, MA, experienced a good will train of 55 cars. Before the Easy Pass, there were repeated similar reports occurring at toll booths.

This notion of paying it forward has become a popular way of doing good, but it's not a new one. This kind of generosity and care for others is rooted deep in our scriptures, particularly in the life of Jesus. We see it in the feeding of the 5,000, when Jesus instructs his disciples to take the two fish and five loaves of bread and feed the hungry crowd. The disciples were skeptical, but when they shared their meager meal, their generosity became contagious, and as others shared their food, eventually all were fed, and there were even leftovers!

We see it when Jesus sends his disciples out two by two to share the good news of hope and to heal people in need. He does not send them out with giant backpacks filled with food and supplies; instead, he sends them out with very little, so that they need to rely on the good will of others.

Jesus' deep faith enabled him to trust God that his needs and other people's needs would be met. And he instructed his followers to have that same trust. He wanted his disciples to step out in faith and take action, even when it was uncertain where the bread or warm bed would come from.

We could also learn a lesson from our early Pilgrims, who began our tradition of Thanksgiving. They chose to offer their first fruits of their meager harvest to God. Instead of focusing on what they were missing, on what their land lacked in their new world, they practiced gratitude and generosity.

Many today have bought into our culture's great myth of scarcity. There isn't enough to go around. Everything, from safety and love, to money and resources feels restricted and lacking. A few fish and loaves are not enough to go around. This underlying belief can drive us to consume, hoard, accumulate, and devour, rather than share, contribute, give.

Global activist and fundraiser, Lynne Twist, writes on this issue in her book, "The Soul of Money":

"For me, and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is, "I didn't get enough sleep." The next one is, "I don't have enough time." Whether true or not, that thought of not enough occurs to us automatically before we even think to question or examine it. We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don't have enough of....Before

we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we're already inadequate, already behind, already losing, already lacking something. And by the time we go to bed at night, our minds are racing with a litany of what we didn't get, or didn't get done, that day. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to that reverie of lack. "

Perhaps those who feel that way could take a lesson from the classic children's book, Stone Soup. In the story, a traveler visits a village and asks for something to eat. All the villagers respond that they don't have enough to share. So the traveler asks for a pot and sets about to make soup, with nothing but a stone and a pot of water. As the curious villagers look on, he tries the soup, declares it to be good, but that it would be better if only it had a bit of onion. Someone produces an onion. The story continues, with carrots, potatoes, and all the ingredients requested being added by the folks who originally claimed to have none. All but the traveler were amazed at the wonderful meal that could be made with just a stone and a pot of water, and they were grateful to be able to share in the stranger's wonderful meal.

We don't need to feel gratitude in order to practice gratitude. Sometimes we don't feel grateful at all, but that shouldn't stop us from practicing gratitude. It's easy to love the person who loves you back. It's easy to be kind to the person who's been kind to us. It's easy to bless the person who's been a blessing to us. But, as Christians, we are called to pay it forward. So, we need to pass that love, that kindness, that blessing on. Sometimes it looks like a simple action like paying for a coffee for a random stranger, or saying hello to a homeless person, or visiting a lonely neighbor, or bringing a cup of hot chocolate to a bell ringer standing for hours in the cold collecting funds that will be paid forward. Or it might mean working to feed the hungry and homeless on a regular basis, or collecting coats and blankets to be passed on to those in need. It might mean donating school supplies to children who we may not have suspected were needy, or donating to our community through our monthly communion offering, or working toward officially becoming an open and affirming congregation. And, if we're really good at these things, which I believe we are, others will see how rooted we are in our beliefs and service, and maybe, just maybe, they will want to know the joy of paying it forward, just as Jesus has taught us to be bold, to give freely, and "to love others as much as you love yourself." Contrary to the scarcity we might feel, we need to act with generosity and gratitude. It's a little crazy, but that's what our faith demands. And in our world today, with so much uncertainty and fear, may we, through our example, possibly be the ones whose actions soften the heart of even one who needs their heart softened.

French philosopher, Jacques Ellul, wrote, "Christians were never meant to be normal. We've always been holy troublemakers, we've always been creators of uncertainty, agents of a dimension that's incompatible with the status quo; we do not accept the world as it is, but insist on the world becoming the way God wants it to be."

On Jesus' last night on earth, he gathered at the table with his disciples. He knew that he would soon be captured and suffer and die at the hands of the Romans. And he knew full well that some of his disciples that he loved to the depths of his heart would betray him, abandon him, and deny him. But still, before their last meal together, he took off his outer garment, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began to wash his disciples' feet. This was shocking because only slaves washed feet. It was an act of service and

a symbol that pointed to Jesus' love and sacrifice. And after he was done, he only made one request of his disciples: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14).

So friends, in response to the God who has cleaned the dirt off our feet, provided us with strength, and blessed us with faith, may we, in the days ahead, look for an opportunity to pay it forward. No act of kindness, no matter how small, will go unnoticed in the eyes of the receiver, nor in the eyes of God.

Amen.