

Genesis 8.15-22

¹⁵Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶‘Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁷Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.’ ¹⁸So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. ¹⁹And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

20 Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. ²¹And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²² As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.’

1Timothy 6:17-19

17 As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Luke 10:25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.* ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ ²⁷He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ ²⁸And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ ³⁰Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii,* gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ ³⁷He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Giving with Thanksgiving

1. Let’s talk about what it’s like to be an adult. As adults we spend our day busy, going to appointments, handling phone calls, doing various tasks, driving around, filling out paperwork, doing laundry, cooking, cleaning. Meanwhile we see our children playing games, riding bikes, watching television, and just having a good old time, and maybe we get a bit nostalgic longing for those carefree days when life was all fun and games.

2. Being an adult has its advantages, doesn't it? Adults have this thing called *authority*. Parents tell their children what to do, and children do what their told, even though they may resist or throw a tantrum. If you don't have children, chances are you've still exercised authority, on your job or even in a church setting as a teacher or leader of some committee. In the military, authority is a huge factor; we respect rank, and those with a higher rank always exercise authority over those of lower rank. Adults are usually saddled with some form of authority, and those who are "under" your authority have an obligation to obey and respect those who hold authority.
3. But we know that people can take advantage of the authority that is given to them. A parent who is abusive or selfish or lazy very soon loses the respect of his children, and they no longer recognize that parent's authority. They find someone else to call their parent, someone who does care and love them more. True authority is must be legitimate authority, authority that is earned by good behavior, by providing for others, caring for others, showing kindness to others.
4. There is a problem, however, that results when we have earned a true authority, and our gospel lesson very subtly addresses this problem. We can be a very good parent, a good supervisor, a good teacher, a good provider, but our goodness can go to our heads. We can spend our lives doing the right thing for others and end up hurting our own souls. Because my "goodness" serves to inflate my own ego so that my whole reason behind my goodness is to make me feel good about myself. Kindness and generosity does not always stem from loving hearts, and this is a point Jesus is making in the gospel lesson. Jesus does an interesting thing is this parable about the Good Samaritan in putting the Jew in the ditch. Jews felt themselves to be better than Samaritans – better morally and ethically and spiritually. The Samaritans were heretics and heathens worshiping idols and committing all sorts of other iniquities. Some Jews despised Samaritans, cursing them, even killing them. But other Jews committed more subtle sins against the Samaritans in simply feeling themselves superior to these heretics and heathens. If Jesus had told them the parable of the Good Jew who finds this poor, beaten, dying Samaritan laying in a ditch, a parable about the Jew tends to this poor Samaritan, places him on his mule and carries him to an inn and pays the innkeeper to care for him and get him medical attention, everyone's head would have nodded, and all the Jews would have said, "Ah, very wise, Rabbi. We should care for the needs of our enemies, even love them! In fact, Rabbi Jesus, I contribute to the Samaritan Relief Fund. I believe in helping them, even if they are heathen and heretics."
5. But that's not the way Jesus told the story, is it? No, it was the Jew who was dying in the ditch, and the Good Samaritan who treated him like a neighbor, who tended to the needs of his "enemy." The Jew had no opportunity to feel good about himself and, were he not on the verge of death, might have refused to be cared for by his "enemy."
6. I graduated college in 1982 with major in religion, and I began working in a group home for wards of the state, who were children anywhere between 10 and 18 years old who could not live at home because they had no home that could be considered safe and nurturing. And my job was to supervise them, to be a house parent, to make sure that they were fed, that they were doing their homework, that they took their medicines, that they respected one another and followed the house rules. I worked an eight hour shift, often on weekends, and on weekends I was left with very little support staff, so it would often be me alone with seven or eight of these children, who were often pretty rough around the edges if you could imagine. I enjoyed the authority that I was given. It made me feel good to be caring for these children, and I enjoyed hearing people tell me, "That's really a great thing you're doing, Matt." I was showing everyone what a good "Christian" man I was, tending to the needs of "the least of these." And one day I had an epiphany. There was some virus going around, and it happened to

strike me on a weekend when I was working and very early into my shift, so here I am operating at about 30% of my capacity with no other staff and a cottage of emotionally disturbed “children” (some of them were bigger than me!), and even though I called in to let my supervisor know that I was feeling under the weather I was told that it might be awhile before they could find someone to come in and relieve me. And I couldn’t fake my illness. I was like Hillary Clinton on 9-11, I required medical attention but I had no assistants to carry me off and take me home, and it was clear to the kids I was working with that I was not feeling well. Now this would have been a perfect time for them to take full advantage of their superiority in number and run completely amuck, to start smoking in their rooms and leave the campus and crank up their stereos and start making out in the living room, but they didn’t do that. The oldest “child” who was seventeen, explained to the others that they needed to tend to Mr. Schaeffer. Someone needed to get me some water and a cold towel and a blanket, that everyone needed to stay close and come by and check in with me, and keep the stereos down – now I’m not naïve; there was probably some smoking going on the rooms. But our roles were reversed. I was not so much the caregiver as the care-receiver. And my whole mindset was changed that day, from being the “loving” man in charge to being the “loved” victim of influenza. Our whole relationship changed that day, because I was truly able to love those children not out of obligation but out of appreciation for them loving me.

7. We all need such humbling experiences to help us appreciate one another, because if we’re always the one who is giving, we can let that go to our heads, and our giving becomes nothing more than a duty we perform to build our self-esteem. And it’s only a short step from self-gratifying giving to “conditional” giving, giving with strings attached. “Pastor I’m writing a check to the church today for \$5,000. No, you don’t have to tell me how generous that is; I know it is. And I don’t want expect anything in return, but I really don’t like the color of the walls in the fellowship hall. Maybe you could use some of the money for some new paint and we could get together with some volunteers and change it up a bit. It would a great fellowship opportunity.” Do you see what has happened? You’re giving with some expectation, which is more like lobbying.
8. And the implicit assumption has become that what you are “giving” to the church actually belongs to you. And here’s where I need you to follow me closely. We begin as God’s enemies. Let me say that again: We begin as God’s enemies. We may not like to admit it, but that same willfulness that makes us think that what is ours is ours is what separates us from God. We fail to recognize God as the source of all we have, and all we have as being a gift from God. We pat ourselves on the back for being hard working and clever and so we have “earned” all that we have. And so we think that WE can decide who to share with and how much to share with them. We pick and choose who or *what* we want to support and compliment ourselves for being so generous with our resources.
9. Our Old Testament lesson finds Noah at the end of the flood ordeal, and the first thing he does in getting off the ark is to make an altar and make a thanksgiving sacrifice to God. The story of the flood reminds us that all that we have received from God including our lives can easily be swept away; it also mentions God’s promise not to destroy every living creature in this good earth. We have good reason to be thankful to God for his mercy.
10. And God’s desire is that we live and prosper as a people, to “take hold of the life that really is life” as Paul states in our epistle lesson. But if we forget that all good things come from God we are apt to take credit from God and apply it to ourselves. We are apt to become proud and believe that we have the power to determine who eats and who doesn’t, who has a home to live and who doesn’t, who should get medical help and who shouldn’t. We convince ourselves that those are things to be earned, and yes, we have earned them.

11. Every church faces a challenge to grow as a community of love. Every church is potentially a family of God that lives out its love for God and for others through action, but every church is also at risk of doing good works without a loving heart. That's why we must always give with the knowledge that what we give has been given to us out of love from a God whose desire is that we all live and prosper in a peaceful and just world. We give with thanksgiving. May you always be conscious of God's amazing providence, and may it prompt you to be generous with all that he has provided you.