

CARE: “Advance Your Generosity”

Text: Psalm 150; II Corinthians 9: 6 - 12

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I want to be absolutely simple with you this morning. Sometimes, that’s just the best way to say what’s important.

It all starts with a children’s song.¹ Or is it a nightclub circle dance? Or is it a soldier’s song intended to lift the anguish of war in Britain? Or does it have roots in the *Latin Mass* referring to the gestures of a priest? I guess, even among the simplest of things, there can be a little controversy!²

*You put your right foot in, you put your right foot out,
you put your right foot in, and you shake it all about;
you do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around,
that’s what it’s all about!*

You know it! Left foot and then shoulder; right hand and then left hip! And then this, especially this, *mostly* this for today:

*You put your whole self in, you put your whole self out,
you put your whole self in, and you shake it all about;
you do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around,
that’s what it’s all about!*

Though the origins of the song may be unclear, the truth is not! Putting your whole self in is what matters. In fact, it is statistically verifiable: the happiest, most fulfilled of all human beings on planet earth - across the long measure of history - are those who give of themselves fully. And you can name the setting . . . whether that spirit of generosity is to family, community, relationships, marriage, church, or all of the above! That’s not just the hokey pokey ó it’s life!

The echoes of scripture lead us to the same conclusion. The Apostle Paul stands quite tall in this regard and speaks the same truth in a variety of places and circumstances. (Though I daresay his words are among the many references in scripture that we do not particularly like to reckon with. As evidence: No one *ever* thanks me for preaching on Paul’s admonishments on giving!)

*The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly;
and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

He is not just giving instructions about gardening here! Far more important, he is spinning a metaphor of seeds and sowing that those of his day would quickly understand as speaking about the capacity we all have to give back to life ó *or not*.

*Each of you must make up your mind
not reluctantly or out of compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver.*

So many people seem to hear these words as a conditional statement about God. But that's odd, because Paul doesn't discount or place in question God's love for all people or set criteria around it. He is merely lifting up a spirit of giving, an ethos of life that surrenders in generosity as superlative. And he makes this promise:

You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity!

Paul's words bear the particularity of this context. Apparently, there were among the early followers in Corinth people who expected much of the community of Christ, but who were not as good at putting their whole selves in to make it so. (Hmmm! Yikes! Really? Say it isn't so!)

So, armed with the evidence of having had a good look at the giving records, and aware of their far-larger capacities, Paul wrote to them as an auditor.³ He was likely seeing that people were putting in a right hand here, or a left knee there, or even a hip . . . but holding back on their fuller measure.

Katherine Jeffers Schori, one of the wonderfully fresh voices in the Anglican community today, puts it like this. "We need people in the church who know how to give themselves away!" If the church is to thrive, let alone survive . . . "we do not need prima donnas . . . or those who need to be in the center . . . or passive consumers of ministry." We do not need people who fashion the church to their own personal needs and ends. "We need adults in this body . . . who advance their generosity; adults who take responsibility in full measure . . . "for being children of God does not invite us to be childish."⁴

Let me leave you to wonder with this. Among our travels this summer, Pam and I were in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, for an overnight visit to some dear friends. It's one of those friendships where everyone speaks and everyone listens.

Along the way in our conversation, I looked at the place mats on the table in front of us. All of them were scenes from Ireland. Mine in particular portrayed a church in the Irish countryside. It was a small stone structure with a stream running in the foreground and a crossroads of dirt paths just off the left of center.

I turned the placemat over and discovered that the painting is called: *The Halfway Church*. "Hmmm . . ." I mused, "the halfway church!" Pam said, "Uh oh, I know the look in his eye. Here comes a sermon!"

The halfway church! But halfway between what? Between here and there on those dirt paths ó as in halfway between Dublin and Galway? Or could it be more a statement about a congregation that struggled, as did the church in Paul's time, that was halfway in and halfway out? Right foot, left hand, right shoulder . . . but not the cheerfulness of one's whole self? Halfway between faithfully thriving and barely surviving?

And so it is, I'd leave you to wonder! As always, I do so in the name and spirit of the One who gave of his life withholding nothing, that we might live to share in everything. Because truly, honestly, personally: *that's* what it's all about! Amen.

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¹ I am grateful to The Rev. Dr. Warren H. Bouton for his insightful use of this song as a statement of stewardship.

² Wikipedia, 2013.

³ Ernest Best. Interpretation: Second Corinthians. John Knox Press, 1987, pp. 82-90.

⁴ Katherine Jeffers Schori. A Wing and a Prayer. Morehouse Publishing, 2007, p 23.

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