**Building a Bigger Table**

**2 Corinthians 9: 6-15**

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November 22, 2020

With Thanksgiving fast approaching, a few days ago, I posted on the church’s Facebook group and asked you all, “What are you thankful for this year?”  The answers you gave were so moving to me.  Many people mentioned fundamentals - a warm home, good health, family, and friends. Others mentioned being grateful to have jobs - particularly, jobs which could be done safely from home - and for the internet that keeps us connected.  Some focused on the many people who are working so hard to keep our country functioning during this time of crisis - medical professionals, school teachers, grocery workers, and delivery drivers; there is such a long list.  A number of you spoke of little things like seeing a deer, laughing with a colleague, cuddling with a kitty, and spending time outdoors. Our former senior pastor chimed in that he is thankful not to be writing a sermon.  And there were several comments about our life in community - grateful for all the people who voted or that the election is over, that there is a group locally working on climate action, that many people will choose to stay safe this year so we can all be together in years to come.  And finally, many people mentioned our church - this community that loves and cares for each other and the world and the staff that works so hard to keep us connected.

That is such a powerful list!  If you haven’t seen it, I encourage you to go to Facebook and check it out.  It will warm your heart!  For me, it was a reminder of what a generous and grace-filled congregation you are.  So, I would like to add just how thankful I am for you.  Thank you for sticking with us through these tough times. Thank you for embracing ways of giving when we are not gathering every weekend. Thank you for the random acts of kindness you are doing for your neighbors. Thank you for watching worship and offering kind words of encouragement to those of us trying to make the technology work. Thank you for participating in Zoom meetings and classes and discussions and games - even a meeting with our local police chief.  Thank you for wearing a mask to keep the rest of us safe. Most of all, thank you for believing that even if our buildings are closed, we are the church and we are open for the business of love, compassion, and hope.

Today is the last day of our sermon series “Building A Bigger Table”, and it’s also the culmination of our annual giving campaign.  We’ve spent the last few weeks dreaming about how we as a congregation can continue our church’s long tradition of care, compassion, outreach and mission by learning from the saints who have gone before us, reaching out beyond our church walls, and inviting those who are missing at our table to join us.  I’ve used the metaphor of the table for our sermon series because Jesus so often taught, healed, cared for others, and, particularly, welcomed the outcast and stranger all at the table.

We, of course, do the same.  Think about, in normal times, all the things that happen in our church at a table.  The first thing that comes to mind for me is that we gather at the Communion table.  There is no more sacred moment to me than when I serve bread and juice to one person after another as they come to take Communion.  We come to the table to remember who Jesus was, what he taught, how following him saves us - often from ourselves.  We come to the table together in community, sharing the meal that has connected Christians to each other over centuries and miles.  We come to the table to offer ourselves and our lives to God and to be nourished by the elements of Communion so we have strength and courage to go out and do God’s work in the world.

But, the Communion table isn’t the only table where we gather.  I’m reminded of the tables of food in the middle of the social hall or the corner at Green Wood - food we share as we spend time catching up with each other.  Tables create a place of holy connection.

Of course, there are also the tables in our classrooms.  Think of all the lessons taught to generations of children seated at tables during Sunday School.  There are the tables where our youth gather for dinner on Sunday nights.  There are the tables we use to organize donations to take on mission trips or to pack sack lunches for those who have breakfast at St. Andrew’s. There are the tables that our bells rest on when the bell choirs play for us and the changing tables where babies soon to be baptized get a clean diaper before worship starts.  There are the tables where we sit for an Advent potluck and ornament-making at Green Wood and those where our Just Older Youth gather for lunch and a program.  Of course, our church committees meet at tables to care for the administration and programs of our church.  And there are tables where we study the Bible together or sit with a small group and share the joys and challenges of journeying in faith.

The thing about the table is that at the table God makes the ordinary extraordinary, and we live at a time and in a world that is desperate for the extraordinary love and grace of God.  So, what could be more appropriate than to build our table bigger?

God has given so much to us as a church, and there is much we can share with our community and world.  We are already making such an impact through our missions and ministries - Love Thy Neighbor, Alpha House, Kenya and Costa Rica, children’s small groups, youth group, and adult faith formation, the Justice League, the Covid-19 fund, the assistance we give to individuals, our chancel choir, bell choirs, and children’s choirs, online worship, Communion services, weddings and memorial services. All of this, and so much more, happens because we individually recognize how much God has given us and make the decision to give some portion back to God through the church.

Right now, in the midst of the pandemic and a great deal of social upheaval, it is tempting to fall into what Steven Covey calls a scarcity mindset.  We are fearful, worn, and weary, which can lead us to hold tighter to what we have.  To assume there might not be enough to go around.  To cut back what we give - just in case.

Yet, what we learn from the apostle Paul is to give with abundance. “The point is this,” he says, “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”  These words are written to the church in Corinth as he encourages them to give to the home church is Jerusalem.  He reminds them of the joy that comes with generosity and the spiritual growth that is nurtured by gratitude.

Paul teaches giving as a spiritual discipline. Of course, Jesus did the same. Jesus spoke more about money than about faith or prayer.  He was passionate that his followers give to the poor, advocate for the oppressed, and welcome the stranger. Over and over, he taught that this is what God asks of us and, in fact, we grow when we share the gifts God has given us with others.

Just as Jesus’ teachings about money reflected his kingdom values, I really believe our stewardship - what we give of ourselves and our finances to the church - is a reflection of who we are and what we believe as individuals and as a congregation.  We give bountifully because we believe that our church offers the love, compassion, and justice that our world so desperately needs.  We give abundantly because we are a congregation that believes everyone belongs at the table, and we’re willing to build a bigger table to make that possible.  As Henri Nouwen so eloquently puts it in his little book, *A Spirituality of Fundraising,* “If we raise funds for the creation of a community of love, we are helping build the kingdom. We are doing exactly what we are supposed to do as Christians.”  With the gifts we give, we at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor are creating a community of love.  We are helping to build the kingdom.  And as we move into the future, we will extend our reach and expand our table.

We have all had a rough year. Not only are we weary, but there is still so much uncertainty.  We feel as though we have very little that we can actually do in the face of Covid-19.  It’s easy to feel defeated or paralyzed when we are isolated from each other, from our families and from our church home.

But rather than focusing on what is frightening us, paralyzing or limiting us, I am inviting you today to focus on hope, to live in hope.  Let’s use this time when we are out of our buildings to plan and prepare so that when we are back together, we can continue and expand on the good work we do at the table.  Let us be God’s Easter people who trust that God is still at work in the world building a kingdom of justice and peace, love and compassion - and that our church is a part of that work.

In a few minutes, we will have a prayer of dedication as we offer our pledges to God for the coming year.  If you haven’t pledged yet, I encourage you to do so as we hear again the beautiful words of Shirley Erena Murray’s hymn, “For Everyone Born, A Place At The Table”.  You can pledge online or fill out the pledge card you got in the mail.

Thank you for taking a few minutes to make an investment in hope.  Hope that God’s kingdom will one day be fully-realized.  Hope that goodness and love will win out over fear and hate.  Hope that this congregation will continue the work of the saints who have gone before us by seeking out those in need of our help and those who long to be welcomed at God’s table of grace.

May it be so. Amen.