

Proper 10, Year A

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalm 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Before we get started,
I want you to grab a pen
and write down this phone number:
(229) 379-3600.

We'll come back to that in a bit.

* * *

The longer I'm a pastor,
the more convinced I am that
if you want to know God—
if you want
to see God,
to find God,
to understand God—
then the only place to start
is to know God
as Giver.

Let me say that again.

If you really want to know God,
then you must first know God
as Giver.

Not the Taker.
Not the Destroyer.
Not the grand Conquistador.
Our God is not Zeus or Ares.
Our God is not Wall Street or warcraft.
Our God is the Father of Lights,
the Giver of every good and perfect gift. ¹

Now, intellectually,
I know we already know this.

We've read Genesis.

¹ James 1:17

We know that in the beginning
when there was nothing,
God gave us everything.²
We know this!

We've read John.
We know that God so loved the world,
that he didn't just give us
our whole world,
he gave us
his whole world, too—
his only Son—
to seal the deal,
to make his love complete.³
We know this!

These are the stories of our faith.
We know these things
deep in our bones.

And yet, is it not true
in this day and age—
as the messages we hear
are increasingly about fear,
and selfishness,
and intimidation—
that while we know in our heads
that our God is the great Giver,
we're acting more and more
as though that might not be true?

When it comes to knowing God as the Giver,
I wonder if most of us are becoming
intellectual believers,
but functional atheists.⁴

* * *

Well, if this is the case,
just one listen to today's parable—
one telling of this story that Jesus told long ago—
and you *get* it.

² Genesis 1:29-20

³ John 3:16

⁴ Palmer, Parker J. "Leading From Within." Center for Courage & Renewal, n.d. Web. 14 July 2017.
<<http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/leading-from-within/>>.

When you hear the parable
of the sower and the seeds,⁵
you get how *lavish* God is,
how *indiscriminate* a Giver he is.
And then you realize
that you and I cannot help
but to be the same way.

All week long
I had a huge debate with myself
about this point in the sermon,
and here's why:

When I go to youth events at Honey Creek
or lead retreats for our young people,
I often tell the parable of the sower and the seeds,
and I take a big bag of Skittles—
you know Skittles . . . the little rainbow candy—
and I *throw* them everywhere.

(This is not of my own devising
but comes straight from the playbook
of my friend and colleague, the Rev. Kevin Kelly.)

Like that sower of the seeds in today's parable,
I walk around the room
and throw Skittles everywhere.
And as I do, I go to different groups and say:

“Over here is the *hard-packed* path
where the birds swooped in and ate it up!

“Over here is the *rocky* soil
where the seed grew too fast and withered and died!

“Over here is the *thorny* soil
where the seed was choked and destroyed!

“And over here is the *good* soil
where the seed rooted, and flourished,
and grew 30, 60, 100-fold!”

Skittles, Skittles everywhere!

⁵ Matthew 13:1-9

As you can see, I opted not to do that here today,
not because I thought it would be tacky
(for who doesn't love a whimsical priest?),
and not because you don't like Skittles
(you know you do)
but because I had nightmares about
digging them out of the pew cushions
and seeing them crushed underfoot on the way to Communion.

But you get the gist.

It's silly, I know,
but is this not how God's love is?
God's love is absurd.
God's love is exuberant.
God's love is indiscriminate, and lavish, and wasteful.

God is not particular
about whom or how he loves.

God does not walk up to you and say,
"I give you *one* seed,
one Skittle,
one kernel of my love to sow.
Try not to mess it up!"

No, God is constantly throwing *everything* he's got at you.
Whether you're sandy or thorny,
well-tilled or hard-packed,
God just keeps throwing
his goodness, mercy, and love at you
over and over and over again,
hoping something will stick.

Like I said at the outset:
if you want to know God,
you must know God as Giver.

Likewise, if you also want to know *yourself*—
if you want to know whereof *you* are made
and who *you* are truly meant to be—
then you must know *yourself*
as giver, too.

For if we are made in the image of God—

if we are born in his likeness⁶
and wish to be more and more like him
and less and less like the thorny, barren world around us—
then we, too, must know ourselves
as lavish, wasteful, indiscriminate givers . . .
not just with our heads,
but with our hearts and our hands also.

Brothers and sisters,
you and I have a theological, spiritual need:
it is the need *to give*.
Our God is Giver,
and we do not get to keep to ourselves
what was given to us in the first place.

* * *

I want you to do me a favor.
I want you you to pick up your bulletin
and turn to the announcements.
Look midway down,
a paragraph or two beneath the box
about the Revival.

Do you see where it says
2017 Financial Summary as of June 1?

2017 FINANCIAL SUMMARY AS OF JUNE 1

Income YTD: \$173,272.23
Expenses YTD: \$193,958.56
Budget YTD: \$203,933.35

Here's the good news:
When it comes to spending,
your church is \$10,000 below budget.
That's awesome.
We are scrimping.
We are saving.
We are using our resources wisely.
We are *under*-spending.

But if you look at the Income and Expenses,
you see the flipside.
We may be under-spending,

⁶ Genesis 1:26-27

but we as a congregation are also under-giving.

Your church is \$30,000 behind where it needs to be in order to keep up with the bills.

You need to know that.

You need to know that challenge is there.

You need to know that opportunity is there.

You need to know that soon, we will have to dip into our reserves, reserves that are really meant more for a rainy day, not for regular, ongoing operations, by the way.

As your Treasurer Earl Denham and I have looked at things, we've realized two truths:

One is that there's a *lot* of generosity going on.

About half of our church family is actually ahead of where they were in their giving last year.

For that, you need to hear a strong and hearty "thank you."

The other truth is that about half our congregation is behind where they were last year . . . but not by much. It's an average of about \$200 per household.

To some of you \$200 may not sound like a lot, especially if you think of St. Anne's as a big, thriving, healthy place (and it is).

But if you take \$200 and multiply it by 150 people—the number of people in this room—guess what it adds up to? \$30,000 . . . the exact amount by which we are behind.

Those little seeds—those little contributions that you think don't matter—*they matter.*

And when those seeds are thrown at the good soil, when they're thrown at our youth and children's programs, which are stronger now than ever . . .

when they are thrown at our outreach ministries, which are feeding and clothing people in need *right now* . . .

when they are thrown at our music, and our prayer, and our worship . . .
when they are thrown at our teaching, and our preaching, and our Bible studies . . .

when those seeds that we think don't matter
are gathered and thrown at all the ways
that we celebrate
and love one another
and stand as a different kind of people,
a different kind of Christian—
a beacon of light and a witness to this town
for God's extravagant, compassionate, forgiving, forbearing love—

whenever we sow those seeds,
the yield, in the words of Jesus,
is 30-fold, 60-fold, sometimes 100-fold!

God does great things with a little.

* * *

You know that I do not love
to preach about money—
I do it as little as I can—
and I certainly do not love
lifting up figures and budgets
in the pulpit.

But I *do* love y'all.
And like y'all,
I love the Lord
who loved us first.

And I love what happens
when we remember
that our God is the greatest Giver of all,
and when we—like him—
become givers, too.

I love what happens
when I watch y'all rally together,
when you own your church,
when you sow your seeds,
when you get a little lavish,
a little exuberant,
a little joyful and indiscriminate,

and you give fearlessly
to ensure that there's plenty in the garden
for you
and for me
and for anyone who needs it.

I love that.
That's the St. Anne's I know.
That's the kind of people we are,
and that's the kind of God we serve.

If we want to know God,
then we must know God
as Giver.

And if we want to know ourselves,
then we must know ourselves
as givers, too.

* * *

That number I gave you,
(229) 379-3600:
that's a brand new number,
a number you can text.

When you text any dollar amount to that number,
it goes directly to the support of your church, St. Anne's.
On your first time you'll have to give some information,
but after that,
you can text amounts to it all day, every day.

Because times have changed
and people no longer carry cash,
we want to make it easy for you to give.
This is one among several easy ways
to sow some seeds
and tend the soil
of the church you love.

If we want to know God,
then we must know God
as Giver.

And if we want to know ourselves,
then we must know ourselves

as givers, too.

* * *

Let me close with this.

As we talk today about being
lavish, loving, generous givers—
as we talk about imitating God
in his indiscriminate compassion and goodness—
many of us cannot help
but to think of our old friend
and longtime member,
Jim Clayton.

As many of you already know,
Jim finally passed away yesterday
after a long bout with Parkinson's and dementia.
His funeral will be here at St. Anne's
at 11 a.m., Tuesday, July 18.

Meanwhile, we put the notice of Jim's death
on Facebook yesterday,
and y'all . . .
20 shares,
60 comments,
6,000 views
sprang up overnight
and transformed our St. Anne's Facebook page
into a makeshift Jim Clayton memorial.
You should go through
and read the comments that people have left
about Jim's life and witness.

In these moments,
you cannot help but to see
the power of a life lived in
exuberant love and indiscriminate compassion.

And then last night,
I was reminded in an email from Christine Tibbetts
that there once was a time, years ago,
when our friend Jim
was the Stewardship Chair,
and his message to you
was eloquent, constant, and simple:

“Never let the plate pass you by
without putting in a \$1 bill.
Even if you pledge,
even if you write checks,
even if you have other ways of giving,
never let the plate pass you by
without putting in a \$1 bill.”

In other words:
Sow a seed.
Support your church.
Be involved.

* * *

Brothers and sisters,
you and I have a theological, spiritual need:
the need to give.
St. Anne’s is not the *only* place
where you can meet that need,
but it’s a *good* place,
and our fresh and fertile soil
yields so much more
when you’re a part of it.

Whether by text,
or [online](#),
or a faithful, weekly \$1 bill in the plate,
our friend Jim’s message
was spot on.

If we want to know God,
then we must know God
as Giver.

And if we want to know ourselves,
then we must know ourselves
as givers, too.

Amen.