

***Stewardship Sermon Series: Why I Love My Church?***

***Sermon Title: "Our Spirit of Generosity"***

***Psalm 137; Luke 6:32-38; Ephesians 4:1-7***

***Salem United Methodist Church; October 2, 2016***

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Many have said this statement, “I love my church,” or “I love Salem.” Have you ever considered why we love this church, Salem? What is it about this little church that makes it special? For the past two weeks and for the next couple of weeks we will explore some reasons we love Salem. Today we will talk about our spirit of generosity as we remember World Communion Sunday.

One word that describes Salem is generosity. When asked, we give. When there is a need, we meet that need the best we can. We give of our time, our money, and our talents to serve God’s people in many different ways. When a flood came to Sri Lanka this past year and we heard the need of one family, we gave. Our giving made such a difference in the lives of this one family. Last week we heard the stories of our youth and adults who gave of their time and talents to serve some of the poorest in our nation through Appalachia Service Project. When we are asked to give financially to support our ASP teams, we give generously. When asked to provide school supplies for children in need, we collect boxes filled with supplies for them. When asked to provide items for police cruiser kits, we step up. When asked to provide food for those who are underemployed or unemployed, we show up and cook for The Lord’s Table, a soup kitchen, or we bring food in for Olney Help, our local food pantry. When asked to provide items for Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets, we have no trouble filling those baskets until they overflow. When asked to provide Christmas presents for youth who are hurting, we usually don’t have enough names to go around. When someone is sick, we provide meals. When one of us is in need, we respond in kind with whatever kind of support is needed. And when asked to support the various ministries here at Salem through our giving, we pledge and give generously.

But why do we give so generously? Do we give so we can get a tax deduction? Perhaps, for some. Or is it because Jesus told us to give because we would receive it back? Luke has Jesus say that we are to give and it will be given to us. “The portion you give will determine the portion you receive in return” (Luke 6:38.) Do we give because we believe God will give us back what we gave away? That could be a literal translation of the text. John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrim’s Progress in the seventeenth century, is to have said, “You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.” Wow! What would we have to do for someone or give to someone so that they could never repay us? Why would we want to give to someone who couldn’t repay us?

Psalm 137 may give us some clues. This Psalm has the only Bible verses that talk about bashing in the heads of babies. Because of these very harsh words, this Psalm is not often read or preached. This Psalm is filled with pain and is very dark. To understand this Psalm we have to know what is happening. The people who are crying out have lost a war, their homes, and their families. They were captured and taken away from their homes in Jerusalem. For about forty years they were held as prisoners in Babylon. They were the elite, the most educated, and the most intelligent of the capital of Judah. Their captors demand that these exiles entertain them with songs from their homeland. The exiles were in such deep grief and terribly homesick. They just could not muster up the energy to sing the songs they held dear just to entertain their

captors. They had no joy in their hearts. So they gathered at the river, hung up their stringed instruments, and cried. They mocked their captors and held onto their memories of home, Jerusalem. Then they pleaded for God to take revenge on their captors. The anger bubbled up to the point that they wanted each and every Babylonian baby's head smashed in. This is raw emotion filled with anger and hate. As awful as this wish is, we can understand why they felt the way they did. We hear their pain. Our hearts go out to them. We have compassion on them.

The word, compassion, literally means to suffer together. "Com" means together and "passion" means to suffer. When someone is suffering, we suffer with them. When one hurts, we all hurt. And when we reach out to help another feel better, we feel better. That is what I believe is the portion we receive. We usually receive more than we give. And we can find comfort in knowing that we have eased someone's suffering. Having compassion, suffering with another, easing the pain, meeting the need, being generous is what participating in the Kingdom of God on earth is all about. God partners with us to bring love, mercy, justice, peace, and healing to a broken world.

Another example of our participation in the Kingdom of God on earth is World Communion Sunday. On the first Sunday in October, Christians all over the globe share in the bread and cup that unites us in Christ. This international, ecumenical celebration of Christian unity has different traditions and customs. Different kinds of bread and cups are used. The liturgy is spoken in many different languages and in many different locations: in urban and rural areas, in ornate cathedrals, under tents, and small churches. No matter, it is in the giving thanks to God for the death and resurrection of Jesus in this simple meal that unites us with Christ, unites us with each other, and unites our ministry to all the world. World Communion Sunday began not out of celebration, but out of pain and sorrow. In the middle of The Great Depression, people around the world were without hope and were divided over issues. Rev. Hugh Kerr, a Presbyterian pastor, in 1933 conceived the notion that having a special celebration of Holy Communion might unite the world. In 1940 at the start of World War II, the Federal Council of Churches adopted the idea and since then we have been celebrating our diversity as Christians united by our faith in Christ through the sharing of Holy Communion.

We still need a Sunday where Christians around the world can gather at Christ's table and remember that Christ unites us. Today people don't have much hope and are divided over issues. We still need to be reminded that we are one in Christ Jesus. Also, today, like in biblical times, there are those who are exiled from their homes. Perhaps they have not been taken from their homes, but they are still exiled from the life they knew. They have fled their homes to survive. They are from many different countries and have left for many different reasons. They are in a way being held captive from living in their homes and their countries. Many will never be able to return, even if healing comes to their nations. These exiles which we call refugees can identify with the pain and suffering described in Psalm 137. They will always cry when they think of their home. They may have feelings of anger and sadness for the rest of their lives when they think of the way life used to be back home. It is as though their hearts have been smashed upon the rocks. If we believe that we are one in Christ, then when one hurts, we all hurt. We suffer with them, so we give. We give because God first gave to us life and grace through the death and resurrection of Christ. And with this great gift, we receive the unity of peace, hope, and faith. And we are called not to keep it for ourselves, but to give away.

