

***AS ANY HAD NEED***

a sermon based on Psalm 23

Acts 2:42-47

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In a brochure describing a hospice for people living with AIDS, one of the residents who died just before the brochure was published, was quoted as having said, "The hardest thing about having AIDS is asking for help, but this house is nice for that sort of thing." A dying man's gentle affirmation of a community in which one can give and receive understanding and support. And it describes one of the deepest needs we bring to the church. Like that young man, most of us feel that asking for help is extremely difficult! We want to be independent. We want to stand on our own. What we DO NOT WANT is to be dependent on someone else. We DO NOT WANT to be emotionally indebted to anyone.

But life has a way of humbling us. Chance and change across the years force us to realize we're not nearly as self-sufficient as we would like to believe. We learn that none of us has all the answers, resources, or discernment to be able to control all of the circumstances and events that occur along the way.

It's like learning to swim. We are usually uncertain and afraid to be in water over our head until we know how to stay afloat. We need reassurance and someone nearby to catch us as we learn to breathe, relax, and use our arms and legs to move us through the water. We need someone we can trust. With practice, we learned to swim alone, without help from anyone. So it is with so many tasks and skills we've gathered.

Even so, we are never so independent that we do not ever need others. Scuba divers are taught to always go in pairs in case something happens and one of them needs help. For the same reason, nearly all mountain climbers climb in teams.

Some four years ago, as the conclave of Cardinals met to begin the process of appointing a new pope, the religious community acknowledged the incredible and positive changes that have swept through the world, including the Catholic Church, in the last century. Much has been written Pope John Paul II, who saw himself not

only as a shepherd to Roman Catholics but to the world. He understood the importance of traveling to other nations and he understood the importance of using modern media and technology to communicate the love of God. He had a vision of a world in which God's love brought healing and reconciliation to all people. He was the first pope to step foot into a mosque, a Muslim house of worship, and humble himself in the presence of Allah. He was the first pope to acknowledge the fact that the Catholic Church had not done all that it could during the Holocaust. He was the first pope to say that God loved the Muslims and Jews. He understood how much we all need one another and he proclaimed this message to the far corners of the Earth.

I recently ran across this helpful insight: "God did not promise to make us independent. He did promise to make us free."

The description of the early church in our lesson from Acts indicates how very much they needed one another and how fully their lives were intertwined. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that those who believed together also worshiped together daily, ate their meals together, and even shared their possessions and income together. As Luke put it, **“and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.”**

That's a radically caring community! Everyone for all and all for everyone. Actually, this describes a brief moment in time. Down through the centuries, there have been attempts by various groups to establish similar communities of communal sharing. Some have failed. Some have succeeded. But, the principle of mutual concern and support continues to serve as a model for Christians everywhere even if we seem far from achieving it. In fact, the book of Acts goes on to tell how the early church experienced internal conflict, more often than not. The church of the first century was growing but it was still comparatively small. They relied totally on one another for guidance, assistance, and support. They were learning -- and, by word and deed, they were showing others what it means to be the Body of Christ. They were called to give their all to help one another and others in the name of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, we have been called into this community of faith to serve in the name of Jesus Christ. We are no worse nor better than our spiritual ancestors and the world is no better nor worse than it was then. In fact, our imperfections and those of the world are all too evident – pride, greed, violence, jealousy – you name it, we've got

it. Yet, it is not enough to say we are flawed, that we are imperfect, that we are broken. Jesus calls us to accept the forgiveness that God offers and then he calls us to “go and sin no more.”

This is a community which gathers around the Gospel of Jesus Christ and proclaims God’s unconditional love. We receive that love through the testimony of our spiritual ancestors as recorded in the Scriptures. We receive that love in the sacraments. We also experience that love as we care for one another, and for the world around us.

And as we receive that love, we are changed forever. We cannot return to our old sinful ways without at least thinking about the new persons we have become in Christ. In other words, once we acknowledge that we are forgiven, we must choose to sin. In other words, we choose to reject God’s love and, as the ancient church confession puts it, “we choose to follow the devices and desires of our hearts.”

If we choose to live a new life in Christ, then we need to work together to build up the community of faith. Without the community of faith, where will we turn for reassurance when our confidence falters, or for guidance when we face a new and difficult challenge, or for forgiveness when we have failed ourselves and God? I have a story.

For years St. Anthony's Catholic Church in San Francisco has served meals to people in need. Over the doorway to its dining room the church has posted a sign bearing the inscription: *Caritate Dei*. One day a young mechanic, just released from jail and new to St. Anthony's, entered the door and sat down for a meal. A woman was busy cleaning the adjoining table. "When do we get on our knees and do the chores, lady?" he asked.

"You don't," she replied.

"Then, when's the sermon coming'?" he inquired.

"Aren't any," she said.

"How `bout the lecture on life, huh?"

"Not here," she said.

The man was suspicious. "Then what's the gimmick?"

The woman pointed to the inscription over the door. He squinted at the sign.

"What's it mean, lady?"

"Out of love for God," she said with a smile, and moved on to another table.

And so, we find ourselves in this church – imperfect, to be sure, but always grateful for and accountable to the unconditional love of God as revealed by Jesus Christ. And that is why, when we become members of the church we promise to support its mission with our time, our talent and our treasure. We have learned that we need one another as we travel along the road of life. Like the earliest Christians, we realize that as we become part of the body of Christ, we become part of the family of faith. Our goal is not to become independent of one another but to be **inter-dependent**.

We need one another – to worship and work together, to pray together and study together and learn together and serve together and be in fellowship together.

That’s the true meaning of stewardship: As we worship and work together, as we pray together and study together and as we learn together and serve together and as we are in fellowship together, we are saying that we need one another. I have a story.

Few people would associate famed horror novelist Stephen King with the subject of giving but hear what he wrote about an epiphany he had as a result of an automobile accident.

“A couple of years ago I found out what ‘you can't take it with you’ means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like a branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard.

...We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke. Warren Buffet? Going to go out broke. Bill Gates? Going out broke. Tom Hanks? Going out broke. Steve King? Broke. Not a crying dime.

All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade—all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. It's still going to be a quarter-past getting late whether you tell the time on a Timex or a Rolex....

So I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All

you have is on loan, anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on.

Now, imagine a nice little backyard, surrounded by a board fence. Dad—a pleasant fellow, a little plump — is tending the barbecue. Mom and the kids are setting the picnic table: fried chicken, coleslaw, potato salad, a chocolate cake for dessert. And standing around the fence, looking in, are emaciated men and women and starving children. They are silent. They only watch.

That family at the picnic is us; that backyard is America, and those hungry people on the other side of the fence, watching us sit down to eat, include far too much of the rest of the world: Asia and the subcontinent; countries in Central Europe, where people live on the edge from one harvest to the next; South America, where they're burning down the rain forests; and most of all, Africa, where AIDS is pandemic and starvation is a fact of life.

It's not a pretty picture, but we have the power to help, the power to change. And why should we refuse? Because we're going to take it with us? ***Please!!!!***

Giving isn't about the receiver or the gift..... but the giver. It's for the **giver**! One doesn't open one's wallet to improve the world, although it's nice when that happens; one does it to improve one's self....

A life of giving—not just money, but time and spirit—repays. It helps us remember that we may be going out broke, but right now we're doing O.K. Right now we have the power to do great good for others and for ourselves.

So I ask you to begin giving, and to continue as you begin. I think you'll find in the end that you got far more than you ever had, and did more good than you ever dreamed!"

Thank you, Stephen King, for telling it like it is!

Occasionally, when it comes time for the annual pledge drive, some people will say, "The only time you come to me is when you want money!" Well, sometimes that's true and that's really unfortunate. The church cannot neglect people and expect commitment to its mission. Hopefully, that is not said about us. At the same time, it can be a convenient excuse to say, "The only time you come to me is when you want money!" These people may not know what we know: It is through our own

faithfulness in giving of our time, talent and treasure, that we find meaning for our lives! And.... when we invite others to give, we're actually inviting them to add meaning to their lives, as we together experience God's wondrous and transforming gift of unconditional love which, in turn, empowers us to serve one another and the world **as any has need**.

And why do we do this? *Caritate Dei*. Out of love for God. What else could or would motivate us to care more about others than ourselves? Out of love for God we seek to serve the world **as any has need**.

And let the people say, "Amen."