

## GETTING A GOOD RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT

1 Samuel 12: 19-24. Luke 14: 12-14

I started ministry here at Armour Heights church in August 2017. In November that same year we were holding a Christmas Bazaar at the church. There were many people coming and going from the church and wider community around the church. I was getting to know people and it was very busy. I was approached by a man with a thick accent and broken English. He was clearly new to Canada. He needed to speak to me urgently. He told me he was familiar to the former minister and he provided me with a few details suggesting he knew Rev. Bill and Armour Heights well enough. I told him it was a busy time right now but he was insistent it was urgent. I took him to my office and told him I could spare 5 minutes before I went back out to be with everyone else.

He told me a sad story of himself and his family trying to make a go of it in Canada, working multiple jobs and nursing various health concerns. He was sincere, intense, and detailed in the story he told me. He also promised to bring his family to meet me and other church members on Sunday. But what he needed now was a little help with transportation costs to and from work and help to pay his month's rent until the next paycheque came in. Here's where I was vulnerable: I wanted to deal with this quickly in order to get back out doing the rounds with our people; I wanted to believe this man's story was true and to help him in some way; and even if he wasn't altogether honest, he clearly needed some help. And so, I committed some cash to him and even though he wanted more, I gave him what I had and committed nothing more. Plus, I got his promise to come to the church Sunday with his family so we could meet them all.

Of course, not only did he never come back, but I never got any money back even though he promised to pay it back. Now, let me say that this has happened to me several times before, and I bet it has happened to some of you too. Sometimes we have been taken advantage of because people have pulled at our heartstrings, maybe at a little guilt at our privilege, and maybe a little bit at some feeling of obligation at our duty as Christians to be generous and giving to those in need. But even as people have been in need, we have also felt taken advantage-of. Sometimes people have also resented us for our privilege or good fortune, and our sense of guilt and obligation have been used against us leaving us feeling complicated, resentful and defensive too.

It's not easy figuring out our motivations, our obligations, and our overall feelings when it comes to sharing, giving and serving other people.

And this is as true for us as a church as it is for us as individual persons. Why do we reach out to people? Why do we welcome people? What expectations do we have of any return on our investment of time, generosity and care? Have we ever been disappointed and even hurt because for all our sacrifice and service we have sometimes received little in return in terms of gratitude, appreciation and some tangible giving back?

The truth is, even as we sometimes claim to want to give expecting nothing in return, this is not the honest truth. In any meaningful exchange of generosity and service we always hope for some return whether we admit it to ourselves or not. We want to be lifted up within ourselves and feel good about what we're doing, and this also comes with some giving back from those helped by their words of thanks, their money and their volunteer time. That's also how we build community and relationships in community. It has to be a two-way street in some way. Just giving one way without anything back is no way to survive and thrive as a church. What can you give back for all you receive and how may you give to others inviting them to give back too?

But having said all this, the world around us has changed, which also means our church has changed too. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war here in Canada, churches exploded with people and young families starting to build their lives. Churches were the social hubs for Sundays and nothing else was open for business or available for activity for individuals or families. People put their time, money and participation into churches, and budgets were based on donations from members and friends of the congregation. Whether for social reasons or spiritual ones, churches were the places to be and people put their money and time into building new churches as much as caring for older ones.

But several generations later, we live in a very different world. Let me highlight a few of those differences.

- 1) A lot happens in our world on a Sunday commercially and socially, and churches are no longer a central social hub for most people.
- 2) People themselves who have been in Canada over a generation are far more fluid spiritually speaking and spiritual community is no longer a central priority for most 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Canadians.
- 3) Immigrants and refugees are more eager to participate in church, whereas only a small minority of 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Canadians are ready to do so. If you don't come to church primarily for social reasons, it has to be because you are a spiritual seeker. That's not the majority of Canadians. But newer immigrants and refugees come from situations and places of the world where spiritual need, faith, hope and love from God in community are urgent necessities for themselves and their families.

4) People's financial resources are more splintered and stretched over various groups, charities and memberships. Church is not going to be the central focus of giving for the vast majority. And new Canadians or those with fewer resources come to church with their heart and need, but little money.

5) Finally, people with resources also have busier lives and few people, working or retired, have as much time to allocate to the church above other competing demands on their time. People have less time to give and this undermines not only the working of the church but the building of community too.

OK, so then, what can we expect realistically in terms of serving and getting back as church? How do we build meaningful community here with a new understanding of our current reality which is a more diversified community with more fractured resources of money and time, in person, and now ever more so, online?

This is the right moment to dive into our scriptures in search of some revelatory guidance. In our first reading, we have the prophet and judge - Samuel, confronting the people with their request to have a king anointed to rule them. They are not happy with a political system where God is king and judges like Samuel rule them. But wanting a king rather than accepting God as king is also a rejection of God as Samuel sees it. Nonetheless, the word of God Samuel hears within himself is to give way to the will of the people. Even though God and Samuel may be hurt and feel rejected, God continues to be committed to the people whatever they decide. "Give them what they want" Samuel hears God saying to him. "Give the people what they want even if you have serious misgivings about it."

Why? What is God's motive for giving the people what they want even if it's not the best decision? Here's what Samuel tells them: "God will not cast away God's people... because it has **pleased** God to make you a people for God's self." There it is - God's core motive. Even though the expectation of the covenant is that the people give back to God as God gives to them, the reality is that God's heart is in the pleasure of the giving. It is all about love. Love is its own reward and its own driver. Even when there is disappointment or a lack of reciprocity, love keeps us in the relationship hoping time and commitment will bring some benefit too.

Now, please don't get me wrong. This is not a formula for staying in a relationship that lacks reciprocity, or is abusive or demeaning of your humanity or self-esteem. Absolutely not! It's more of a parent-child relationship or a family member relationship where your commitment has to adjust your expectations to the reality that there are limits and disappointments. There is also the reality of seeing bad consequences of choices being made but allowing the person you love to make them and being ready to support them however things turn out. This is God too with us and with all humanity in a world being turned upside down everyday. But the key is in the motivation. If love does not give us the pleasure and fulfillment in itself, then any

expectation of some return, named or unnamed, that does not pan out will lead to resentment and bitterness. We need to feel clear and good that we are acting out of love in what we do outside any response of the person so served – truly difficult but essential if it's love.

And love has to be the biggest single motive for what we do not only in our personal lives, but also in church if we want to flourish as persons in community. In the case of my opening example, I have no regrets giving away money the times I have because I did it for the right reasons. Yes, I was taken advantage of, and yes, between my sense of compassion, obligation, and guilt in my privilege, I did what I did. But I also had to remind myself that love and love alone has to be the final motive in my giving. Sure, I hoped the man would come to church with his family, and sure, being paid back in terms of offering to the church or to me personally would have been nice. But desperation makes people do all kinds of things. Have I become more vigilant and smarter about what people ask of me and us as a church? Absolutely! But this should not shut down our compassion for people in their need either. Let us never lose love in the face of deception or betrayal. That would be a tragedy for our identity as the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in our world.

And this brings us to our second reading from the gospel. Here, Jesus actually becomes intentional in challenging people to give to those where you expect nothing in return. Why? There are two reasons actually and Jesus shares these reasons throughout the gospel. First, if you expect nothing in return, whatever you may get back is always received as a gift rather than an expectation of payback. Isn't it so much more energizing of the love in you and the joy in you too, to receive a gift rather than a debt repaid? Imagine if we saw everything we experienced and received in church as a gift. How would that inspire and lift up our spirits personally and our togetherness too?

Second, if you don't expect anything back you focus on the gift that is the opportunity to give. When you see people helped and served it pleases your heart as God is described as being pleased simply to love and to share. You don't need anything back to experience an abundance. But of course, any giving back is always a wonderful gift too. It's a bonus!

OK, so, on this Annual General Meeting Sunday as we ponder our constantly changing and changed reality as church, what may we be called to learn and internalize about being church in a new way because of our new circumstances too?

We are being called to love without strings attached, visible and invisible to us. We serve people and we serve each other and our motivations have to become purified. We need to do what we do and engage as we engage because we want to grow and practice our loving. Service in love should be its own reward when it's pure. When we give to each other or give back to the church it should not be seen as payback for what we have received, either. It should be seen as a gift of love for love experienced and felt.

But finally, this also makes us open and welcoming to those who are among us who are in need materially, socially, emotionally and spiritually. We are, as the great St. Augustine declared 1500 years ago: a community for those in need of healing and forgiveness rather than a society of the holy and righteous. We all recognize our need and that's why we're here. We need to receive love but we also need to exercise love in order to heal and be made whole. Each of us is called on a journey of healing toward wholeness growing in our learning and practice of what it means to love without strings attached. I am less vulnerable to expecting some tangible return even as I am a little wiser about the way desperation makes people behave in the world. At the same time, I experience so much more how so much in my life is a gift given and received. That opens me up to so much more fulfillment and joy.

What about you? Is what you give here a gift of love which gives you pleasure in and of itself without strings attached? And is whatever you receive not simply a return of your investment but a gift given to you in love? May we grow in the joy and pleasure of love here and may we take this way of being into the rest of our lives too.

Amen.