

Called as Partners in Christ's Service: Receiving & Giving Dave Bianchin  
Philippians 4: 10-20  
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First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

Our second scripture reading for this morning comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians chapter 4, verses 10-20. I'll mention a little more about Paul & the Philippians in just a moment. But this is the warmest church relationship that Paul had with any of the churches he was involved in. And it's a very important letter because it shows Paul's heart to a group of people that he knew and loved very much. So listen to God's word in Philippians 4:

*I rejoice in the Lord greatly; that now at last you have revived your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I'm referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little; and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and in all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry, of having plenty & of being in need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share in my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the prophet that accumulates to your account. I've been paid in full and have more than enough. I am fully satisfied now that I've received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. A fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours, according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God the Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me...Gracious Lord guide us in this time of reflection upon your word, that we might grow in our desire to serve you, in the recognition of your grace extended to us and in seeing the needs in the world around us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We are nearing the end of our sermon series "Called as Partners in Christ's Service." And the theme for this week is Giving and Receiving. And we're going to stick to that theme and text for the sermon this morning.

Receiving and giving sounds like a simple, logical thing, doesn't it? I mean, that's part of life. We give to people, we receive from people. That's just the way life is. But I think sometimes it's harder to do than we will admit. One of the best examples of this was my dad. My dad was one of the most giving men I've ever met. After coming home from World War II, he was involved in all kinds of community things. He was a coach; he started the Boosters club. He served on boards in our community. He'd reach out to people. He was just great. But, you know, it was hard for Dad to receive. For some reason going this way and giving to people was really easy. But letting people administer to him was sometimes difficult. And, he was one of the greatest guys I ever knew. And of course I'm prejudiced; I know that. But my dad lived a wonderful life. And I wish that he would have been able, before he got ill, to know the joy of receiving as well as giving.

Now there are several challenges to this interchange. Either the receiving or the giving. Sometimes we don't see the needs around us. And sometimes, frankly, honestly, that's intentional. I've known many people in my life who've made a practice of avoiding seeing a need because they didn't want to be bothered with anybody else's stuff. I could tell you the story of a friend, maybe another time, just to make that point. He avoided watching the news sometimes so he wouldn't see the needs around him.

Sometimes we're just distracted. We're busy with our own lives and so we don't happen to notice because we're plowing through. Sometimes we're not willing to help, frankly, for whatever reason. Perhaps it's even a good reason. We cut short of seeing needs around us because we don't see the needs, we're not willing to help, or we don't know how to help. Many of us, in our good-heartedness, want to do the right thing and if we're not sure, we just sometimes freeze.

But some of us are not comfortable receiving help, either. And I don't want to unpack that too specifically; there are lots of reasons for that. It's our personality, it's our habit. Sometimes it's our pride. And sometimes when we do help, and even when we're open to receiving from other people, we don't get deep enough into the relationship to really get to know those we're helping. Which is really the heart of this chapter that we're reading today. That in giving and receiving, the most important thing is learning from one another, ministering to one another and receiving that ministry from others.

One of my seminary profs in regard to the issue of evangelism used to talk about many of us doing “commando” evangelism. We swoop in, we fire the gospel at people, and then we swoop away. Well, that’s not a good model for mission, either. Sherron Kay George says that mutuality in mission is a gift exchange, an on-going two-way relationship of giving and receiving. And I like that. Because it means we’re free to give. It also means in any close relationship we also receive. Think of those you love. We love to give to them. And we also love to receive from them because we know it blesses them to receive things. And our text from today gives us real life examples of how this played out in one of the early churches. Paul’s relationship with the Philippians, as I mentioned, was very much, as Dr. George says, ongoing and two-way. It was a beautiful gift exchange between Paul and this group. They helped him out immeasurably. And he helped them out significantly, bringing the gospel to them, helping them to know the love of Jesus Christ. And the whole epistle speaks of Christ’s humility, of his love, and of his transformative power.

Even the act of expressing concern, Paul says, flows out of the love of God through us. If we really think about it theologically, we, as simple human beings, don’t have it in us to give. But through receiving God’s love and the Holy Spirit, we now have not only the opportunity but also the resources to reach out and help others as well.

And we need to remember that whatever we face, God walks with us. That God walks with us through all of our circumstances. You can read some of the other epistles where Paul talks about the challenges that people are facing or this very warm one when he majors in the blessing of the fellowship relationship.

We are the body of Christ. We are placed in community with one another. We’re here today in this community of faith; and we’re placed here because of our common bond in Christ. We didn’t just happen to be here today. We’re here because God has drawn us to this place. God has drawn us into fellowship. God has drawn us to bring our gifts and our ministries and our opportunities to give to one another. And to receive from one another.

I know it’s baseball season, and I won’t talk about the Cubs this morning...but Lefty Gomez, the great pitcher, was asked what was the secret of his success. He said ‘clean living and a fast infield’. That’s good; he was recognizing it wasn’t just him. It was the teammates around him who helped him in all of his circumstances. So it really begins with all this.

Even so, we know that life can be hard. Life can be very, very difficult. Paul willingly, knowingly lived his life traveling and preaching the gospel, moving often, never developing the closest relationships that come over year and years together. It's not a great formula for stability and material gain. And he had needs. But he chose not to focus on them. And it was the blessing of the Philippian church to be one of those groups that stepped up for him and blessed him with what he needed.

There are two clarion, wonderful declarations in the passage I read: Paul said, "I have learned to be content in all things. And I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

So when we think about doing mission, especially in the dynamics of one party in need, another party trying to help, it's really important to keep this in mind: that God walks with us, God walks with all of us during this time. And even in difficult times. And certainly in the give and take, inviting us to open up ourselves to one another.

We've been having testimonies throughout this season of looking at mission, and I'd like to introduce and ask Pat Ensing to come forward and give her testimony this morning. Pat, thank you for sharing with us.

Good morning. I'd like to thank Chris and Dave for asking and supporting me to share this testimony. Thank you.

It can safely be said that all of us have experienced deep, personal loss. The experience of these losses can often reveal individual gifts and talents. Not often can be realized but exposed at that time and also a desire to share those gifts and talents with others in the midst of their loss and needs. Those gifts can take many forms: a listening ear, compassion, sympathy and empathy. These gifts can be shared when walking alongside without judgment. It brings much joy to the giver and comfort to the receiver to be able to share their life, thoughts, and grief.

I'm the youngest in my family by several years so all except my oldest brother have gone before me. My mother passed away when I was fifteen, but my grandmother then became the positive influence in my life. She was a faithful woman who knew her Savior, had confidence in Him, and unconditionally knew where she was going when she passed away. Her faith revealed in her the gift of compassion and being non-judgmental. Gram had a lot of what she would say "get-up-and-go." For example, she threw a party for herself on her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, asked her guests to bring a hankie, and called it a mock funeral. She revealed that she did

this to enjoy the family and friends while she was still here. She lived until she was 96 years old and experienced a lot of losses herself, including my mother—her daughter—who was 52 years old. She also lost a young baby at the age of eleven months, earlier in her marriage, and many other loved ones during her lifetime.

We learn by the actions of others and not necessarily by their words. In contrast, the only word of which we can be sure is that of our Lord. My grandmother knew her Savior well through her almost-daily Bible reading which gave her the direction and strength to console many family, family friends, and even strangers with her faithful and empathetic support. My grandmother was always helping someone in one form or another. It was well known that periodically there would be items of clothing on our back fence or food on the back step. She also rented out rooms in her basement; and once in a while a tenant would leave without paying. Her attitude was that they may come back and pay, but then again, they may not. And that's ok, too. She even bought dentures for a man in jail that she didn't even know. And the list goes on.

The point is that she lived her life as a giver because of all that she had received. Truly living that faith without works is dead. Observing her actions throughout my life gave me a faithful example of how to serve others.

Then one day, a person at First Pres asked me if I would like to be trained as a Stephen Minister. I was curious because I had never heard of a Stephen Minister and didn't know then what a transforming role it would be for me and others. So after fifty hours of amazing training, I recognized that the Lord had initially prepared me for this role by giving me the example of my grandmother and the gifts of compassion, a listening ear, and empathy to those who are grieving. My role as a Stephen Minister is to call on a member of our church or a member's family on behalf of Stephen Ministries and First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest to extend our condolences on the passing of their loved one. This call is to let the person know we are there for them during their grieving time. Many times the person has a great support group. However, there are times when the call seems to be just what the person needs. He or she can share over the phone to someone they probably don't know; this makes it easier for them to share. I just listen and encourage them. One day, I made a call to a person who had lost their brother. Now, I don't usually share my experiences but it must have been the Holy Spirit nudging me, saying, "with this one, it's okay." I shared that I just lost my brother, without any detail, and that just opened the dialogue. That person knew I understood. Another time a member shared the amazing life of the person who she

just lost; we were on the phone for an hour. I gave my time and listening ear, and she received the support knowing that someone cared.

Stephen Ministry also offers free booklets that are well-received. Several have sent heartfelt notes thanking us for these booklets and support. These little booklets let the person know that they are not alone and there are others that have gone through what they are going through. And it's okay to feel the way they do.

I do know by observing my grandmother help in so many ways to fill this need as a person with a caring ear. Am I perfect? No. Do I always know what to do? No. But I'm a faithful woman who knows my Savior. He's given me confidence to serve Him by using these gifts with others. And as I mentioned, we learn by others' actions, not their words. Well, our daughters must have been watching me, because they, too, received these gifts. And they share those gifts with others as well. And so it goes.

I humbly thank God for my grandmother, Stephen Ministry, and First Presbyterian Church. There are many Stephen Ministers throughout this congregation that are available to help. If you know of anyone that is grieving and that might benefit from the sharing of their grief with a compassionate listener, please contact Chris or Donna. Thank you.

Thank you, Pat. Thank you so much for reminding us that while life can sometimes be hard, God is with us in the midst and there are lessons to be learned. And what we learn then, we can go, share and give to others as well. And I would reiterate the plug for Stephen Ministry; it's a wonderful ministry to help folks through difficult times with a caring Christian friend to walk alongside.

We help one another as we walk alongside one another. I've already mentioned the challenges to this. And the concept of gift-giving, I think, is a really wonderful one. And those of us who have done very much mission work know that it really is more blessed to give than to receive. I loved Sean's visuals earlier this morning. He outdid me in that, and it was great at reminding us that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. And life flows from the vine. The vine is connected to the life-giving water and nutrients, and many, many branches can grow out of one vine. But all of them are connected to one another. Some need special care, some are stronger than others; but as we come together in the body of Christ and learn to give and receive. It's all part of the larger picture of life in Jesus Christ.

We can give. We can receive in humility and compassion. We must give. We must receive in humility and compassion. In different seasons of our lives, we may

be givers. And other seasons, we may be receivers. And both are important for us in the fullness of our lives.

Paul said in the middle of the passage that I read, “In any case it was kind of you to share my distress.” And to share is another word to be connected. The root word for this is the word for fellowship. It’s fellowship in such a way that we are in a give-and-take relationship with one another. So we want to encourage one another to serve. We want to encourage one another to share in Christ’s name. We also want to encourage one another to receive in humility and in compassion.

Let me close with an illustration for you. In my home state California in the northern areas are the great Redwood forests. And the Redwood trees grow to hundreds of feet tall. And they’re thousands of years old. And you might think that trees that large would have a deep, deep strong root system. But the root system for a Redwood tree is relatively shallow. For a tree that size, it’s just amazing how shallow they are. But what they do in those Redwood groves is those roots intertwine with one another, and so you will very rarely see a Redwood tree by itself. It’s only in that grove, together, do the roots intertwine and they grow up to that great height so they support one another in the storms of life.

So friends, as we give and as we receive in this gift exchange of mission may God be glorified. May we be gift-exchangers with one another. Amen.