

## Two-Way Street

By Rev. Eric Moeller, delivered at St. Lucas UCC March 23-24, 2019

I'd like to begin with a story from the book *The Art of Neighboring* (by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon) that some of us read together in book club a few weeks ago.

"George and Kate live in a middle-class subdivision. Their neighbor, Heather, is a single mom. Over the past few years, George and Kate have made it a point to be good neighbors to Heather and her son. If her lawn needs to be mowed, or her driveway shoveled, George will often do it after he's finished his own. If Heather needs someone to share with or vent to, then Kate makes time to listen.

Recently when George and Kate were in their backyard putting mulch around their bushes, they came up a bag short. Heather happened to stop by, and when they told her they were getting ready to go to the store to get more mulch, Heather said, "Hey, I have an extra bag."

"That's okay," George said. "We can pick one up easy enough. We need to get some other things as well."

"No, I really want you to have it." There was a look of insistence on Heather's face.

Their first reaction was to say no. They didn't want to take a bag of mulch from a single mom. They knew her money was tight and even a bag of mulch had to be carefully budgeted. But Heather was persistent, almost aggressive. Finally, they said yes.

Later when George and Kate talked about it, they understood that, perhaps for the first time, by allowing Heather to give them the bag of mulch, they were allowing her to care for them. In essence, she was saying, "You're always helping me out all the time. This is a way of letting me help you back." Really, what they did that day was allow her to be a participant in their relationship. She was saying, "We're participants in this together." (p.120-121)

We speak often in church of loving our neighbor, as well we should. In Jesus' own words loving our neighbor is perhaps the primary expression of our love for God. However, what does that really mean? What does it look like? Is the best expression of our love to only give of ourselves to our neighbors? Or does loving our neighbor also mean accepting them and the gifts they possess, and receiving from them as well? Love is most transformative, I think, when it creates a community of reciprocity that honors the agency and dignity of each person, the gifts that each possesses, and each possesses the humility to give and receive as they need. George and Kate's neighbor, Heather, longed to participate in that kind of relationship, that kind of community, where she wouldn't be just a charity case but a human being with agency, able to contribute as well. I think we all long to belong to such a community, and I think Jesus models this way of being for us, and invites us to live in such a way. Sometimes we give and sometimes we receive.

Take Mary from our gospel story for instance. In the previous chapter of the gospel, she asks Jesus for the greatest gift he can give: the healing of her brother Lazarus. However, by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has died, and Jesus resurrects him from the dead. It was a greater gift than Mary could have possibly expected or imagined. After receiving such a gift, she and her family respond in gratitude by giving to Jesus. They give a dinner for him in their home. Mary's sister Martha serves, of course, and Lazarus is there as well. Then, in the

midst of the meal, Mary gives even more. Mary takes a pound of expensive perfume, the cost being equal to about a year's worth of wages, she pours it extravagantly over Jesus' feet, anointing them, and she lets her hair down (which was a cultural no-no in those days) and bends low to wipe the excess away with her hair. Mary, who has received much from Jesus, now gives what she can to him, in an extraordinarily generous, humble, and loving way. As a disciple of Jesus, she doesn't just take what he can give, but she claims her own agency and utilizes her own gifts to give something to him. She fully takes her place in this relationship of reciprocity that is based on a cycle of giving and receiving and truly taking care of one another.

Then look at Jesus' actions. Following his actions of raising Lazarus from the dead, he accepts their invitation to their home, and accepts their invitation to a meal prepared for him. Now, Jesus is known for making feasts happen. Thanks to Jesus, at Cana, 180 gallons of new wine are created, even more than a wedding crowd can consume. Five thousand hungry people are fed by the Sea of Galilee, with twelve baskets of leftovers remaining, and, after fishing all night without results, Simon Peter is instructed by the risen Christ to cast his net on the other side of the boat. Immediately, 153 large fish begin jumping into the net.<sup>1</sup> Just in the area of food, he has given a great deal, and now he sits down at a table to receive the generous gifts of others prepared for him. Then, as he's there enjoying these gifts of the table, his friend Mary comes, kneels, and pours an abundant amount of expensive perfume on his feet. All at once he is struck by the extravagant aroma, and the home becomes filled with its beautiful, pleasing scent. She then lets her hair down and kneels lower to wipe away the excess with her hair. It is an extraordinarily generous, humble, and loving act. Jesus, usually the one giving generously, humbly, and lovingly, is now happy to sit and receive such an act, even defending Mary's actions when they are questioned.

Why would one question such an act, you ask? Well, because they judged it as wasteful, or perhaps not to their own benefit. Judas remarks that this expensive perfume could've been sold, and the money put into the common purse to serve the poor, but the author notes that really Judas steals from that purse, so his concern isn't really that they could do more for the poor, it's that they could improve the size of his own wallet a little more. Say more? Whatever the reason for Judas' outburst, Jesus is quick to tell him to leave her alone, for 'you will always have the poor with you, but you don't always have me.' Jesus chooses to honor Mary's dignity and receive her gift gratefully. Yes, there were certainly other needs, and the work of tending to the needs of the poor and marginalized would continue beyond Jesus' earthly life, but their moments together were coming to an end, so Jesus chose to do the most loving thing he could, which was to receive the gift he was being given. His life was coming to a close, so he was going to make the most of every moment, I think, by loving those he was with, whether that was through sharing generously, or receiving generously.

With the time we are given, making the most of any given moment, living any given moment rooted in love, means being ready and willing to give or receive generously, and that's true on an individual level, as you navigate life amongst your literal neighbors, and a congregational level. There is no doubt each of us, and us collectively as a congregation have much to offer one another, our neighbors, our community, and the world, really. This

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David L.. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Kindle Locations 4759-4762). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition

congregation internally does a lot of giving and receiving. We receive financial gifts that enable us to hold worship, have staff to create a wide array of programs, and meet many needs, be they spiritual or physical. Folks also give their time and energy to meet needs, being part of the caring ministry, helping to facilitate our worship through ushering or A/V, or by volunteering with our food programs, or other ways. In many ways, we are really good at giving, and that is a great, great thing. Please continue giving of yourself and resources here and elsewhere as you're led. But, on a missional level, being a good neighbor, really loving our neighbors, means to give in a way that invites reciprocity and the exercise of agency by our neighbors.

I'd like to share two personal stories from my own missional activity in the last year. First, on one of my All-In music and mission tours last fall, I played a show at a meal for the impoverished at a UCC church in Memphis. I got all set up and was getting settled in when one of their volunteers brought a gentleman over and introduced him to me, asking if I wanted a bass player. Usually when I'm playing a show I'm somewhat a perfectionist, and wouldn't take such a risk, but it seemed right in this setting; to receive the gift this man was offering. So I invited him to join me during the section of the set when I'd do some classic soul and Motown songs. The time came, and I invited my new friend up. I didn't have charts for him, so I'd just give him the title and the key and away we'd go on songs like Soul Man, My Girl, and Higher and Higher. He was phenomenal! As it turns out he's been playing on Beale Street for like 40 years. It was a special moment, because here, in this place where he usually receives from others, he was able to give in a unique way, and it transformed the room. The other guests with whom he typically dined were also able to receive this gift from him; to see him in a new way and they were filled with joy and energy. All of this happened simply because I said yes when he offered his gift, rather than insisting that I be the only one giving.

The second story comes from El Salvador. IPM (International Partners in Mission), who facilitated both journeys I've taken to the country, really taught me a great deal about mission as a two way street, helping me to see that when we humbly enter into relationships with others, walking with each other, we gain more than we could ever hope to give from our North American abundance. In particular, my relationship with a woman named Candelaria was quite impactful in this way. Candelaria was a catechist in the 80's during their civil war. She worked with a woman named Dorothy Kaizel, who was one of four American church women martyred in El Salvador in 1980. So Candelaria risked a great deal living out her calling during that time, and she continues to seek justice through her music. Essentially she deals with her past and continues the struggle as a protest singer. The first time I met her was in 2013, when she and her band played a show for our group. Afterward, I sat down with a guitar and translator and sang her one of my songs. Those moments with her helped me to realize the universality of music, and how powerful it can be for the impoverished and those engaged in movements for social change. That interaction was a seed of what would become the music and mission project I now have that takes me to places like the food ministry in Memphis. Well, when I went back last summer I got to tell her that. I got to tell her how she inspired me and how I was now serving others through music. She told me that, while it is difficult to do what she does because of its association with a traumatic past, knowing the impact she has helps to keep her going. We now have an ongoing relationship, communicating online and sharing music

with one another. We've given and received with one another, and it's been quite transformative.

I also see this kind of giving and receiving here. Take for instance our support of Bridge Bread and Lydia's House. Once a month, some of our members make an effort to bring baked goods from Bridge Bread and pies from Lydia's House into our social hall so you can buy those items, which in turn supports those organizations. These organizations are unique in a way. Bridge Bread trains and employs people experiencing homelessness giving them a skill in baking that allows them to move on to more gainful employment. They are able to exercise their own agency. The same is true of Lydia's House. The pies sold here are a social enterprise, through which clients that are victims of domestic violence are trained and employed to produce the pies are given marketable skills and new ways to exercise their own agency. Both organizations allow people to move beyond simply being charity cases to being able to exercise their own agency. Their dignity is acknowledged, affirmed, and they are able to contribute their gifts, perhaps discover new gifts as well, rather than just receiving from others. These organizations, and with our support, are truly transforming lives.

So, as we move forward into the future together, let's imagine new ways of giving that invite reciprocity, and the agency of our neighbors. Let's continue to give as we are able, but make room to receive the gifts of others as well.