

Passing the Blessing: A sermon on Matthew 18:21-35 (Year A, Proper 19)

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“I don’t know why I’m here. I just knew I had to come.” Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of one of her clients in her counseling practice. As a teenager, she had begun secretly bingeing and purging her food in a time when eating disorders were not easily recognized. Feeling completely unable to talk to her parents or her friends or her doctor about the powerful compulsions she felt around food, she struggled through them silently and alone. By the time she was an adult, a public conversation had begun. The word “bulimia” appeared in the newspapers and on television, and she finally discovered that her experience had a name.

Since she had recovered from her eating disorder, she wasn’t quite sure why she felt a strong urge to attend one of the new bulimia support groups. Week after week, she sat quietly in the circle and listened to young women as they shared their struggles with body image and food. Then one day, as she was leaving, one of the girls stopped her. She said, “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you come. This is so hard, and it sometimes feels like I’ll never get better. And then I see you, and I know that you were here once, and you got out.”

The woman in Remen’s story could not go back and undo the painful years she spent wrestling with her disorder. But she could take the strength she gained and give it to someone else. Just by being herself, by standing quietly before others and showing them that healing was possible, she could pass the blessing on.

Today, Jesus gives us the difficult story of the slave who owes a debt. The slave, who is clearly from a high caste of servants who carried out important responsibilities, owed a huge debt to his master. The debt was so large that the only way to repay it would be lose his family and all his possessions. He pleaded with his master, and received more mercy than he asked for or deserved. Instead of giving him more time to repay the debt, the master forgave the whole debt, freeing the slave from this great burden. But the slave could not take in the master’s mercy and learn from it. He went out and demanded immediate

payment from another slave, throwing the debtor in prison when he couldn't pay up. His failure, Jesus tells us, is not that he owed the debt in the first place, but that he held onto his unearned blessing and refused to share it with others. God gives us so much, forgives our every mistake and heals our every wound. But the only way we can keep that blessing of love alive in our hearts is to pass it on.

This year, we will be celebrating one of the ministries of our parish each month. In one of my sermons for the month, I will draw on the experiences of your fellow parishioners, exploring the things they've learned about God as they served in the church. This week I asked the Church School teachers what it meant to them to pass the gifts of God on to our children.

Barb Hooper came to me last year for a blessing on her first day of teaching. She took a risk in reaching out to small children, despite having never worked with that age group before. Because she is open to a new challenge, she gives the children permission to take their own risks and discover new ways of looking at God.

Barb Zorzy has found a home at church, and she wants the children to feel that this is their place, too. After weeks of planning and rehearsal, she sent the children up the aisle in their costumes for the Christmas pageant. Not a single one of them was nervous to be up front in church and the center of everyone's attention. They turned to their church community and just beamed with pride that they got to tell us the story of Jesus' birth.

Michele Winkler Gettings remembers all the adults who helped her to grow up and discover her faith, and wants to be that loving guide for the next generation. She treasures the day that, for the story of the disciples who saw the resurrected Jesus when they broke bread with him on the road to Emmaus, she brought in a loaf of bread and shared it with the kids. They were so happy and grateful for this unexpected treat. We eat so many meals and attend so many church services, we sometimes forget how powerful it really is to break bread with your friends. But for the children, it was a whole new experience of God's love.

Jane Trott was working hard to help a particularly rambunctious class learn the self-control to take part in a lesson. At the end of a tough class, they took turns praying silently or aloud. One boy said, "Dear God, please help me to behave." If nothing else, he learned that he could turn to God when things didn't go they should.

Sheila Sullivan feels almost selfish when she teaches the gospel story, because it is so clear to her that she is getting more from the children than she can ever give. She knows that she's done something right when she sees that the children are so excited about God that they want to share the Gospel with others. She remembers giving the children sand dollars at Easter time, and showing them first the holes in the outside which mirror Christ's wounds, and then breaking them open to find the dove-shaped pieces that can represent the Resurrection. Not long after, her daughter Sophie saw another child with a sand dollar and retold the whole lesson, stopping just short of breaking the little girl's shell into bits to get at the doves.

Christina Holz loves to help the children make crafts because each project becomes a symbol of something they learned about God. Her daughter Phoebe brings the crafts home and displays them around the house. As her family moves through their week, they constantly come upon these small, cheerful reminders of God's presence in their life.

These teachers take all they have been given by God and offer it with open hands to our children. When they give their spirit, it is not diminished, but made larger and more alive. They show us the way that our blessings abound and overflow, as long as we pass them on.