

Psalm 84:1-4
Philippians 2:1-8

St. John's Presbyterian Church
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WHEELS WITHIN THE WHEEL

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. *Philippians 2:3-4*

The title for this message comes from a heady image in the first chapter of Ezekiel. It's a bizarre image that need not concern us in its details, beyond its being characterized as wheels within the wheel. And particularly this, that on several occasions it says that wherever the spirit of God went, the wheels also went, not turning themselves but flanking with a perfect symmetry and unison. I ask you simply to hold on to this image.

As most of you know by now, I'll be retiring on August 1 next year, a few days after my sixty-sixth birthday. And I cherish one great desire by that date, to leave our beloved St. John's family in the most capable, faith-full, and committed hands possible. That would be *your own*. I feel very strongly that the best gift a pastor can give a congregation is confidence in Christ and in themselves. This comes unquestionably from confidence in two related sources, the power of prayer and the teaching of Scripture. If we claim and pursue these two paths that issue from God, *everything else will follow*.

Paul calls us to this same perspective in his letter to the Philippians. It is, I feel the most irenic letter he wrote. It has a softness and gentility of spirit about it. He is writing to a congregation that has little in the way of possessions, indeed their poverty is often extreme, yet he elsewhere (2 Cor. 8:1-4) praises them for their extraordinary generosity of spirit in helping their sister churches in Jerusalem during a time of severe famine.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 2:1-5*

In other words, Paul reminds them what they have already experienced through their gifts, that the most fulfilled life is the one that gives itself away. As counterintuitive as that sounds—*that loss is gain*—it is true. The people of Israel in the Old Testament discovered that in a wonderfully providential way. Once a year they were called upon to give sacrificially to God offering, as they had means, a young lamb, even an ox, to atone for the household's sins against God, their neighbors, and their own selves. The latter may be the most common of our sins. These costly gifts honored God through their gratitude. But then the most astonishing thing

happened. God received the offering on the altar, through the priests, taking everything they least wanted anyway (entrails, carcass, scrapple, fat, and all that stuff), only to return the good meat to the family for their nourishment. So having given something costly away, God not only blesses it but gives the best back to the giver. Is that extraordinary grace, or what! By your own experience you know how something sacred that you gave away: affection, friendship, compassion, your time, energy to a task, your quiet companionship with one in need, wisdom, all of these, like five loaves on a Galilean hillside, become profoundly enlarged, finding fond homes in memories and influence in another's souls. The gift is a living wealth become exponential.

One of my former luminaries in seminary, Hugh T. Kerr, once told of an American teacher who was employed in Japan. His employment, however, was conditional upon his pledge not to utter a single word on the subject of his Christian faith, and he agreed. He never spoke a word about his faith, but instead he lived before his students the Christ life.

So attractive was his witness and so shining his example, that forty of his Japanese students, unknown to him, met in a grove and signed a secret covenant to accept his faith. Twenty-five of them entered the Kyoto Christian Training School, and some of them went on to preach the gospel. Yet not a word, not a single word was offered or shared of the gospel before their commitment.

Here was a teacher who made manifest the life of a still greater saint, Francis of Assisi. Francis once wrote, "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching." More familiarly he also said, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words." And this, perhaps my favorite line from St. Francis, "I have been all things unholy. If God can work through me, he can work through anyone."

The best gifts always spring from gratitude. Let me give you some examples from among those who sit with you in the pews. Elizabeth Dalrymple, daughter of Dave and Libby, graduated from Cornell this past May. A stellar athlete, she was voted the best woman pitcher in the Ivy League. After graduation, Elizabeth joined her Mom and a physician uncle in Haiti for two weeks of volunteer medical work among the poorest of the poor in that desperate landscape so besieged by famine, flood and earthquake. Then, after coming home, she went back, this time to live for a year in the most beleaguered of cities, the capitol of Port Au Prince. I went there many times in the early seventies, under very different circumstances, and even then it was a human mess. Next to the compound where Elizabeth and her international aid colleagues live and work there still exists a tent city, twenty-one months later. But here's the clincher—the thousands of people who live in these tent cities are reluctant to move. Why? Because it's often the first time in their lives that they have had anything like a "home," a place of shelter. If we could ask Elizabeth why she went back, among the complex of reasons I bet sheer gratitude would be way up there.

Right now, I think Elizabeth might say that she see this as her calling, for this year. But a calling, and this is important, can change many times in a person's life. For almost forty years I have been a pastor. When I retire I feel called to do some other things. One of them is a real desire to volunteer in a hospital, pushing the elderly and infirm around in a wheelchair. But I don't want them to know that I was formerly a pastor. That has a dispiriting way of ending promising conversations. I also want to see what it's like to live as an ordinary Joe.

Here's another example of someone functioning within the spirit of God, as a wheel within *the wheel*. The Reverend Dick Ollinger was our splendid speaker at Carriage Club last Monday. For ten years he's been President/CEO of Cornerstone Christian Academy in Philadelphia. Dick and his staff serve some 200 children from among the poorest and most

dangerous neighborhoods in the city. They are ordinary children who, because they function in a different educational environment, go on to complete high school, and eventually college, in numbers that rival the best private schools. Yet, here's a hint of what those children, and their often single parents have to contend with. One new program the school now offers is breakfast for the children, because an alarmingly high proportion of these children arrive at school not having had anything to eat since the previous day's school lunch. It's even worse on weekends, which some children face with the highest anxiety because they know there's nothing to put on table at home, and they live in incredibly high risk neighborhoods. Ask Dick Ollinger why he's labored through these enormous challenges for ten years and I have no hesitation in guessing that he would say, it's out of his deep love for our Lord Jesus, and his abiding gratitude for what that partnership with the living Lord has accomplished.

One more example, because it beautifully dovetails the previous two. Linda Groves (formerly Linda Root), who is a former Clerk of Session at St. John's, has recently spearheaded a St. John's campaign to get large volumes of food, that otherwise would go to waste, to Broad Street Ministries, a Presbyterian missional church downtown opposite the Kimmel Center. Working with our local Acme supermarket, Linda and her team coordinate the weekly pick-up, which they deliver to center city in refrigerated sacks. When people in need arrive at the church, they are provided a cart, just like the ones in a supermarket, and are encouraged to take from the shelves whatever their household needs. There are no prices on the food, just labels that say, "Take one," "Take two," etc. Ask Linda or any of her volunteers what their motive is and, you guessed it, it's likely to be gratitude, and a great desire to want to give back.

Let's get back to Ezekiel's wheels within the wheel again. Remember how we said that wherever the Spirit of God goes, the wheels track the spirit unwaveringly—sort of like a gyroscope with counter-spinning wheels that maintain a course—that's what our three examples do. It's what happens whenever we earnestly seek to be faithfully one with the Spirit, thrilling to experience the gift that returns to us when we give ourselves away.

Dear friends, this is actually the stewardship sermon for the year. But I wanted to get through it without mentioning the dollar sign, because there is so much more to our giving. And this: because if we get it right by committing to the two paths of discernment, the power of prayer, and the power of Scripture for guidance and encouragement, everything else will fall into place. I know Scripture can be challenging, but reading slowly and prayerfully ten to fifteen verses a day, and reflecting on them, builds like the lovely marbled accretions on a pearl of great price.

Let me finish with a story that the ancient rabbis used to tell about the founding of the temple. It goes like this. Centuries ago, two brothers were partners in a grinding mill in Jerusalem. At the end of each day they took the grain they had milled and divided it equally into separate sacks. One night the bachelor brother thought, "This is not right. I am alone and I don't need much, but my brother has a wife and a family. He deserves the larger share." So, sneaking back to the mill each night, he took part of his share and poured it into his brother's sack.

The married brother also thought one night, "This is not right. When I am old, I will have children to support me, but my brother will be all alone. He deserves the larger share. So, sneaking back to the mill each night, he took part of his share and poured it into his brother's sack. Each thought it a miracle to find his sack refilled each morning.

One night, however, the brothers left home at the same time to sneak back to the mill, and by coincidence, they met on the street with their sacks in hand. Instantly, they knew what had happened and fell into each others' arms, weeping.

So God looked down upon the scene and said, "Here is where love meets. Here I will build my temple."

You are God's temple.

Amen.