The Big Secret of Giving: Hidden Treasures in Life and Church

William C. Green

"In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret . . . I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Philippians 4:12-13
Preface

I am pleased to add my blessing to this collection of meditations from Bill Green because I know that it will be a blessing to you.

Bill joins those of us who are working as part of the Congregational Vitality Initiative of the United Church of Christ to develop accessible and useful resources for leaders, members and friends of congregations of the United Church of Christ.

Our overall aim is that of the Apostle Paul, “to equip the saints for ministry.” While this aim and need are timeless, we intend for our resources to be timely.

Ours is a new time. No longer do we live in the world of American Christendom where the mainline Protestant churches were the established church. Today we must be at the work of spiritual formation, working with the Spirit to make and sustain disciples of Jesus Christ.

No longer do we live in an era where the values of modernity prevail unquestioned. Today, there is new interest in spirituality, a seeking both for what is beyond us and what is deep within us.

In this new time stewardship cannot be “paying our dues,” or simply “supporting the institution.” Today, we seek to reclaim stewardship as a spiritual practice of an abundant and faith-filled life. Bill’s resource of short but substantive reflections will help greatly as you and I seek to grow in grace and in generosity.

Anthony B. Robinson

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The Purpose of It All

Jesus sums up the purpose of his ministry this way: that we “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). He came to make possible a quality of life meant to be all of ours. This is not just for “the religious people,” but for “Gentiles” too, meaning anyone, including those at odds with conventional norms and expectations—a particularly big controversy in the early church (see Acts 10-11, Matthew 25:31-46, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 3:1-13). We began as one family before sin fragmented us and difference became division (Genesis 11:1-9). In the spirit of Jesus we’re called to reunion, finding God’s abundance as one family.

This abundance is about sharing the sheer joy of being alive, and the assurance of welcome and acceptance whatever our differences, freed from the grip of fear and rejection. This sharing is what stewardship is all about. It’s also what salvation means.

“Salvation” in Hebrew comes from a root that suggests space, freedom, and security which is gained by the removal of constriction. This means release from whatever threatens the promise of God’s love. God creates life, gives us our first breath, and enables us to breathe again amid all that would stifle us.

Sin and evil, including oppression and injustice, selfishness, indifference to others and to the environment—these arise from the burden or boredom of feeling hemmed in, as though we don’t have enough room, enough of what we need.

But we’ve already been given all we need to live a full and satisfying life! We see and learn this quality of life in Jesus. And we learn to give as he gave, becoming generous under the influence of the goodness of God.

What—or who—am I shutting out of my life? Am I accepting God’s abundance? How is it that I have more than I need to be a generous giver?
It Is Very Good

So God declared upon completing creation (Genesis 1:31). "Thus does Divine Providence teach us not to be foolish in finding fault with things," writes St. Augustine, "but, rather, to be diligent in finding out their usefulness or to believe that there is some hidden use still to be discovered." By usefulness this saint of the church meant not simply utility but value.

"And when the cynic reminds us that people fall off cliffs, get lost after sunset, and are drowned by waves and eaten by lions; when the cynic cautions that faces get old and lined and forms get pudgy and sick—then we Christians do not declare that it was all a mistake. We do not avail ourselves of Plato’s safety hatch and say that the real world is not a thing of space, time, and matter but another world into which we can escape. We say that the present world is the real one, and that it’s in bad shape but expecting to be repaired" (Anglican bishop and theologian, Tom Wright).

Neither the snake nor the apple is to blame for the trouble, despite how Adam and Eve saw it. It was their focus on the one thing they did not have that cost them paradise.

God supplies everything we need and gives humanity ability to create more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). We waste that power, distracted by the things we don’t have in hand right now.

Who told you that you were naked? Who told you that you could not end poverty, war, and stop environmental disaster? Who told you that you did not have enough to share? Faith in the still-creating God says we are fully equipped! This is faith that "repairs" the world and restores a strong sense of how very good life is.

What “one thing” do I lack that keeps me from appreciating all I’ve been given to share?
We Are Accountable

"CATEGORIES OF ‘LIBERAL’ AND ‘CONSERVATIVE’ ARE ALIEN TO CHRISTIANITY OR ANY OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITION. THERE ARE NO ‘RIGHTS’ IN THE BIBLE. LIFE IS A GIFT AND SO, FOR THAT MATTER, IS HUMAN FREEDOM OF CHOICE. REDEFINING THE ISSUES IN THIS WAY DOES NOT MAKE THEM SIMpler, BUT IT SHOULD CHANGE THE WAY WE APPROACH THEM. THE CONTEXT OF ALL VIRTUE IN THE GREAT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS IS RELATIONSHIP—RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, PRACTICAL LOVE IN FAMILIES, PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITIES, CARE FOR THE ‘OTHER.’” (KRISTA TIPPETT, PRODUCER AND HOST OF NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO’S “SPEAKING OF FAITH”).

THE PSALMIST DECLARES, “THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S, AND EVERYTHING IN IT, THE WORLD, AND ALL WHO LIVE IN IT” (24:1). EVERYTHING AND EVERYBODY IN LIFE BELONGS TO GOD WHO CALLS US TO ACCOUNT FOR HOW WE RELATE TO THESE PRECIOUS BLESSINGS. “GIVE ME AN ACCOUNT OF YOUR STEWARDSHIP,” SAYS JESUS (LUKE 16:2).

STEWARDSHIP IS ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIPS TO GOD AND ONE ANOTHER. “STEWARD” COMES FROM THE GREEK WORD, OIKOS, WHICH MEANS HOUSE. STEWARDSHIP IS RELATING WELL TO HOUSEHOLD MATTERS. A RELATED WORD IS OIKONOMICS FROM WHICH WE GET THE WORD “ECONOMICS.” STEWARDSHIP IS TAKING CARE OF MONEY MATTERS THAT GOD HAS ENTRUSTED TO US. STILL ANOTHER RELATED WORD IS OICOCLOGY FROM WHICH WE GET THE WORD “ECOLOGY.” STEWARDSHIP IS TAKING CARE OF THE EARTH THAT GOD HAS ENTRUSTED TO US.

DURING TIMES LIKE OURS, WHICH SO VALUE FREEDOM OF CHOICE, WE’RE CALLED TO REMEMBER THAT ACCOUNTABILITY IS THE PRICE OF FREEDOM—and “FROM EVERYONE TO WHOM MUCH HAS BEEN GIVEN, MUCH WILL BE REQUIRED; AND FROM THE ONE TO WHOM MUCH HAS BEEN ENTRUSTED, EVEN MORE WILL BE DEMANDED” (LUKE 12:48).

HOW AM I PARTISAN OR POSSESSIVE IN WAYS THAT KEEP ME FROM BEING MORE OPEN AND GENEROUS IN MY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS?

HOW WELL DOES WHAT I GIVE EXPRESS MY ACCOUNTABILITY TO GOD?
Giving Gladly

It's been said that the Lord loveth a cheerful giver—but the Lord also accepteth from a grouch! Not so in the story of Cain and Abel. (Genesis 4:1-16). The way we give reveals our inner hearts, and God knows the inner hearts of all of us. According to Jewish tradition, God's acceptance of Abel's offering and rejection of Cain's was a result not of how much each gave but of what kind of gift it was.

Cain's very name comes from a Hebrew root meaning acquisition or possession. His offering was both grudging and rendered on his terms, as if to say to God, "I work under your curse and will acknowledge you so long as you provide me with a good harvest."

Abel, on the other hand, gives what is God's due, the selfless sacrifice of the first and best portions of his flock, out of gratitude and love. It is significant that Abel's name comes from a root meaning breath, and breathing is also associated with the spirit of God.

Good giving is like good breathing—something essential to our health, but also something that can't happen with an upright disposition. God says, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live!" (Ezekiel 37:14) This is the grace, the energy, that at once empowers and relaxes us, enabling us to "let go and let God." But this spirit can enter only when there is room to receive it. As Goethe put it, "It is the nature of grace always to fill spaces that have been empty" and not filled by ourselves.

What, more than anything else, fills my thoughts?

Does this keep me from relaxing? How far have I gotten worrying about it?

Can I trust that a power greater than myself cares about me?

Can I breathe more freely—and give more gladly?
Form er Yale chaplain Bill Coffin once said, “Some say the church is a crutch. I say, ‘Who doesn’t need a crutch?’” If leaning on outside authority can be dangerous, no less so is another conformity: the popular notion that nothing is more important than the right to choose what one believes, wants, needs, or must possess. More than one observer of cultural trends has noted that, ironically, this “individualism” means that people largely look alike, eat alike, and behave alike. Most are inclined to the same choices!

Religious scholar Huston Smith says that so steeped are we in our version of individualism that it may be difficult to realize that this is neither Christian nor universal. “Many times when I have been in India and have been helped, the helper’s response to my thanks has been not ‘You’re welcome’ but ‘It is my dharma, my duty.’ This concept attaches duty to truth and renders the response, ‘It is the duty God has imposed on me’—a far cry from what the helper might have been inclined to do.”

There is no “me” without “we.” We’re part of a bigger picture. We find our identity as part of the wider world of others. Our baptismal vows, most church creeds, and the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ begin with “we.” As St. Paul puts it, no part of the larger body of believers can say “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Without each other we are lost to ourselves.

So it is that we support the church, not only as a matter of our own dharma, but as an expression of gratitude for what makes faith possible and our lives complete.

**How well do I understand the dependence of my faith on the church?**

**How well does my giving express this?**
Hidden Treasure

Deep-sea explorers recently mined what could be the richest shipwreck in history, bringing home 17 tons of colonial-era silver and gold coins from an undisclosed site off the coast of England.

Jesus speaks about hidden treasure of unsurpassed worth. It’s sometimes hard to find and of lasting value. He compares God’s powerful love to a tiny mustard seed planted beneath the soil, to a small bit of leaven hidden in three measures of flour, to a treasure buried in a field, to a rare pearl hidden among pearls of lesser value, to a great catch of fish hiding below the surface of the sea (Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49a).

To know more completely the abundance with which God blesses us takes mining, what can be called “deep-seeing”—what the poet, Theodore Roethke, calls “long looking.” (“I recover my tenderness by long looking. By midnight I love everything alive.”)

We are prone instead to tunnel vision. We tend to focus on what we’ve always seen or expect to see, quickly fixating on what can’t be or shouldn’t be, rather than on what can be, and what is. “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees takes off his shoes—The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries” (Elizabeth Barrett Browning).

God may be hidden, but God is not hiding. Something divine is revealed in every moment of time and in every breath of life. Too often in the busyness of our everyday lives we fail to look again—and miss the treasure that lies not miles away from us, somewhere else, but just beneath the surface.

Knowing all we’ve been given inspires our own giving, making us generous in return.

What are instances of “hidden treasure” in my life? in my church?
What am I failing to see and appreciate right before my eyes right now?
"Complete possession is proved only by giving. All you are unable to give possesses you."

Andre Gide

Thoughts and a Prayer

Giver of life, source of freedom and assurance, we are reminded by the psalmist that yours is “the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it.” From your hand we have received all we have, and are, and can be. Help us to use your gifts wisely and teach us to share them generously. May your love in Christ show in us for others. Remind us that in all we face nothing can separate us from your grace and blessing but our own betrayal. Amen.

“The mystery that has been hidden through the ages... which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Colossians 1:26a, 27b
Contrary Blessing

Although most of us have been taught at one time or another that “those things that hurt, instruct” (Benjamin Franklin), few of us welcome this education! What some trouble teaches is not good news.

But how quickly we tend to write off trouble as bad news. How easily we resist or avoid anything that threatens peace and harmony. How much generosity is squelched by conflict in our own lives and in the church. We commonly think of blessing as comforting and attractive like a beautiful spring day, or, in other ways, like the resolution of personal difficulty, the growth of our congregation, or how much we love the pastor.

There is another side of blessing—what radio commentator Paul Harvey used to call “the rest of the story.” It’s actually part of the first story and the original partnership spoken of at the beginning of the Bible (Genesis 2).

The exact words God uses to describe someone who is supposed to be a “helpmate” for Adam hardly inaugurates the subordination of women. Looking more closely at the Hebrew, God says “I will make a helpmate against him.” Some blessing!

But what the Bible is saying is that this partner will be unlike Adam, in some ways contrary, at least someone who has a separate outlook on life. Difference is essential to this first partnership as something good. Something that will make life better, more interesting and worthwhile.

And so with our relationships. “Blessing” is not always comforting. It’s sometimes conflictual and challenging. As the poet William Blake reminds us, “Without contraries is no progression.”

Let’s look again at the “contraries” we face. Difficult as they are to handle, sometimes might they be, not simply trouble, but also blessing—something important to a more complete appreciation of life?

Can I give generously even when I face conflict and trouble?
Mission is Who We Are

Mission is not simply what we do but who we already are. As soon as the church opens its doors Sunday morning, and in all its activity through the week, we are meant to embody God's love and justice. After all, we can share with the wider world only what we have received and live out ourselves.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, "The church is the world the way God means it to be." This is the ultimate "mission statement" for all of us who work in every setting of the United Church of Christ—congregation, Association, Conference, national.

Our concern for the whole world is expressed in the way we relate one-on-one. How well we respond to difference and controversy, how we express the power of God's love in our personal and corporate life, how much worship, Sunday School and adult education, and all the rest we do, testify to God's amazing grace—all this makes us a beacon of hope, and hopefully a model, in a world torn by conflict and division.

Gandhi put it well: "Be the change you want to see in the world." "Great things are done by a series of small things brought together" (Vincent van Gogh). So it is that one congregation, beyond helping the homeless, welcomed them into the congregation and, working jointly with them, initiated political action that brought about a wiser allotment of welfare expenditures.

So it is that another congregation found ways of encouraging open debate on issues dividing the church, overcoming skepticism and apprehension, and created greater trust and respect and a stronger spirit in the church.

What are some of the "small things" in my own congregation that call for closer attention, understanding, and support? Do I save my giving for bigger matters?
Giving Justice

Our Jewish forebears distinguished giving from charity by speaking of it as *tzedaka* from the Hebrew word for justice, “*tzedek*.” “Tzedek, tzedek you shall pursue,” the Torah instructs (Deuteronomy 16:20). Hundreds of years later, the Talmud taught, “*Tzedaka*” is equal to all the other commandments combined.”

Performing deeds of justice is among the most important obligations Judaism imposes on its adherents. “Charity” is a choice; *tzedaka* is a duty. While Jewish law urges people to give charity from their hearts and affirms generosity of spirit, it understands that waiting for inspiration to give means it might never happen. Giving for the good of the community is not simply a choice but an act of justice, hence a duty.

Jesus agreed. And he said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law… I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). Our modern concern for choice, and for giving from the heart, is not at issue unless it makes us disregard law and duty. The real issue is fulfilling justice, an embodiment of God’s love. More than benevolence and acting kindly, justice is behavior that pursues the common good as indispensable to personal and corporate well-being.

Giving God the best involves doing good, not simply feeling good. It means finding what is right for us in what is good for others in our congregation and beyond. Sacrificing to do so may be a duty—but we may also wish to make it a good choice…and let our hearts catch up.

The United Church of Christ is well-known for its commitment to justice as it wrestles with the pain of difference, in our own churches and beyond. The church is not only a charity!

*Is my giving to the church an act of justice?*
True Joy

"The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts it."

This persuasion of William James, pioneering American psychologist and philosopher, found expression in the work of playwright George Bernard Shaw, who famously declared: "This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

However unintentionally, Shaw expresses well the promise of baptism by which we are incorporated into the universal church, "the body of Christ." Recall part of that promise as we know it in the United Church of Christ Book of Worship: "...by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ...celebrating Christ's presence and furthering Christ's mission in the world."

The local congregation embodies God's mission in a particular place. There we become part of the universal church and the revolutionary Spirit transforming the world.

When we support the church we are aligned with the very power of the universe; we are plugged into what our faith recognizes as the purpose of life: the joy of love and justice overcoming all that separates us from the goodness of creation.

In the United Church of Christ, we give both for the work of the local congregation and to Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) which embraces the work of the church at large.

Does my giving support both the local and wider work of the United Church of Christ?
Don’t Just Do Something!

My grandfather, prone to grave utterances as if delivering the Commandments, often admonished me as a teenager on a hot summer day, “Don’t just sit there. Do something!” This was usually prompted by my greater attraction to the shade of the front porch, an ideal place for reading, than to doing something worthwhile. Doing something worthwhile meant not just mowing the lawn but besieging the neighbors to let me mow theirs so I could earn more “money for college” and “become responsible.”

A kindly soul as well as realistic, my grandfather had a familiar point. But sometimes the word we need to hear is “Don’t just do something. Sit there!” Staying busy is not necessarily being responsible and making progress. “One’s action ought to come out of an achieved stillness: not be a mere rushing on” (D.H. Lawrence). Scripture says, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

There’s a big difference between simply believing in God and knowing God. Many of us can’t remember a time when we didn’t in some sense believe in God. But that can be like believing in love without loving.

You can know God in worship. You can know God in prayer. You can know God in the Bible. You can know God in people. You can know God in justice and compassion. You can know God in the generosity you receive, and share.

But this knowledge is not an instant message. And it’s not always clear. We must come at it with the same imagination required to appreciate many a masterpiece of art and literature. This is not like information we quickly Google! It takes time. It takes our own stillness and a willingness to learn more, look again, and listen more carefully.

How much of my time is spent rushing on? What about my giving?
The Way

"Me gusta tu manera de ser." That's a compliment sometimes heard in Latin America. It means literally, "I like your manner of being." Colloquially, it's a way of saying "I like the way you are" or "the way you come across."

Early Christians were not called "Christian" but those who belonged to "the Way." (Acts 9:2b). The Navajo people use a similar turn of phrase when someone becomes a Christian. They say, "He has gone down the Jesus Road." This road or way is a particular "manera de ser." It's more than a matter of belief or behavior. It's more than supporting a worthy cause. It's about loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind—and our neighbor as ourselves. It's about having a heart and a brain—and courage, in the spirit of Christ.

Hemingway defined courage as "grace under pressure." C.S. Lewis called courage "the form of every virtue at the testing point." In a world, and a church, full of fault and frailty, it can be hard to be courageous—or generous. The church itself is sometimes weak and ineffectual and riven by conflict.

We do well to remember with Martin Luther that "God can draw straight with a crooked line, and ride a lame horse!" Courage, like generosity, is not the absence of doubt or apprehension. It's the willingness to face them: with all our heart and mind, confident that God is still speaking.

True to forebears who showed us the way, may the United Church of Christ and each one of us grow in that "manera de ser" which is the spirit of Christ become ours today.

Are courage and generosity part of my "manera de ser"? "Skill to do comes of doing," said Emerson. We can't always feel that way first.

How can I act more courageously—and generously?
"This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. [God] gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God."

2 Corinthians 9:10-11 (The Message)

Thoughts and a Prayer

"O my God, teach me to be generous: to serve you as you deserve to be served; to give without counting the cost; to fight without fear of being wounded; to work without seeking rest; and to spend myself without expecting any reward, but the knowledge that I am doing your holy will."

IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1540)

"You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give."

Winston Churchill
Money and Mammon

The Bible calls the allure of wealth “mammon” (Matthew 6:24). This is what money becomes when treated as the bottom-line of what counts. Often forgotten is that money becomes just this not only when taken too seriously but when not taken seriously enough. Then, sooner or later, the need for money and the role it unavoidably plays in life acquire urgent and disproportionate influence. Ask anyone deeply in debt!

Sometimes around the church one gets the idea that money is not a spiritual matter, not an essential concern of faith and an important emphasis in church life. “If I start hearing talk about money in church, I’m leaving.” When this attitude prevails and talk of giving and financial commitment is low-keyed, far from becoming less of an issue, money becomes more of one. No money means no church, no mission—and weak faith. Giving is central to faith and the whole experience of living close to God. It’s a matter of where we place our reliance and find our security.

This is clear in over half of Jesus’ teaching and in the personal experience of his followers. From the first, they had to reconcile their commitment to him with the loss of the kind of security on which they had depended. Ultimately they found joy and “security” beyond measure.

“Make service your first priority, not success, and success will follow” (Robert Greenleaf). What’s true of business is also true of the church’s business when we follow the way of Jesus. “Strive first for the kingdom of God and all else follows” (Matthew 6:33). While this is no promise of having all we want, it’s a promise of having all we need and, as it turns out, what we really want after all!

What priorities are reflected in the way I spend and give?
How does my faith speak to my concerns about money?
Self-Love not Selfish #1

Echoing Socrates, Ann Landers said, “Know yourself”—and adds, “Don’t accept your dog’s admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful.”

More of us should have a dog!

Without loving ourselves we cannot love others. “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Luke 10:27b). Which of us doesn’t know that it’s hard to care well about others when we’re weak or down on ourselves? What makes us selfish is doubt about our own value and strength: we seek rather than share love and assurance.

True of us individually, this is also true of the church. We look at the budget and get down on ourselves because of “how much money we spend on ourselves.” In the majority of United Church of Christ congregations, at least two-thirds of the annual budget is spent on what gets called “overhead” or “maintenance.” We forget that “maintenance” is also mission! The sexton is as much a “missionary” as anyone on the front lines of justice or mission work overseas.

By its very existence, the church is not simply to do mission but to be mission: a people that in its own life embodies justice and mercy, forgiveness and love. We then give what we have first received out of the abundance made ours in the spirit of Christ.

Learned well through the worship and work of the local congregation, including the ways we relate to one another, the generosity of God’s love is irresistible: it demands to be shared beyond ourselves. Like laughter or tears it overflows, inspiring support as well for the work of the United Church of Christ by giving to Our Church’s Wider Mission.

Know yourself, indeed!

Do I know that “maintenance” is “mission” in that it makes the church possible? Do I give less generously to the church than I could because I think “overhead” is selfish?
Self-Love not Selfish #2

Jesus told his first followers, “You will receive power when the holy Spirit has come upon you and will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In other words, “Don’t give until you have received.”

Many of us are better at giving than receiving. Few of us forget that, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35b). But worth remembering is that it can be selfish to do a lot of giving—unless we remember that one of the best gifts we can give is to receive: to listen, not just talk; to respect what someone else has to say and offer us; to accept help and advice, not just give it; to welcome a compliment, not just offer our own.

As author and psychiatrist Scott Peck reminds us, “Self-love is not self-centered and includes the capacity to receive, and to be humble.” When we listen to another, we’re not just being nice: we might just learn something. Self-love is about caring, respecting, and hence being honest about ourselves, aware of what we need.

How honest are we in the care we have for ourselves—and the church? How well do we welcome what others have to offer? This question pertains to all our relationships, beginning at home and church, extending to our jobs and community, and in how we support Our Church’s Wider Mission and the work of the church in the world.

The love of God is not limited to what we already know and welcome. It also comes as blessing from people and experiences different from what we’ve known—as happens in making new friends we never thought we’d like, or doing something we never thought we’d want to do.

Am I a generous receiver? How does my giving reflect that?
Heritage and Hope

It was Tuesday, June 25, 1957, over fifty years ago. Pastors in the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches donned their robes and led a procession through Cleveland, Ohio, to the Civic Auditorium. In the formal joining of these two churches, the United Church of Christ was created.

Our heritage involves the dissent of Puritans and Pilgrims, colonial tax protests, patriots hiding the Liberty Bell, and anti-slavery activity. We ordained the first African American person in mainline Protestantism, the first woman in the modern era, and the first openly homosexual Christian ministers. And these are but the most obvious of forward-looking stands the United Church of Christ has taken since its inception. From the beginning we have been involved in conflict—as were Jesus and the first disciples!

As General Minister and President John Thomas puts it, “A church enduring conflict because it stands for something is better than a united church that stands for nothing.” He adds, “Ours is not a sectarian piety that signals to those who disagree, ‘leave.’ For all our commitment to being a church that stands for justice, a church that works for peace, we remain a church yearning to embody Jesus’ prayer ‘that they may all be one.’”

Unity in the United Church of Christ has never been found in agreement among ourselves. It’s known in communion with God whose love is “strong as death” and more powerful than anything that can separate us (Song of Solomon 8:6; Romans 8:35-39).

Our heritage in the United Church of Christ inspires confidence amid all the challenges we face today. Nothing we face is greater than what we’ve been through. The United Church of Christ today is supported by Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM).

How well does my congregation know the story of the United Church of Christ?
Trust and Anxiety

Money is often a sore point in church life. But often the sore point reveals where the real point lies. Money talk leaves many givers anxious. Under this anxiety people reduce their giving by close to fifty percent.

Ashamed by how little we give, we don’t want to talk about money. Or we're disillusioned because of the apparent ineffectiveness of our contributions in making any noticeable difference. Or we feel overwhelmed by the many requests from worthy causes. Or we resent being asked to give more from fear that we may not have enough to provide for our basic needs or those of our family.

Wealthier people fear they may be exploited. Or they are concerned that their giving will cause family conflict, particularly with the next generation. Or they, too, fear that their giving may not produce the results they desire.

The problem for most of us is not greediness or selfishness. We want to do what is good and right. The issue is anxiety and distrust.

Jesus often talked about anxiety and in ways that bear particularly on generosity.

“Don’t be anxious about your life saying: What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear? Will not God take care of you? Don’t be anxious” (Matthew 6:25).

We can’t talk our way out of anxiety and the distrust that attends it. Sometimes this is warranted. We can acknowledge the extent to which this slants our judgment and can make even Jesus himself suspect.

We can also remember that “It is impossible to go through life without trust: that is to be imprisoned in the worst cell of all, oneself” (Graham Greene).

I have my reasons for anxiety about money. But do they have the final word on how much I give for the work of the church?
Having What It Takes

"I have learned the secret.... I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12b,13). How can we believe these words of St. Paul?

Jesus spoke of the big difference that can result from what seems little and small—like a mustard seed, a widow’s meager offering, several loaves and fish to feed a multitude...and like our own faith. Too often we think what counts is great faith, forgetting that what makes the difference is a great God.

We may feel weak, lost, and alone. Nonetheless, as with the smallest of seeds, significant things can result from even the smallest things we do—and even “mountains” move (Matthew 17:20, Mark 11:23): mountains of challenge, including apparently insoluble difficulty; mountains, too, of hope and opportunity that can seem too great to climb.

This is possible not by virtue of our own positive thinking or deep spirituality, but because of God’s mighty power and love. It’s not faith in our own faith and self-estimate that turns the tide: it’s faith in God.

We are not asked to skate on the thin ice of our own calculations, but on the thick ice of divine grace and faithfulness. Getting out on the ice of bolder living, and giving, we will find support and assurance that we really do have what it takes, after all.

Remember that little nursery rhyme?

“For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the horse was lost. For want of a horse the rider was lost. For want of a rider the battle was lost. For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.”

May I remember that the little I can do turns out to matter a lot!
“The key to generosity is knowing the fullness already ours. A less than generous understanding of ourselves issues in a constricted way of living and of giving.”

Inspiring Generosity

Thoughts and a Prayer

“O Lord, release me from the fears and guilts which grip me so tightly; from the expectations and opinions which I so tightly grip, that I may be open to receiving and sharing the assurance you give, and to risking something genuinely new. Grant me hope, Lord, and remind me of your steady power and gracious purposes that I may live fully.”

ADAPTED FROM TED LODER, GUERRILLAS OF GRACE

“God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment… Be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up the treasure of a good foundation for the future… take hold of the life that really is life.”

1 Timothy 6:17b-19 (abridged)
Too Much of a Good Thing

"We have not given a peck until we have heaped the measure,” writes Ralph Waldo Emerson. He adds, “We aim above the mark to hit the mark... No excitement, no efficiency.” “Glory be to God,” writes the author of Ephesians, “whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” (3:20, New Jerusalem Bible).

Infinitely more! That’s “heaping the measure”! Far more than we need to handle the hottest congregational meeting—and more than enough to pay the bills. Vastly exceeding what we need, the power God makes ours enables us to follow suit, and aim high to hit the mark.

Preoccupied with what we think we don’t have, we fail to see what we do have, and, by neglect, place that in jeopardy. Underused, our spirit, like the muscle of our body, withers away. This hardly disposes us to do or give as much as we could. But one way or another, abundance, not scarcity, is the truth about life—and your church.

Think of the kindness of which others are capable, and you, too. Remember times your church has made an important difference in your life and for others at church. Consider ways in which your job and community would be diminished by the absence of what you or your congregation offer. Be glad for what people do give—you, too—and build on that strength rather than focusing on all the problems and weakness that must be overcome.

“Without electricity the air would rot,” adds Emerson. Morale is lost, the current of generosity cut off, when short-circuited by low appreciation and low expectations.

As Mae West put it, “Too much of a good thing is wonderful”—exactly what God gives, exactly what we have, and precisely what’s needed.

What good things are you forgetting that would make you more appreciative of what your giving makes possible?
Up Against the Wall

"If God asks me to jump through a stone wall, it’s my duty to jump. It’s God’s duty to remove the wall.” Sometimes this attitude can lead to unfortunate behavior. Any truth can be abused. Faith does pose challenges. Often it seems we are up against some “stone wall” and being asked to jump through it—asked, in effect, to “walk on water” or “go through fire,” as the Bible puts it.

The difference faith makes is not the removal of risk and trouble but the presence of power greater than we can figure out—the presence of God’s love, the toughness of which C.S. Lewis calls “kinder than our greatest tenderness.”

In the strength of that love, whatever stands in our way can lead us further along the way toward greater wisdom and fulfillment. We can live and give beyond anything we thought possible.

God’s love is sometimes hard to handle. It inspires more than we think we can do and makes it harder not to do it. It deprives us of excuses which keep us from putting forth much effort. As long as we doubt that what we do makes much difference, we don’t have to do much, or give much. But assured that the guiding power of God’s love is greater than our greatest problem, we open up and get moving.

“Opportunities to find deeper powers within ourselves come when life seems most challenging,” wrote Joseph Campbell, an authority on comparative religion. Recalling how this has proven true when all seemed lost, the psalmist summons us to “Come and see what God has done.” The generosity of God’s love is “awesome” (Psalm 66:5). No obstacle need block our own generosity in response—not even our hardest doubts...or a stone wall.

“Come, and bring your gifts.”
All Things Are Connected

God is with us! This assurance echoes throughout the Bible. It requires openness to God—something we learn and practice through the church. It urges us to seek God in our own conscience, in others—and in nature.

Jesus said “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). He did not say “My kingdom is not of this earth”!

The ancient Israelites lived close to the land. With our indoor existence, climate-controlled buildings, and advanced methods of food preservation, we have largely lost touch with nature and the seasons. To live faithfully, in the spirit of Scripture, requires us to accept responsibility not only for ourselves and others, but for nature itself—to care for our planet rather than trash it.

“Stewardship” comes from a Greek root, oikos, which means house. A related word from the same root is “ecology.” Stewardship involves taking care of the earth that God has entrusted to us.

Chief Seattle, a Native American leader in what is now the state of Washington, knew the intimate interplay between human beings and the earth. Consider his strong words of one hundred and fifty years ago:

“All things share the same breath—the beast, the tree, the man. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth. This we know: all things are connected like the blood which unites one family. We may be brothers after all. We shall see. One thing we know which the white man may one day discover: our God is the same God.”

*All things are connected.* Generosity is not one aspect of life apart from the rest of life. It’s a way of living, not only a way of giving.

Is my generosity evident in concern for the environment? What am I doing about it?
Better Than You Feel!

Talking about what inhibits giving, James Baldwin had this to say in his classic essay, "The Fire Next Time":

"Most people guard and keep. They suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping.... What they are actually protecting is their own system of reality and what they assume themselves to be."

What we assume—our "system of reality"—is often at odds with the reality of God's power already at work in us (Ephesians 3:20). We tend to think of such power as the outcome or reward of good faith rather than a condition already ours, inherent in God's gift of life. Doubts about having enough to secure our own needs are more a consequence of how we look at life than of the actual truth.

Asked by her pastor how she was doing right after successful hip surgery, an elderly woman replied, "I'm better than I feel." So are we, whatever the limitations we face. We are more than we think we are. And we have more to give than we think we do.

Let's remember not just our income, but what we can give through wills and bequests, gift annuities, life insurance, property, securities, and charitable remainder trusts. These planned gifts can be designated for any part of the work of the United Church of Christ, as can other special gifts which may be pledged or directly given.

Along with annual giving to support the local congregation's budget, remember as well the importance of supporting Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) which funds the broader church of which we're a part, including the work of our Association, Conference, and national staff—much of which is devoted to helping local congregations in their own ministries.

Have I considered the different ways in which I can give to support the church?
Trying to Pray is Praying

"Oh God, help me! If you get me out of this mess, I'll never screw up again." "Why bother praying? I can't see that it makes any difference." "I believe in God, but it's hard for me to believe that God really listens to my prayers."

Which of us hasn't had doubts about prayer?

St. Paul simply says, we can't pray as we ought to pray. He speaks of how we "groan inwardly." Few of us associate groaning with praying, considering it a sign of poor faith or simply negative thinking.

But what we can't do, God can. We're simply asked to be ourselves and not give up. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness...(and) intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And the One who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23, 26-27).

Just as it's said faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains (Matthew 17:20); and just as we're reminded that what we can know is always incomplete ("we see through a glass darkly;" 1 Corinthians 13:12), so with prayer. If we could understand how it works we wouldn't need God, we'd be God. And if it took praying without doubt for our prayers to be worth it, we would have to live in denial or not bother praying.

We pray not because we have faith in prayer or in our own capacity to pray, but because we have faith in God. God commands prayer. "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

Not "Ask without doubt; search with complete assurance; and ignore the locked door." But ask anyway, search anyway. The outcome is not yours to produce!

Do I let doubt stand in the way of prayer?

Do I pray about what I give to support the church?
The Bigger Picture

There is no formal, abstract definition of God in the Bible. Rather, God is always presented in various relationships: to nature, to the nations of the earth, to men and women—“Adam, where are you?” (Genesis 3:9)

Neither is there a formal definition of “humanity” in the Bible. Humanity as well as God is disclosed in terms of relationships—hiding, fashioning fig leaves, making idols, worshipping, always in relationship. This is how we know who and what we are. Our estrangement from each other is the clearest indication of our fallenness.

As with us individually, so with local congregations beginning with the earliest gatherings of Christians. “No island is a man,” said Ernest Campbell, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, playing off John Donne’s familiar verse. No congregation is the church. We are part of a much bigger picture—God’s worldwide mission, of which we are a part in the United Church of Christ. Our motto comes from Jesus’ prayer, “that they may all be one” (John 17:21)—brought back into relationship across all that divides us, whether point of view, class, creed, color, or sexual preference.

As General Minister and President, John Thomas, reminds us, our unity is not simply “happy conviviality.” It’s shared focus on a Christ who “for the sake of the joy before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). Following Christ is demanding. It often involves conflict. But we’re not in this alone. We’re called to see through differences with one another the support we need to give and receive to discover the joy meant to be ours, too.

When we feel distant from God it’s often because we’re not close to one another. When our congregation is not close to the wider church, we are not the church we’re meant to be.

Giving to Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) supports the work of the wider church.

How strong is my giving to OCWM?
The former director of the The Stillspeaking Initiative, Ron Buford, wrote these words about the United Church of Christ and why he says,

"I will support it all my days."

United Church of Christ, divine
Beloved home, O let it shine,
God's love unshackled to proclaim...
United Church of Christ.

From many lands and faiths we come
For Jesus prayed we be made one
No one abandoned, left behind...
United Church of Christ.

To Christ's body all are called
Diff'rently abled one and all
Each God's gift in human form...
United Church of Christ.

Not man nor woman, all set free
From condemnation, liberty
In Jesus Christ no longer bound...
United Church of Christ.

We welcome you into Christ's church;
We promise you we won't desert,
No matter who, no matter what...
United Church of Christ.
Thoughts and a Prayer

Eternal God, in whose providence we live, by whose wisdom we are guided, under whose judgment we stand, and by whose mercy we are forgiven, we praise you for the heritage that has brought us the church and the faith that are ours today. Release us from the grip of fears and anxieties which cripple our spirits. Remind us that, by your grace, life comes forth continually new. May we look back to give thanks and look forward to take courage knowing that, with you, all things are possible—and whatever happens serves only to deepen our roots in those things that cannot be shaken.

(ADAPTED FROM A PRAYER BY JOSEPH FERGUSON KING, MINISTER OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN OBERLIN—OBERLIN, OHIO, 1942-1962)
The Big Secret

“Christ in you, the hope of glory.” COLOSSIANS 1:27

God is with us! This assurance echoes throughout the Bible. It requires openness to God—something we learn and practice through the church. It urges us to seek God in our own conscience, in others—and in nature.

Moreover, “anyone who says, ‘Follow me,’ is obviously more interested in the future than the past—and we need a loyalty to the future. With Jesus it’s not where you’ve been that matters, but where you’re going; not whether you have fallen, but whether you will get up; not whom you’ve hurt in the past, but whom you will help in the future” (Ernest Campbell).

W.H. Auden, in his poem, “For the Time Being,” has the shepherds around the manger anticipate what it means to follow Christ:

Tonight for the first time the prison gates
Have opened.
Music and sudden light
Have interrupted our routine tonight,
And swept the filth of habit from our hearts.
O here and now our endless journey begins.

The big secret of our faith is that on this endless journey, alone as we often feel, and despite all that argues against it, we are not alone. We are blessed with the power of God, enabling us to give and accomplish “far more than we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

Let us pray…

Lord, you have said, I am the Way—not that we shall never be confused.
You have said, I am the Truth—not that we shall have all the answers.
And I am the Life—not that we shall never die.
Teach us to know you now—
in the maze of pathways before us, to know you as the Way;
in the mysteries we face, to know you as the Truth;
in the face of injustice, suffering, and death to know you as the Life.
Thank you for saying, I am, and for giving us yourself.

(adapted from a prayer by Elisabeth Elliot, The Beginning of Wisdom)
How Much?

An article in Forbes magazine speaks of tithing: “In the red states the face of tithing is often a pompadour on Channel 46 beseeching you to wire $1,000 to his 800 number. The money, he croons, will return to you tenfold, in divine time, perhaps as a shiny new Harley-Davidson. In the blue states the face of tithing is a Natural Resources Defense Council Hollywood-style shake-down.

…but wait a minute. Along comes a friend—educated and rational—who is glad to tell you his experience with tithing.” He says: “When you loosen your grip on possessions, you become more willing to take a chance. Entrepreneurial risk is less terrifying. Tithing requires discipline, but that discipline begins to show up unexpectedly in other areas of my life. When I began to tithe, I was able to rise earlier in the morning. I am more patient with people….

“Tithing puts you in touch with people’s needs. This is an excellent habit to acquire (if you want to succeed)…. When you tithe, you begin to see your role as a steward of resources. You don’t engage in wasteful spending.”


The Bible, in Malachi 6:10, says, “Bring the full tithe into my house.” A tithe is the giving back of 10% of what God has given us. It’s a form of proportionate giving. We may begin anywhere (on average in mainline Protestantism it’s about 1.5% of annual income), then increase our percentage, perhaps each year. For some, tithing is inconceivable; for others, it’s the least they can do; for all of us, we can pray about it.

Our tradition of faith gives us standards to follow. This becomes legalism when we forget that the real bottom line is God’s amazing grace, out of which these standards arise. Just as the Ten Commandments are preaced with the reminder of God’s deliverance from oppression (Exodus 20:1-2), so admonitions to tithe follow the promise of God’s blessing (for example, Malachi 6:10).

We don’t give to get blessed. We give because we are blessed. The standard of tithing and proportionate giving helps us live into the good life God intends for us.

What we can’t do now, we can pray about… confident that “God is able to give us more than we need, so that we will always have all we need for ourselves and more than enough for every good cause” (2 Corinthians 9:8).
Generosity
Six Best Practices

Remember

“God will meet your needs with generosity exceeding yours…” (Philippians 4:19)

Note the first two words: “God will…” Not “God might…” How has this already proven true for you? Don’t simply count your blessings. Remember times when you didn’t feel “blessed” at all—perhaps quite the contrary…and things worked out anyway. This doesn’t rule out hard times and real trouble. It is to say that what’s proven true before will prove true again: God’s grace is greater than any difficulty we face. That’s a promise!

Pray

“Ask, and it will be given you….” (Matthew 7:7)

With many decisions to make, often among equally important things, we need guidance. What we give, and how, is among those decisions. Before you give, ask for help. Pray about it.

Tithe

I can’t. That’s ridiculous. Why do you quote that part of the Bible and ignore the rest? Don’t tell me what to do.

Many are our reservations, or complaints, about “titheing.” Remember this is not the pastor’s idea—or the Conference minister’s, or national staff’s. This is God’s idea, expressed in the Bible, sometimes understood, as by St. Paul, in terms of “proportionate giving” (2 Corinthians 8:12), when we deliberately give according to our resources with tithing in mind.

What we can’t do now, or doubt we want to, we can move toward or at least include in our prayers—being open to God’s guidance.
Focus
Given the numerous appeals for worthwhile causes, and our desire to support those, too, focus on what is distinctive about the church.
The church is not only another worthy cause. It’s about a way of life that, both historically and right now, underlies and inspires concern and support for charity and philanthropy, and peace and justice in the world.
Where would your community be without the church? Where would society be without the church?
Remember that the church is more than your own congregation. We’re part of the United Church of Christ. Among the ways we support the church is by including in our gifts support for Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM)

Diversify
There is more than one way to support the church financially. Remember not just giving from income, but what can be given through wills and bequests, gift annuities, life insurance, property, securities, and charitable remainder trusts. The opportunity here is not just for the wealthy!
These planned gifts can be designated for any part of the work of the United Church of Christ, as can other special gifts which may be pledged or directly given.

Trust
"Trust everybody, but cut the cards." (Finley Peter Dunne, U.S. humorist, Mr. Dooley's Philosophy). Of course good giving needs the assurance of responsible use. Generosity may be open-handed and sometimes open-ended—but it cares about good results!
However, after we’ve done our best with God’s help, following practices such as those above, we do well to remember something Abraham Lincoln said: "I have had so many evidences of God’s direction, so many instances when I have been controlled by another power than my own, that I cannot fail to trust that this power comes from above."
Reverend William C. Green has served in the local, Conference, and national settings of the United Church of Christ.

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