



"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

May 13, 2018

Seventh Sunday of Easter

John 17:6-11, 17-23; Ephesians 1:15-23

Relational Wealth

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Daily devotions and all forms of prayer are like direct deposit of the Spirit. We overheard Jesus praying for his close friends and followers. A few decades later in this letter to the next generation of early Christians, we overhear another prayer of love, of vision, of purpose. Hear what the Spirit may say. {read Ephesians 1:15-23}

Recently I've used prayers for daily devotion from a beloved seminary professor, Sib Towner. A rich legacy of how he began class, compiled over decades. Here's one that stirred my heart this week, with a few added updates.

“O God, this world needed a few good women, and you gave us lots of them. You gave us strong, brave women like Judith and Deborah and Eleanor Roosevelt and Barbara Bush and Michelle Obama. You gave us daring women like Esther and Mary Magdalene and Hildegard of Bingen and Rosa Parks and voices of the MeToo movement. You gave us beautiful, passionate women like Susanna and the Shulamite and Juliet and Beyonce. You gave us wise, warm, nurturing women, to follow the ways of Dame Wisdom herself in the Bible, and many another mother and grandma, as well. We thank you, God, for women in all their colors and personalities and enthusiasms and excellences—for your great cloud of female witnesses. In the name of He who loved Mary and Martha and the other Mary, and whose life was enriched by theirs.”¹

Friends, I wonder what other good women we'd name. Strength, courage, beauty, passion, wisdom, lovingly deposited into our hearts. On this day, maybe mother figures come to mind. On my mom's birthday in March we children and grandchildren came to celebrate. No presents, except a flash drive we received from her and dad with old home movies compiled. Of course, we sampled some. My second birthday. Mom approaches me at the table with cake and two candles. Just about to set it down, when {poof!}. One blow. They're out. Pleased smile. Take two. Mom lights them again. This time it takes determination, my older sister comes to help, sixth or seventh try one goes out, then both ... beaming smile. I pick out the candles, lick the frosting. Then put them back in. Mom strikes another match. Again and again, persistent puckering, {poof!} unending delight. That four or five minute video never got to presents! I suppose for me lighting those candles were gifts enough. And for me, this week it epitomizes the many ways she's kindled caring love over the years.

This past Tuesday we talked about care concerns of our congregation. Somehow, we got onto babies crying in the middle of the night. Immediately all the women / mothers smiled with subconscious muscle memory of sway-bounce-bounce, sway-bounce-bounce. Kathleen has agreed to demonstrate! No, actually not. Maybe someone else among us?! We could audition for our next baptism! What a comforting and inspiring image of how God cradles us like a mother who will not forsake her crying child ... a father who runs to embrace the lost home again.

At Rotary last Monday, a presenter spoke about human trafficking. There's so much disturbing about the reality, yes, here in our community. One particular term stuck with me, swirling in my mind, stirring my heart the rest of this week. Relational poverty. Not a complicated idea, really. Yet, for me, it brings such clarity. Relational poverty—when people suffer an absence of love, attention, guidance, affirmation. Not as much sway-bounce-bounce. Not so many cuddles and

conversations and random complements and even loving correction, like candles lit again and again and again. The presenter showed a slide of clear physiological differences in brain development; and a video—one person's story of social consequences from growing up in such relational poverty. It's a prime determiner of how youth end up in the sex trade.

Wow. So simple. So powerful. In truth, such a need for all of us of any age. So real across generations of human history. Maybe we take it for granted. Maybe we feel poignantly aware of its lack in our life. Maybe we lament our own imperfections in offering the gift, making a deposit in someone else's heart. Friends, truth is, none of us make it where we are in life on our own. Even our huffing and puffing talents, our determination, our capacity to choose well, it's all return on the investment of so many mothers, teachers, friends, colleagues who've touched us and nurtured us. As much as bank accounts, investment portfolios, or dollars in our pockets, I wonder how we might measure and manage our relational wealth.

On the night before he died, Jesus tried one last direct deposit, for others more than himself. He prayed his friends and followers might be wealthy. They'd been learning, serving, journeying together for years. They'd shared the Last Supper where he commanded them to continue living faith in that love. Now John imagines a glimpse into Jesus' praying heart. It's really John's way to pass along loving relationship with Christ to others in his community. To incorporate them in the symbiosis of Holy Love and purpose. To invite them and us to recognize, to receive Sacred Grace and be touched with peace. To inspire us to be one with Christ on behalf of others who come to believe—to give their hearts and lives to loving words and deeds as Jesus did.

For John this relational wealth begins with something intimate, personal for each of us. And for John, Jesus models in prayer how God wants the whole community to

live. We're blessed by ties that bind. We trust God to work through our partnership beyond what seems possible in the moment and what proves impossible if we're alone, separated by broken relationships, alienated from the Holy. You see, John's people suffered relational poverty in their own way. Jewish and early Christian communities John knew split amid caustic acrimony. Hostility extended to rejection by Roman society. God's Spirit gave them courage in their broken and fearful world. It seems an immeasurable miracle of God's resurrection power in Christ. So many people from Jesus' first followers through clouds of witnesses across generations, have come to rejoice that nothing can separate them from God's love. Then they lit for others Christ candles of faith.

Friends, when with a praying heart I come to know others like you, sharing joys and struggles; when my prayer widens to our world with all its beauty and tragedy, this relational wealth is my truest cause for hope. Hilary Rantisi, is a Palestinian Christian peacemaker I worked with years ago. People earnestly wanted to make a real difference for peace in Israel-Palestine. Her response has swirled in my mind and stirred my heart ever since. She said, "if you really want to make peace in the Holy Land, start with peace in your back yard." World peace begins with personal peace. The reign of God's grace and love in Christ begins with each of our minds and hearts and intimate relations.

I've come to believe Hilary Rantisi for a few reasons. You see, so much external conflict with others arises from and reflects and projects internal discord. Poverty of love and peace in our families, our communities, our world is an accrued deficit of relational poverty in our own personal accounts. I still believe Hilary's response, because the pattern for solving the worst geo-political problems in Korea, Iran, Africa, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, the paradigm for building relational wealth and abundant life in the most acrimonious places is much the same as investing relational wealth with those closest to us. I believe Hilary, you see, because when

our relational riches abound, and we invest generously, we live direct deposit prayer for others, wealth for all increases exponentially.

In another bit of news this week, a law or regulation that says investors must act in the best interest of clients is being rescinded. I confess to feeling a bit baffled. I mean, first, it seems sad we need such a statement. If I'm supposed to serve you in your financial wealth, isn't acting for your benefit kind of the basic definition of what I'm called to do?! Still, if we've reached the point of needing to legislate that intent or direct that action, why rescind it? Now, I'm no financial advisor. Maybe there are intricacies of investing I don't get. Enlightenment from any other experienced experts is most welcome!

For now, note how that compares with the vision of relational wealth and investment in our Bible texts this week. Jesus prays, not to capitalize personal gain at others' expense. Rather only, as ever he has lived, he prays to increase relational wealth for all, even at the great cost he soon pays. In the Ephesians prayer, it's like that seed contribution from Christ begins the best performing mutual fund of all time, by far. It's Warren Buffett or whomever times infinity. It's relational wealth we're part of, we benefit from, we contribute to in our living faith.

Here's the holy mutual fund prospectus, the investing strategy and guidelines according to Ephesians. I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, your love for all the saints, and for this reason I give thanks! I pray that God may direct deposit in you the spirit of motherly Wisdom herself. As we come to know the Holy One, grow in relational wealth, may our hearts be enlightened with Easter radiance—with trust that we'll be raised to real new life, into all eternity, starting from today. And so, we share: hope God calls us to spread, riches of God's glorious inheritance, and great power of God's love working among us far beyond our ability to measure and manage.

Jesus hopes and prays that we may be one in love and purpose. It's more than superficial nice, though simple compassion and kindness can be good contributions to seed our investments. It's believing the truth across generations of Arabian cultures, and African and Asian and American at our best. The truth that your best interest is my best interest. In your benefit, I benefit, and we all benefit. Each "one" of us is most complete, fulfilled, fully alive when we are all "one"—unified in sway-bounce-bounce security, and beaming smiles kindled with joy and peace. Ephesians prays that the power of Holy the raised Jesus, above all others, may be real and full in our life together. For every youth raised in relational poverty. For every one of us of any age, across all generations in human history, including all creation. It's not that complicated really. But consequences and our calling are clear.

Friends, see that between individual hopes and our mutual power lie resources to live faith—relational riches we inherit and reinvest. The divine inheritance of grace and peace and love and life gets passed on to us among all the saints. It flows from God to us. It flows through us to others. In our daily devotion to one another we make a direct deposit. We accompany others to their scans, tests and treatments or call to ask how it went. We pay a welcome visit to a friend who just moved into a new home. We tutor and pack groceries and serve meals and sing on a Sunday. We comfort a friend who's pet died recently, and keep trying to make peace with estranged family and friends and strangers on the street, ones we name enemies in faraway lands. We go to work every day, we invest in society and this congregation each in our way. And in a few moments, we ordain deacons and elders to lead this caring effort among us.

Dear friends, on this Mothering Day, I pray we give thanks for riches we've received. And in our so-called Mother Church I pray we also remember others who suffer effects of relational poverty. As we become ever more faithfully the body of

the Risen Christ in service, I pray we may receive, trust in, and pour into others the fullness of Jesus who fills all in all. And so, one more prayer:

Before you, O God, all generations rise and pass away, seeking your pleasure and purpose. They leave legacies of strength and health, spiritual insights from hymns and writings and from our own mothers' knees; legacies of art and music and literature and memory and tradition. We are the heirs of all this, O God. Give us the sense, we pray, to preserve it with tenderness. Give us the wit, we pray, to pass it on to those who are coming after us, invested with our own best efforts. Amen.ⁱⁱ

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ W. Sibley Towner, *Prayers that Sing and Stir the Heart* (Richmond, VA: Union Presbyterian Seminary, 2018), 62.

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