

“Be Fruitful – Be Generous!”

I heard a radio program almost two months ago, which gave evidence of the importance and validity of the type of life Jesus taught and demonstrated, especially in today’s Reading. Krys Boyd, the host of the KERA Radio program titled, THINK, began a September 18th story, saying: **“What do we end up with, if we give a lot away?”**

After pointing out that day was the North Texas Giving Day, she continued, “... it seems a perfect time to dig into the research that links acts of philanthropy with better health, stronger relationships, and happier lives. The remarkable thing is / those benefits are actually associated with the people who give their time, money, and energy to good causes.”

Krys Boyd then introduced Hilary Davidson, co-author of the new book, **The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose**. In response to Boyd’s question about how this book came to fruition, Davidson said: we “started studying altruism and generosity amongst givers and the relationships that they have with those, who receive and noticed that there is – there’s quite a strong link between well-being and generous behavior. So being willing to give your time, money, resources – giving some of that away for those who may need it – we noticed some very strong empirically established links.”

After Boyd asked how that happens, Davidson responded, “... but what really counts and what’s really formative for people in terms of producing these better relationships and mental wellness outcomes **it’s the practice of generosity** – so consistently practicing generous behaviors – having a posture towards others – in thinking of things in win-win scenarios, rather than win/lose.” I hope everyone can see the connection between what Davidson and her book described as “the practice of generosity” and what Jesus meant when he said in John 10, **“I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness.”**

Continuing to explain, Davidson said, “... so it really is about thinking through the resources that we – we all – we each have individually and then how can we manage those resources and put them to use for others’ well-being.” What Davidson said and wrote goes very well with our Consecrating Stewards Theme, **“Blessed TO BE A BLESSING. ‘... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ (Gen. 12:3b).”**

Davidson further revealed, “... **generosity is a lot like love, it’s something that can’t be faked – it can’t be counterfeited.**” In vs. 11-12 of today’s Scripture, we see again how Jesus addressed this generous self-giving loving way of life, when he said, **“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you.”**

Davidson continued, “In order to experience the sorts of positive impacts that we noticed in our interviews, it became very apparent that people had to **genuinely desire the well-being of others, so / not desiring their own well-being**”. [Now that sounds very much like the self-giving and sacrificial agape love Jesus taught and lived.] Davidson continues **“... but truly desiring the well-being of others is what – what leads to their own well-being.”**

Like Davidson’s book, **The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose**, in today’s Reading, Jesus also raised up the importance of his followers bearing much fruit – being very generous. He indicated a crucial aspect of this fruitfulness is to be loving toward one another. Jesus defined this love and the nature of the life he calls us to live as being self-giving and sacrificial.

Jesus didn’t just teach about some utopian life, he lived this New Life and he even sought to emphasize it with his remaining eleven disciples, during the last evening of his earthly life. He knew he was about to be betrayed, tortured, and crucified. Yet, he spent a significant amount of that time explaining the life he calls us to live – in essence, he told them **how they were being BLESSED, and how, they were TO BE A BLESSING to everyone else.**

Jesus used the image or metaphor of the vine to communicate this teaching. First, he described the roles for the Divine Parent, himself – the Son of God, and ourselves as parts of his body, when Jesus said in vs. 1, **“I am the real vine, and my Father is the Gardener.”** Then, Jesus raised the issue of being fruitful when, referring to God, he said in vs. 2, **“He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and He prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit.”**

Jesus clarified this call and the importance of his relationship with us as he said in vs. 5, **“I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.”** He lifted up the value of being fruitful, when he stated in vs. 8, **“My Father’s Glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples.”** Belonging to Jesus and producing **“much fruit”** are bound to one another!

Then, explaining the connection between the fruit we are to bear or produce and our relationship with him and God, Jesus said in vs. 10, *“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s Commands and remain in His Love.”* Jesus tied together the fruitfulness of our lives with our ultimate happiness and obeying his commands about loving one another, as again, he stated in vs. 11-12, *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you.”* In order to emphasize the importance of producing this fruit – following this commandment, Jesus restated in verse 17, *“This, then, is what I command you: love one another.”*

Jesus further delineated the self-giving nature of this love in vs. 13, *“The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them.”* Jesus’ dying for us is a powerful and the greatest example of this love!

The call to be fruitful by living out this self-giving love was clearly given, as Jesus said in vs. 16a, *“You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures.”*

Our Consecrating Stewards Program reminds us we are called to *“bear much fruit”* and to follow the command to live out self-giving love toward one another, for God’s purposes in the community and the world. **This “bearing much fruit” is being both Blessed and being A BLESSING through self-giving love.** As we use our time, energy, talents, financial wealth, and other resources through our work as a community of faith, which concretely expresses God’s Self-Giving Love toward others, we are both **Blessed and A BLESSING** for other people! Even Hilary Davidson and her new social science book testify to that truth!

Since our everyday lives are bound up with money, an important aspect of being fruitful is returning a significant percentage of our financial resources back to our Divine Parent for God’s purposes. **Doing so, enables us to deepen our remaining in Jesus’ love, in the Vine – Jesus, and in God’s Love!**

Our Annual Consecrating Stewards Program is designed to aid us in growing in our Faith Relationship with God, as well as, in our living out the New Life in Jesus Christ – giving glory to our Divine Parent by *“bearing much fruit”* – showing we are **Blessed** – growing in how we use much of our resources, including money, for God’s Purposes – being **A BLESSING to other people and nations.** Through the Faith – Promise Process, which our Guest Steward, Rev. Anna Humble, the North Texas Association Minister, will lead us next Sunday, we seek to foster this authentic expression of love – as Hilary Davidson suggested. We do that by making Faith – Promise Commitments of which the specific amounts and the specific identity of the individuals or households, which are promising to give those amounts in 2015 are known only to them and to our Divine Parent. Further, our program takes place in the spirit of Worship, during the three Sundays leading up to the Consecration and Thanksgiving Sunday, in addition to that important Sunday. This process and program focuses on the need for each of us to grow and deepen our Faith Relationships with God by having a greater commitment to being more fruitful in our support of our Divine Parent’s Purposes through Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ. We do that instead of emphasizing the church’s need for money. We make sure we are not begging one another to support the church’s Budget through this program. Indeed, the Board of Trustees will not even develop a proposed Budget, until all Faith – Promise Commitments are turned in.

God’s expression of Self-Giving Love for us in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, brought forth an unequivocal demonstration / of producing the fruit, which endures, by the early disciples and believers. Out of their relationship with Jesus, his fruitful disciples received his enabling promise. He said in vs. 7, *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it.”* Later he said in vs. 16b, *“And so the Father will give you whatever you ask of Him in my name.”* Jesus was not saying Christians have some magical power for the fulfilling of their desires.

In the context of remaining in the vine of Jesus Christ by being fruitful in self-giving love, the promise to the followers of Jesus Christ is through prayer and the Holy Spirit, we receive of our faithful and our the enabling fruitful lives. Let us remain in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and live that way by being **Blessed TO BE A BLESSING – being fruitful – generous!** Amen.