

## To Give and Receive

Message for August 2, 2009

Are there any Seinfeld fans in the house? I loved Seinfeld – such irreverence, such whining, scheming and talk about nothing. From the first episode, I was hooked, and I've seen all the episodes so many times since then, I know many of the lines by heart, as well as some of the catch-phrases that stick in my head – Don and I toss one out every so often when it fits the situation (because he, too is a Seinfeld fan).

One phrase is “close talker.” A close-talker gets too close to the person they're in conversation with – like “in your face.” If you've ever experienced someone who was just a little too much in your space, you know what this feels like.

Another phrase that I like is “No soup for you!” This came from someone known as the Soup Nazi – he made legendary soup which he sold in his cafe, and if he didn't like you or something you did in line waiting for the soup, he'd say, “No soup for you!” It was the ultimate rejection.

Then there was the story about the girl Jerry dated with the “man-hands” – poor thing – her hands were out of proportion with the rest of her, and it grossed Jerry out. She was gorgeous in every other way, but he couldn't get past this one flaw.

I bet most of you have heard, “Yada, yada,” a nonsense phrase that can be inserted almost anywhere. “I went to the store, the dry cleaners, yada, yada.” It's a great filler in conversation, if you feel you need to add just one more thing.

The term, “double-dipper” came from a show where George, Jerry's friend, dipped a chip in a bowl of onion dip – bit into it – and then dipped the same chip in the bowl a second time. The person who caught him at this called him a “double-dipper.” This is the ultimate social faux pas.

But the most useful and applicable phrase that came from Seinfeld involves the concept of “regifting.” In an episode about a birthday party and the obligatory present-purchasing, Elaine calls Dr. Whatley a “regifter” after she finds he's given Jerry a label-maker that she gave Dr. Whatley a while ago. This concept has been enfolded in our culture, and has found a niche in modern living – apparently, regifting is OK if you rewrap the gift, if you don't use it before you regift it and if you don't give it back to the original gift-giver. Any gifters out there?

Before you think I've completely lost it, let me tell you why I think of regifting when I hear parts of this passage from Ephesians...

*But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." ... The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*

I see it this way: God gave us Jesus – the ultimate gift of love and forgiveness. And Jesus rewrapped and regifted himself, so that servants of God (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) could be filled with the Spirit to grow in faith and carry on the good work started by Jesus himself.

Does this work for you? I hope so, because that's what this message for today is all about.

Now, just as there are different levels of regifting of Jesus through the Spirit, it seems to me that there are also different levels of receiving and accepting these gifts and putting them to good use. The trick is to find the one that fits you best, accept it, and get to work.

If we look at each of these gifts, it's pretty clear to me that we can't all be apostles and prophets – I think those folk are the pioneers of faith among us who got a little bit more of some key traits when God passed out the goodies. It seems to me, to be an apostle or a prophet requires serious sacrifice – in the Old Testament, prophets were described as odd, eccentric and maybe even scary characters. They claimed to be chosen by God to bring messages to the people. Often they wore strange clothing and said things no one really understood – they talked to themselves, talked to anyone about the Kingdom of God and appeared to others to mad or crazy. I'm not sure people truly heard the wisdom of the prophets until long after they were dead and their prophecies (that came true) were recorded by scribes later on. I'm not sure I have a modern-day example of a prophet whose message I trust, so to be gifted with those abilities must be a very rare occurrence. (We know there are people out here who claim to be prophets of other types of beliefs, but I'd like to focus on our Christian messengers instead).

Then there were the apostles or disciples described in the New Testament. They received the gift of an invitation from Jesus himself, and they gave it all up to follow him – what they may have lacked in understanding about what was happening to them and to Jesus at the time, they made up for in loyalty and dedication to the cause. Few possessions, abandoned relationships, living hand-to-mouth each day – I don't know many of us who would be willing to take on this gift of living as an apostle in the name of God. I think Mother Teresa could have been one of the Twelve; she certainly qualifies as one who gave it all up for her faith.

So what about the rest of us? At what level can we be the receivers of the regifted Jesus? Well, those last three roles could work for us, I think. Believe it or not, you, too could be an evangelist, a pastor or a teacher for God!

An evangelist is a “zealous advocate of something.” When you advocate for something or someone, you speak from the heart on behalf of it – persuasion and fearless coaxing come naturally from deep within – you can’t exactly control your enthusiasm about what you feel, and it bubbles out of you. Finding the words you need to convince someone to go along with your feeling come naturally, and you have no trouble speaking to others about it, it means so much to you. Everyone can tell you live and breathe it - it’s your passion, you’ve dedicated your life to it and you want others to share it. Modern-day evangelists? Well, in the public sector, Billy Graham comes to mind for sure. But what about in real-life? Ladies and Gentlemen, meet Al Beeson, Evangelist for Community Cupboard. Meet Betty Bergthold, Evangelist for Mission and Justice. Meet Anne Solt, Evangelist for Music Education in Schools. My guess is that all of us have something we are passionate about that we can share – and if it relates to bringing good to the world, as far as I’m concerned, that’s speaking for God and making good use of the regifted Jesus. We are all evangelists.

The word pastor comes from the Latin word meaning, “shepherd.” We already know that while there are formal ways of becoming a pastor, it’s also acceptable in the eyes of our church that someone who is not ordained can serve as pastor. I have been so blessed to be the recipient of this role from God! But, it’s not just my role – it’s also a role others can fill. As you know, a good shepherd keeps an eye on all the sheep – gathers them when they wander off – protects them from harm – lives with them, and basically sees to their needs. Did you know that we have shepherds right here in our church? Many of you go out of your way to pick up members and bring them to church – off the top of my head, I know the Solts, the Jarvies, the Dunnells, the Beesons, Mardell Hull and more of you – quietly go about your business, serving as shepherd. I also know many of you look after others, and see to their needs – you visit homebound folks and take food or just spend some time. You deliver flowers and treats – you call during the week to check on one another - you take people to doctor appointments. Jesus regifted himself to you so you could be shepherds, and many of you in this church have accepted that gift. In the best meaning of the word, you are shepherds.

To teach, then, is to share information or model how to do something so others might learn it. Teachers know stuff – and if they don’t know it, good teachers know where to find it. Good teachers know students need experiences in order to learn; good teachers recognize when a student needs a little more help. Good Teachers ask for more from their students – good teachers never stop learning. There are obvious and meaningful ways teaching is done around here – we have classes and groups like the “Living the Questions” clan who come together to listen and help each other learn.

But I see excellent teaching in other, more subtle examples – we are all learning deeper skills in forgiveness, in acceptance, in tolerance and cooperation because those of us who are masters of these gifts are teaching the rest of us by openly modeling them for us. As we spend more time together and continue to lift one another up on this journey of rebuilding our church – I find that we all wear the hat of the teacher at some time. Jesus regifted himself so that we might be teachers, and we honor that gift by helping others learn God’s way. We are teachers.

Now we weren’t given all these gifts just so we could sit back, celebrate ourselves and enjoy them within our little church and our circle of friends and family. They come with a serious stipulation that we *“equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”*

Paul charges us with the task of living the mature faith-life to which we’ve been called – to help build the one body of Christ *“with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*

Our job is to take what we’ve received from the regifted Jesus and do a little regifting of our own. We are to do as Jesus did – go outside of our comfort zone and get into the world with the Good News of God’s love and forgiveness. We need to evangelize, to pastor, to teach others about what we believe is the absolute Truth – that God loves us all, that through Jesus we are forgiven our sin, and that through the Holy Spirit, we can be one in God.

One in God – this sounds good to me. It’s why I’m at this church, with you at this time – I have always believed we should be One in God. This belief brought me to the United Church of Christ five years ago, and it keeps me here – Jesus loved everyone because God loves everyone. That message rings loud and clear in my heart, and I know it does in yours, too.

So, today I’ll ask that you who evangelize and pastor and teach prepare to join me as we journey into the next phase of our life together at First Congregational Church of Prescott. Our Saturday worship is coming together, and we’re beginning to consider how we can reach out into our community to draw people to us – there’s a world of spiritual need out there in this little town, and we are the one place who can provide so much hope for so many. You’ll be invited to participate as you can, and my belief is that you’ll celebrate the new life that finds its way to us...we’ve come through the rough time, and we’re a healthy congregation now. It’s time to open the doors...

God gave us Jesus – Jesus gave us new life. How will you regift the love of God and Jesus? Amen.