

THE LORD LOVES A CHEERFUL RECEIVER

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Several years ago, one of those small but significant exchanges occurred in my life. I had agreed to play the piano for a service conducted by the Pastoral Care Team, although I am extremely self-conscious about my keyboard abilities. BUUF member Andy Pendley chose to compliment me, opining that I have a nice touch. Andy is a professional musician. I replied, “Oh, I missed a lot of notes, and got really screwed up in the middle, in a place I usually know really well.” Andy stepped back, eyed me, and admonished: “Elizabeth, just say thank you.” So I swallowed the worst of my discomfort, took a deep breath, looked straight at his obviously-sincere face, and did so. My protestations almost kept me from accepting something of value from someone I hold dear. My reluctance almost caused me to treat my good friend Andy dismissively.

That conversation, a few years ago, sowed the seed for this sermon.

There was another time awhile ago, when I wanted to honor and thank a group of people who had done something important for me. It had been a certain number of years since they had put themselves forward on my account, and the intervening years had gone well. I was grateful to them and wished to express that gratitude, so I invited them to dinner at my house. I am undomestically inclined, and cooking a meal for a dozen or so people is not something I choose to do often—this seemed an appropriate time for me to offer the gift of my culinary skills.

I sent out invitations, and began receiving RSVPs. Everyone asked, “What can I bring?” I replied, “Nothing. This is from me to you, because I appreciate so much all you’ve done for me.” The usual answer to that reply was, “How nice—see you on Saturday.” One person was different, though. She made her RSVP in person, when we both happened to be in the same place, asking me, of course, what she could bring. I gave her my answer, and she said, “No, I want to bring something.” I said, once again, “No, no, I’d just like you to come and enjoy yourself.” At that point, she literally jumped up and down, laughing but also shouting, “I-WANT-TO-BRING-SOMETHING!!!” I said, “OK, OK, OK, bring a dessert!!!”

This person, whom I will call Ruth, told another of the guests later, “I never go anyplace where I don’t contribute.” That is not, by and large, a bad position to take. But in this case, her insistence on “contributing” diminished the value of what I was offering out of gratitude and affection. She already *had* contributed, and that was the point.

What makes us so unwilling to receive? Ruth and I are not unusual cases. I have noted, time and again—in myself and in other people—that giving is easier than receiving. Check in with yourself and see if your experience does not match mine. When you get a compliment, do you immediately qualify it or deny its truth? (I am acquainted with one very intelligent person who will reply to a compliment on their [sic] achievement, “Yeah, sure.”) Are you more comfortable offering a gift than getting one? When you are on the receiving end—especially if the gift is something important from the giver—are you a little uneasy, in the way you are not if you are doing the giving?

All of us who answer “yes” to these questions are creating stumbling blocks to deep, intimate relationships. Writer Mary Caroline Richards speaks of love as a “yielding at the center.” (Sewell, 58) When we cannot receive graciously and comfortably, we are resisting such yielding. We are acting in ways guaranteed to keep those who care about us at a certain distance, no closer. We are putting up barriers to genuine community, to love itself. Love is a great religious commandment—to love our neighbor as ourselves—and we are turning away from that fundamental admonition.

Why do we do this?

Perhaps we actually learned the old platitudes about the Lord loving a cheerful giver, or that it’s more blessed to give than to receive? I doubt it. Howard Johnson, a dearly-loved and much-missed member of our congregation liked to recall an occasion of his childhood. He was told that giving was more blessed than receiving, and he replied, “You do the givin’ and I’ll do the gettin’.” He hadn’t learned the lesson, and it is doubtful if any of us learned ungracious receiving because of old Sunday-School-type phrases. (And our children’s marketplace-incited consumerist demands do not count as gracious receiving.)

A more compelling reason may be that we have had bad experiences at the hands of sanctimonious or martyred or disapproving givers. I am acquainted with a person who gives gifts on birthday and holiday occasions, then stalks around the receivers’ houses when she visits, looking for the things she sent, indicating quiet hurt when she doesn’t find every one of them. We all know at least the stereotype of the religious giver, self-righteously dispensing “charity”; or the bureaucrat, behaving as though the needy are as lacking in character as they are in money for the power bill.

It is no wonder we shy away from receiving—if we equate receiving with being treated as though we are inferior somehow to the giver, or with being obligated to the giver for eternity. The loving, flowing exchange of giving and receiving is as mocked by a sanctimonious giver as it is by a reluctant receiver.

But Andy was not condescending to me with his compliment. Nor was I bestowing a spurious boon upon my guests, out of some kind of *noblesse oblige*. Most givers of gifts are offering simply because they wish to do so, hoping to express love or gratitude or appreciation. So why do we resist even these generous folks?

The question is a hard one—a good deal more perplexing than I anticipated when I proposed this topic for a Sunday service. The topic is complex enough to merit followup conversations of some length and seriousness; complex enough that this morning’s conclusions are of necessity tentative.

The deepest reasons for resisting gifts seem to flow around issues of self-worth, intimacy and control—issues about which we learned very early. Each of us has in our hearts and minds, deeply engraved “scenarios” about what we are like and can do, usually a bleaker picture than is true (“I play the piano badly”); images about how safe or dangerous it is to be really close to others, usually that it isn’t very safe; firmly-held ideas about how much control we have and ought to have (“I can maintain control if I always contribute...”). Some deep part of us is “committed” to maintaining our lives and selves as though what we learned as children is still true—using the word “committed” very broadly, not implying conscious intention. Mary Caroline Richards calls it our “treasured sorrow and self-mistrust, all the precious loathing and suspicion...” (Sewell, 58)

I don't esteem my piano playing highly, so I discount a positive comment—even from a man who is very experienced in the area of music. (And he wasn't the first musician to comment positively on my tone.) Another person, highly intelligent, has learned well a self-assessment of limited ability, so fiercely denies anyone who asserts otherwise. ("Yeah, sure.") We clutch these self-evaluations to our heart's bosom. What if we accept our friends' gifts, and it turns out that their assessment of us is wrong—and they see our weaknesses? Worse yet, what if we accept our friends' gifts and it turns out that they are right? A part of us is comfortable with the old images—that old treasured self-mistrust—and does not want to grow into this strangely competent and worthwhile being, the "us" to whom the generous, complimentary offering is being made. If we accept the others' gifts, accept that they care about us and value us, how will that change us and our relationship with the world?

For it will change us. It will propel us toward greater intimacy. Toward love, that religious imperative.

Lowering our customary defenses and controls, risking that our weaknesses will show, committing to being different from what we have learned about ourselves—is hard. It requires that we believe in the affection and regard of friends and loved ones—that we cease pushing away their assessments and their gifts, that we even allow ourselves to feel in debt to them, sometimes. It requires that we think highly enough of ourselves to offer and receive love freely, to understand that giving and receiving are both part of truly loving.

Difficult as it is, this kind of trust—vulnerability, giving up of control—leads to deeper, more authentic relationships. Deeply connected relationships take unexpected turns, require much of us. The habit of yielding at the center is uncomfortable to practice. It is little wonder we resist, for we are always more exposed when we make the commitment to receive graciously, to move closer to others. But that is the path of love.

What would happen if we all resolved to move toward practicing this openness? What if I always say, "Thank you," *proudly*, to the Andys of the world, and allow myself to reflect upon the possibility that they may be right? (I'd probably have to start practicing more, to justify their opinion....) What if a party is given for Ruth, and she receives gifts of food and drink and other things, and says to herself, "I can be a loving friend to these people and believe in their love and accept their gifts—even though I am merely receiving this time"? (She'd probably have to give up being in charge, in this area....) What if my smart friend, the next time there is a compliment, not only says, "Thank you," but goes further to ask, "In what ways do you think I'm doing this job so well?" And listens to the answer, and smiles, and appreciates the speaker's point of view. (Maybe he would have to start making decisions differently, or taking a different kind of responsibility for them...?)

We would all have to open our hearts.

Poet Marge Piercy writes:

Learning to love differently is hard,
love with the hands wide open, love
with the doors banging on their hinges,
the cupboard unlocked, the wind
roaring and whimpering in the rooms

rustling the sheets and snapping the blinds
that thwack like rubber bands
in an open palm.

It hurts to love wide open
stretching the muscles that feel
as if they are made of wet plaster,
then of blunt knives, then
of sharp knives.

It hurts to thwart the reflexes
of grab, of clutch; to love and let
go again and again....
 to love consciously,
conscientiously, concretely, constructively. (Sewell, 43)

Loving consciously, conscientiously, concretely and constructively is directly related to generous receiving. Loving with hands wide open is directly related to accepting with heart wide open.

Not that we must always be receiving, never giving. Of course not. Our hands are wide open in both bestowing and taking in. What is important is that, for a relational system to work, all people must be joyful givers and joyful receivers. All of us must give openly, without strings attached, showing that we care for others, and many of us do this pretty well. We also must learn to do what we don't do so well. We need to learn to be on the receiving end with grace and gratitude, knowing that for that particular time, we are not in charge of the situation, and we may well be changed by accepting.

Can we do it? Do we dare take the time for introspection, for the close look that reveals how much clutching we do, grabbing to ourselves the old familiar loathing and suspicion. Can we look at how we push the genuine compliment away with a smart remark, the way we rebuff affection and regard by insisting that we never let our "gift ledger" show that we owe? Can we see how we devalue and hurt those whom we refuse?

Beyond the introspection, that difficult and necessary—but not sufficient—first step, do we have the courage and the generosity to become cheerful receivers, to open our hearts in gratitude for all that is received? Can we allow those who love us to do so, to give to us—beautiful and competent us—in simple joy and satisfaction?

In short, by becoming ever more gracious in our receiving, can we come to do that of which Marge Piercy sings:

to love and let
go again and again....
 to love consciously,
conscientiously, concretely, constructively.
May it be so.

Sources consulted

Sewell, Marilyn, ed. *Cries of the Spirit: a Celebration of Women's Spirituality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

