

Smithfield UCC Church
November 8, 2009

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-13, 17-19
II Corinthians 9:6-15

Holy Potlatch

I graduated from college as an English major. And back in what I commonly refer to as my “first life,” I taught high school English – first at a mission school in Egypt, and later in suburban Pittsburgh. Although stored now primarily in memory – and a few boxes – my friends and family can testify that the influence of this chapter of my life lives on.

In ways that I cannot explain, my eye inevitably focuses on the one misspelled word or misplaced apostrophe on a page of print. And I typically respond with a shudder to split infinitives and sentences in which a pronoun and the subject to which it refers do not agree. Even today, I feel that my purse is not fully outfitted unless it contains a red pen. I’m aware that these behaviors can make me a bit of a nuisance in some circles – but it’s my “inheritance,” as an English major.

There are also more positive continuing effects of my course of study. One of those is that I am intrigued by words that are new to me. One of my more recent discoveries is part of the title of today’s message . . .and I’m not referring to *holy*.

As part of my preparation for leading a workshop, I was reviewing *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer’s thoughtful little book on vocation – and this sentence caught my attention:

Late spring is potlatch time in the natural world, a great giveaway of blooming beyond all necessity and reason – done, it would appear, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it. (p. 104)

Then just a couple of days later, I encountered the word *potlatch* again in Wayne Muller's wonderful book on *Sabbath*. After exploring the hold that material possessions have on many people, Muller notes that

Many native cultures measure wealth not by what one possesses, but by what one feels able to give away. They celebrate *potlatch*, or the great giveaway, when gifts are freely given to others in the community. [He further explains that] these are not leftovers or castoffs, as we give to the Salvation Army Thrift Store; nor are they hastily purchased trinkets. Rather they give away the best of what they own, their finest. (p. 208)

Now I had a better sense of the meaning of the word – but I still wasn't satisfied. And as I continued to explore, I realized that what we American Christians typically do on some Sunday in the fall of the year is to celebrate a kind of *holy potlatch!*

Before European explorers and traders reached the Pacific northwest, there existed along the coast, from Oregon to southern Alaska, one of the richest and most dynamic cultures in North America – made possible, in large part, by the fact that food was plentiful and easily obtained from the sea and coastal rivers, and the heavily forested countryside. The numerous tribes that lived along the coast were intensely competitive in their quest for social standing, granting prestige to those whose possessions included more than enough baskets and blankets, carved boxes and canoes, decorated hides and pieces of hammered copper. And one achieved even *higher* standing by giving such things away. Enter -- the *potlatch!*

The *potlatch* was a feast given, ordinarily to celebrate a wedding or the birth or naming of an heir, at which the host demonstrated his greatness by

giving away his possessions – often in the form of food or blankets. The more he distributed to his guests, the greater his prestige – and that of his clan. Early on, before the arrival of whites and the establishment of stores and trading posts, these celebrations were rather modest.

Over time, however, the competition for social standing became so strong that guests who had received gifts felt obliged to give *potlatches* of their own at which they tried to outdo their former host by giving gifts of even greater value, in an attempt to establish their own superiority. As the cycle continued, officials in British Columbia attempted to ban these celebrations, concerned that they were impoverishing the Native American tribes who observed this custom.

Such behavior may seem bizarre to us. And yet we have come together today to celebrate what you are committing to give away – out of your abundance – in the year ahead. The actions are similar – but there is a crucial difference in motivation. We give *not* to impress one another, but to say our joyful “*thank you*” to the God who served as host at the world’s first *potlatch*. We call it Creation.

The opening verses of Psalm 24 make it unmistakably clear that the whole created order belongs to God. Many of you could say the words along with me, I’m sure: The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,

the world and those who dwell therein;

for he has founded it upon the seas,

and established it upon the rivers. (RSV 24:1-2)

And in the Genesis story of creation, we see that as soon as God creates humans, they are put into the Garden of Eden to manage the abundance of

Creation, as God's "trustees." As their descendants, it is now our privilege to experience the abundance of the created order – even as it is our continuing responsibility to be stewards of it. As Christians, we might well ask the question the Psalmist poses in the selection we read this morning:

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” (116:12)

In days like ours, when the stock market is unpredictable and when many businesses have reduced their work force, we may question whether **bounty** or **abundance** really describes life as we know it, in the early part of the 21st century. Then we remind ourselves that Jesus really didn't have money or possessions or job security in mind when he proclaimed:

“I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly” – have it to the full! (John 10:10)

He's talking about the quality of life we live when Christ is our companion:

- the splendor of its adventure,
- the vigor of its spiritual health,
- the exciting possibilities for growth and service it puts within our reach.

This is the *bounty* – the *life abundant* – for which we seek to offer thanks.

It was R. N. Rodenmayer who observed that there are three kinds of giving: grudge giving, duty giving, and thanksgiving. Grudge giving says, “*I have to.*” Duty giving says, “*I ought to.*” Thanks-giving says “*I want to.*” The first comes from constraint, the second from a sense of obligation, the third from a full heart. Thanksgiving is an open gate into the love of God.

On this Consecration Sunday we remember that giving at its best is always an act of gratitude. It is the grateful response of people who are able

to share because of the life and abundance they have received from God and others. In recent weeks, you have been invited to take a “step up” in the percentage of your income you will offer, in the year ahead, as a sign of your increased commitment to the work of Christ, through this congregation. Having received the gift of life through Christ, we give to enrich, sustain, and enlarge the life that is entrusted to each of us as stewards.

It is this sort of life that Paul places before the Corinthian Christians as he encourages them to contribute to an offering for the church in Jerusalem, which had fallen on hard times. Although he reminds them that God gives to individuals for the sake of the community, he doesn't suggest that participating in the collection is their *duty*, such as paying taxes would be. Nor are they – or we – to give in order to make ourselves feel good about giving, for that is essentially selfish. He challenges them to give as God gives – out of love.

It was out of love that God gave us the gift of creation. It was out of love that God gave us the gift of God's Son. And it is out of love that God gives us to one another in communities of faith. Just as a rock thrown into a pond inevitably makes a splash – and ripples – so we, in response to God's love, respond with signs of gratitude, of thanksgiving. We cannot, as Christians, do otherwise. And of course, the bigger the rock, the bigger the splash – and the more far-reaching the ripples. So -- the greater our experience of the love, the greater – naturally -- is our thanks!

And how do we express our thanks? The guidance Paul gives to those early Christians in Corinth can be a useful reminder for us, too, as we come to our “*holy potlatch*” today. Paul knows that the future of what will

ultimately become a world-wide movement depends on their attitude toward giving – their response to his appeal.

First, he assures them that no one ever loses by being generous, for the bounty of the harvest is proportionate to the seed sown. Second, Paul indicates that good intentions aren't enough. We are to give as we have decided in our hearts and minds to give. Third, we are not to give reluctantly or grudgingly, as if responding to God's grace were some kind of duty. Instead we are to give joyfully – as those who recognize how richly they have been blessed. For God loves a cheerful giver! In fact, Paul assures us that, if people are willing to give, God will make it possible for them to do so.

Today, in this great give-away, you are investing not only in the future of the Smithfield Street Church, but in the advancement of God's rule here on earth. By your giving you do wonderful things for others – relieving their need, restoring their faith in people, and turning their hearts toward God in gratitude. And you help yourselves by demonstrating to the world that one who professes faith in Christ does so by actions as well as words. But most important, you honor God by these expressions of gratitude for the gift of God's grace.

In this *holy potlatch*, everybody wins! Thanks be to God! Amen.