



St. Mary's  
Episcopal Church

October 3, 2021

Message by Rev. Michael Burke

*Delighting in This World*

Here. Now. As It Is. As You Are. As We Are.

*Working toward God's Dream*

For Everyone. For Everything. All the Time.

*The Ties That Bind and a Little Red Ball*



“Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.”

- (John Fawcett, *Blest Be The Ties That Bind*, 1782.)

I've been carrying the scripture readings for today around in my head for the past few weeks. And they led me to remember a story that I haven't thought about in years. In fact, I might have first shared it with you over twenty years ago.

My daughter Cassidy, now 22, was a little less than two years ago, I imagine. We were over at Bob Nelson's house, (Bob was an Associate rector at St. Mary's for many years) and I wasn't sure how she would react to strangers, to people she had not met before.

At first, she was pretty shy, or perhaps, leery. She sort of looked at him: "who is this person?" But Bob had a bright red ball, and he put it her hands. She looked at, took a couple steps forward, and gave it back to him. When he accepted, and took it in his hands, she giggled.

But after a minute, Bob gave it back to her. Hesitantly at first, she allowed him to give her the ball. And then she walked over to him, and gave *him* the ball. This time, when he took the ball, she laughed and clapped her hands.

On and on this went, Bob receiving the ball, and giving it back to Cassidy. Cassidy taking the ball and giving it back to Bob. Back and forth. Forth and back. Giving and receiving. Receiving and giving. Soon Bob was laughing, and Cassidy was squealing in delight.

When I think back about that, I realize now that I was observing something fundamental in how human beings relate – how they build and strengthen relationships, how stranger become friends.

In the first reading today, we hear the famous story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. When their husbands have died, Naomi releases her daughters-in-law to go and live among their people. In essence, it's a story about giving and receiving.

Ruth has very little in this story – no lands, no husband, no security, but she gives freely to Naomi what she does have – the gift of herself and her companionship.

Naomi herself is in a situation that is as hopeless as Ruth's, Ruth can't do anything about Naomi's situation, but she can walk alongside her as she journeys into a new future, in this case literally *walking alongside her...* And Naomi bravely allows Ruth to give her that gift.

And so it goes on to become one of the Bible's and history's great stories of deep relationship and friendship.

**In Psalm 146, God I spoken of as the One** "who gives justice to those who are oppressed, \* and food to those who hunger." (Psalm 146:6) it is by being a God of justice-making that God becomes the God of the oppressed. There is a giving, and a receiving between God and those in need. Giving and receiving. That's how the relationship is established, strengthened, and maintained.

In the Hebrew sacrificial system, a community's duty to God and a person's relationship with God was enacted through the ritual sacrifice of animals. The ancient Hebrew people shed blood, not of ourselves,

but of the goat or lamb, which came to symbolize the giving of the gift of life. With this in the shared religious tradition and history, it was natural and understandable that Jesus was seen by the early Jewish church as being the sacrifice that binds us to God. A family or kinship group would offer back to God, in thankfulness for a bountiful increase in their herds or a successful harvest, the “first fruits” of their increase, often a spotless lamb. Much of the New Testament refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God. In the sense that Jesus gave his life as a ‘fragrant offering” in the words of our liturgy, evoking our roots in the burnt offerings of the Hebrew people. It was a giving, and a receiving, the mutual exchange of gifts, that bonded the people to their God, and God to God’s people.

Today, the symbols have changed, but not the exchange. Of course, today we live in a culture in which the very idea that God is somehow pleased by the ritual killing of animals raises all kinds of troubling questions for us. But we still hear that old echo in the words to the old revival hymns. We’re washed in and saved by the precious blood of Jesus. If that language makes you uncomfortable, of course it does. Its from a time and culture that is no longer ours.

But in that culture it was a primary way in which people and God created relationship. Today, when we give, of ourselves or our resources, we in our own way participate in this mutual exchange of giving and receiving. When we give to God through the work of the faith community, we build bonds and strengthen bonds that bind us as St. Paul says, “as members of one another.”

Elsewhere, it is written, “...But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. [For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.](#) (Matthew 6:20-21).

So, if in days like these, where the long reach of the twentieth month of a worldwide pandemic finds us, if you are feeling disconnected from others, - in your family, or neighborhood... ... if you are feeling disconnected from your siblings in your St. Mary’s faith family, there is this ancient wisdom to guide us. This ancient pattern of giving and receiving, receiving and giving, which points us in the direction of how things are re-built and re-connected when the bonds between us are frayed.

This week, if you are feeling disconnected... if you feel like you just want to crawl back in bed and have a long nap.... reach out... give some act of caring for one another – to one another.

You might call someone up, just to check in. Or call two people up, just to see how they are doing. Or call a dozen people, let them know that you have been on their mind, and see how they are making it...

And in the act of giving... relationship is established, and strengthened, and maintained.

And don’t get waylaid by the whole ‘reciprocity” aspect. Give freely and let go of expectation. Its instructive that psychological researchers who study this, tell us that giving with openness but without expectation gives us the highest degree of connection and relationship. (That’s why people who give to animals, pets, etc., experience a higher degree of bonding and connection, and pleasure in giving, than

when they give to other people. People who give anonymously also experience a higher degree of satisfaction, even though the relationship exchange only happens in one direction.

In other words, when we give, it changes *us*. But it didn't need to take a lab of PhDs to tell us that. People of faith have always known that.

It's the same principle with prayer, by the way. When we pray, it changes *us*. In pretty significant ways. When we pray for someone else, especially when we do so regularly and consistently, our relationship with them changes – even if they don't know that we are praying for them. We feel closer to them, because, by the act of praying for them we *have* become closer to them.

You feel estranged from someone? – pray for them. You feel disconnected from your church? – pray for one another. Regularly and consistently, even the gift of prayer is an act of building bonds of meaning and connection.

With every act of reaching out, every caring text, or e-mail, or card, or phone call... we are building the Body. Strengthening our own faith and the connection to one another.

In the next month, we'll all be invited to participate in the annual pledge giving in-gathering. If you've never made a pledge to your faith community, I invite you try it. Again, the very act of giving changes us, connects us, strengthens our relationship with our own faith community. Some people stay, that's how it emotionally and spiritually becomes our faith community. Not *that* faith community. . . but *our* faith community.

In the Gospel story for today, one of the scribes approached Jesus and asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."<sup>1</sup>

Psychologists tell us that who we are as people emerges out of the context of relationships.<sup>2</sup> And that it is by the exchange of small gifts, a greeting, a phone call, a kind and encouraging word, a prayer... it is by such an exchange that relationships are created and maintained.

To be in relationship: This is what is *essential* about being truly human: To love God, love neighbor, and love one self... It is a mutual giving and receiving, one to another, love being the fulfillment of giving itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:28-34

<sup>2</sup> "*The Relational Self*", February 2011, DOI:[10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_7); In book: [Handbook of Identity Theory and Research](#) (pp. 149-175); By [Serena Chen](#), [Helen C Boucher](#), and [Michael W Kraus](#)

I learned this from a twenty-month-old child. Passing a bright red ball back and forth; forth and back. Giving. Receiving. Strengthening. Nurturing. The ties that bind. Amen.

## *Title*

### Notes:

*Today, “*

Gift giving is often the most obvious way a partner can show interest, strengthen a bond or even signal that a relationship should end.<sup>3</sup>

“When you’re giving to another person, you have this pressure of reciprocity, but it’s not there with a pet,” said Tracy Ryan, an associate professor of advertising research at Virginia Commonwealth. “It shows that a lot of the pleasure is in the giving, knowing you’ve taken care of someone.”<sup>4</sup>

A way to express feelings, giving reinforces appreciation and acknowledgement of each other.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See: A Gift That Gives Right Back? The Giving Itself; By [Tara Parker-Poper](#); Dec. 11, 2007;; <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/11/health/11well.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See; Dr. Darlene Silvernail, owner of [Silvernail Consultant Services](#) and [Psychology](#) instructor at [South University — West Palm Beach](#).; In <https://www.southuniversity.edu/news-and-blogs/2016/08/the-psychology-behind-giftgiving-61911>

## Scripture Readings chosen for October 31, 2021

### Hebrew Scriptures

#### FIRST READING

#### Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;  
Where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,

if even death parts me from you!”

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

## The Psalm

### Psalm 146

1 Hallelujah!  
Praise the Lord, O my soul! \*  
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;  
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

2 Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, \*  
for there is no help in them.

3 When they breathe their last, they return to earth, \*  
and in that day their thoughts perish.

4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! \*  
whose hope is in the Lord their God;

5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; \*  
who keeps his promise for ever;

6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, \*  
and food to those who hunger.

7 The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; \*  
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

8 The Lord loves the righteous;  
the Lord cares for the stranger; \*

he sustains the orphan and widow,  
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

9 The Lord shall reign for ever, \*  
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.  
Hallelujah!

## The Epistle

### Hebrews 9:11-14

When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

## The Gospel

### Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard the Saducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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