

Amos 5:18-24
Proverbs 11:24

word count: 2,190

The Book of Proverbs tells us that, “The world of the generous gets larger and larger.” I want to begin by acknowledging your generosity of spirit and heart. In a week that brought us the campaign message of “Yes, we can,” we were also told, “No you can’t.”

Over the last few months I have been privileged to officiate at some of your weddings and watch you make the same loving and holy commitment to each other as I have seen at any marriage ceremony previous to this year’s Supreme Court ruling that marriage is a fundamental right. In fact, being with you at your weddings was even more special because it represented a dream long deferred. I will never forget the reciprocal love I saw between you in what will always be the sharing of vows that are yours alone and that no one can take away.

I want to thank you for your generosity in the time you devoted to working phone banks, drafting our resolution, putting up signs, writing letters, attending rallies, and in general, being open and supportive allies in a long and circuitous path to justice that has been momentarily deferred. You should know that Proposition 8 was narrowly passed in Los Angeles County, but here in Irvine it was defeated, and the Irvine United Congregational Church played a significant role in that defeat.

In the last couple of months I have received the kinds of e-mails and phone messages that remind me of the reasons why so many people want to have nothing to do with religion of any kind. Having grown up in a church that marched with Chavez for the rights of farm-workers, and with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the first civil rights movement, it is appalling to find that the dominant voice of Christianity is that of a bully on the wrong side of justice. Tertullian said that the first reaction to truth is hatred, and as truth finally becomes known, these institutions will pay a steep price in loss of respect for the role they played in this latest struggle for civil rights.

The prophet Amos spared no ire in words that rail against shows of piety and the legalism embodied in empty sacrifices that require nothing. Amos concludes, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

In this church; a church descended from a history of “firsts,” from excellence in education in the founding of schools beginning with Harvard and Yale, to the abolition of slavery; from the rights of women and the first ordained woman pastor, to the rights of lgbt people, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your generosity in keeping open a sanctuary such as this that I could return to after this past week. I hope it means as much to you as it does to me. This congregation continues in the tradition of the United Church of Christ. Your witness in this place and out in the community gives spiritual hope and refuge to many, while more are yet to walk through your doors. Your presence will be needed now more than ever so that true justice and righteousness, can continue to roll down. This is a church community in which your children can say that they were proud to have been raised.

This, if I just jumped to the end, is my Stewardship message on this one Sunday we set aside to talk about our financial commitment to your church. I think it is easy to see that what we are doing in asking for your pledges of support this Sunday is not in order to pay for any new “stuff” we think we need for next year. It is about a generosity of spirit, a generosity shown in the two great commandments; to love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. It is about sharing our dreams widely about what those words mean, and being prepared to provide more

programs for our families in order to ensure that this tradition is passed down. Finally, it is about finding the means to make those dreams come true. A church that knows who it is and why it exists will find the “how”—the way to be the church God is calling it to be. Today I am asking you to show us “how” we can do what is in our hearts to be as a gathered community.

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A dozen of us have just returned from an eye-opening and wonderful interfaith trip to China. (Who is here today from our journey? Bus J3, raise your hands. Nee how! Hello-hello!) There was so much that was overwhelming—the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall, (which climbs on forever through high mountains against high winds) all of these sights took our breath away. There are so many images that will stay with me from this trip, including the fellowship we enjoyed as a group.

Yet, the most humble and inauspicious setting proved to be the most uplifting.

“Hi, my name is Joe—I welcome you. Follow me, please, we go have lunch.” Joe was our guide to a hutong in Beijing. A hutong is a small, narrow system of cobblestone lanes. One of the remaining old quarters of the city that houses the poor, this hutong was once a middle class enclave of small houses in winding streets with high walls and courtyards. Now, they were cut up into one and two-room apartments. Autumn ivy lifted away from walls where once-proud doorways stood painted shut.

Joe says, “Come, I lead you. Take your rickshaw. Remember please the number on it and take same rickshaw when we leave our lunch.”

A dozen red-awninged rickshaw bicycles and their drivers were lined up against a wall, and Carl and I noted that we were in rickshaw number 1049, but we would not forget our driver—a small young man with kind eyes set in a face that looked pinched, as he smiled and sized up these two giant men he would be driving.

We wound through narrow streets with brick and cracked mortar surrounding us close on each side—the occasional doorways wide open and the sounds and smells of life going on all around us. When we stopped, there was Joe waiting for us at the door of a small apartment. Some of the furniture was outside, in order to make room for us within.

Our hostess ushered us in to her two rooms for lunch. On the red concrete floors, a table has been opened up in each room, covered with plastic lace tablecloths and set up for our meal. She is 53 and newly retired, cooking with her sister for the tourists who come to see this vanishing way of life in China.

We sat down on backless stools and were served a generous home-cooked meal in a room where the bed is next to the refrigerator. Wires and plugs in search of sockets criss-cross and decorate the walls along with plastic silk flowers and a red tasseled calendar.

Between the two rooms of this public ownership house stands Joe, and he speaks to us after our meal:

“I am a guide. Being a guide is a good job here. Has respect. I am jealous of students—I want to learn, and so I teach myself. I leave high school five year ago, and learn. My pronunciation not good, but I can spell. P-r-o-n-u-n-c-i-a-t-i-o-n.

“My favorite books are by Mark Twain. ‘Huckleberry Finn.’ ‘Tom Sawyer.’ Also my favorite poet—Walt Whitman. ‘Leaves of Grass.’ Most special. I learn by to making to memory things I believe are true. Here now I recite for you from your president Bill Clinton his inaugural address.”

Joe, the grandson of the Cultural Revolution, Joe—young, maybe 23, standing in a worn cotton shirt and jeans in a doorway between poverty and hope, clears his throat before his audience and begins:

“My fellow citizens:

“Today we celebrate the mystery of American renewal. This ceremony is held in the depth of winter. But, by the words we speak and the faces we show the world, we force the spring. A spring reborn in the world's oldest democracy, that brings forth the vision and courage to reinvent America. When our founders boldly declared America's independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change. Not change for change's sake, but change to preserve America's ideals—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless. Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be an American.”

The rooms applaud. “Please,” says Joe, “I need your claps.” Joe is happy with our response. He tells us he is now working on the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. “I want someday to be able to say the words, ‘It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.’”

The rickshaws are waiting outside to earn the \$2.00 ride back. The hostess and her sister come in from the kitchen and accept our thanks and answer questions through Joe's interpretation.

I think I can represent our group and say that we were all very moved by this experience. In a place poor in means, our hostess, who in turn received the gifts we brought, including our profound respect and greater understanding, fed us generously. Joe's generosity was in sharing his young spirit, ennobled by hope and vision, with every group of people he came in contact with, possibly even changing them.

The Book of Proverbs says “the world of the generous gets larger and larger.” For Joe, I know this will be true as his life unfolds.

This was a week of hopes raised and hopes deferred. It was the week of, “Yes we can” and, “No you can't.”

A young Chinese man working for tips in a hutong in Beijing stood in a doorway and told us words that were so important to him, as he said, “I learn by to making to memory things I know to be true.” We needed these words this week. We can reinvent ourselves as better, more compassionate people. We can change. Change to preserve our ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. “Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless. Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be an American.”

The church is charged with the responsibility to be the voice that calls for justice to roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Your church, this church, has demonstrated our strong desire through our actions, to be that voice right here and right now.

This is your Stewardship message. It isn't about paying for the stuff we need for another year. The world of the generous does get larger and larger, so that from that growing generosity of spirit larger dreams may be born. But dreams born are dreams that have to be nurtured and grown in order to be fully realized.

My own world has been opened up from the sheer immensity of what we saw together in China this week, and from hearing from so far away what was happening here at home. I am grateful to have grown up in this tradition because that means that I have you to return to in these days, and I want to share this with as many people as I can.

Our dreams are about following the life, teachings and example of Jesus so that we may know through this faith what it means to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. Our dreams are about building and maintaining a community of people that are diverse in all ways, including how they seek faith and understanding of God in their lives. Our dreams are about having people who are there for us when we need them, and accepting each other as we are as long as there is mutual respect. Our dreams include building for a future that holds room for more to share our joy with. It's about being ready to be open to playing a role in the positive change that can make us better, more compassionate people, and to redefine what it means to be a Christian and an American today.

Let us look forward with hope for the new day promised to us in this historic election.

Like Joe, I want someday to be able to say the words of Martin Luther King, "It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity." Like Joe, I learn by making to memory things I believe are true.

And this I know is true: A church that knows who it is and why it exists will find the way to be the church God is calling it to be.

We know who we are. We know why we exist. Help us now to be the church God is calling us to be. Amen.

Scripture for Sunday, November 9, 2008

Amos 5:18-24

18 Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; 19 as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. 20 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? 21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Proverbs 11:24 (The Message)

The world of the generous gets larger and larger.