

Good Gifts Keep On Giving
A sermon for Stewardship Sunday
Beacon UU Congregation
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
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We've all had them – re-gifting experiences – some amusing, some baffling. My most cringe-worthy regifting memory is when I was offered, with no irony whatsoever, a second-hand novelty coffee mug with the name “Bonnie” printed on it. As you know, my name isn't Bonnie. And this person *knew* me and it wasn't one of those wacky Yankee Swap or White Elephant exchanges where you might actually end up with a mug with someone's else's name on it.

I was truly stumped about how to respond to this nicely- wrapped, yet bizarre (and kind of passive-aggressive) regifting. So, I just chirped with a twinkle in my eye, “Um, thanks Bonnie, wherever you are.” Does the thought count? Sure, I suppose so, but... really? If you're going to regift, be either more subtle or more blatantly outrageous.

The British comedian John Oliver has published a witty and useful guide to getting away with holiday re-gifting. He advises: “The best place to regift is to an anonymous Office Secret Santa. He adds that you should write a note to throw the recipient off the scent that this gift was not originally meant for them. And be thoughtful. Don't re-gift both a bottle of Scotch and a self-discipline primer in the same box to the same person.

He calls gift bags the sweatpants of gift-wrapping. “It's lazy” he quips, “but its undeniably better than not putting anything on at all.” And finally, don't fly too close to the sun by brazenly re-gifting within your family like its some kind of Ponzi scheme. You'll get burned!”

The most fun I had this week was reading pieces online about hilarious and *gobsmackingly* rude regifting. My “Bonnie” mug experience doesn't even come close. One blogger pondered whether it is not completely acceptable to regift (in his words): a perfectly fine item sitting untouched in your home. Well, that depends.

Here are some examples gleaned from my research:

A Wisconsin couple received a figurine for their wedding, and on closer inspection, discovered that it had been engraved with another couple's name and wedding date. One woman in New Jersey received an oil and vinegar set in a dilapidated cardboard box with a yard sale sticker still affixed to the lid.

A guy in New Orleans received a wallet – a nice wallet, with a condom inside it. Oops. A newly married woman shared that her Mother-in-Law gave her a jar of Miracle Whip (her son's favorite) on their first Christmas together. It was missing

a dollop or two. A bloke in London was regifted a pair of socks he had loaned a friend two years earlier. A nine-year-old received a set of used butter knives from an Aunt because, in her words, “he is just so hard to buy for.” (Target gift card, anyone?)

I doubt that any of these regifters had been blessed with the opportunity to read the Rev. Dr. Kate Walker’s wonderful essay called “The Master Plan.” We heard an excerpt of this reflection earlier in the service. Even so, I do think they would have gained something from this idea that the Master Plan for a good life is essentially “giving and receiving.”

She reminds us that “It’s that simple, and it’s more complicated than that. Giving and Receiving! There were no trumpets, no clouds finally parting with clarity, coming down in gold letters from the heavens. No loud voices or angels in chariots. The master plan of the universe is Giving and Receiving. Simple in so many ways, *and* more complicated because we humans make it more complicated.”

“Giving and receiving go together. We give because we want to believe service is a form of prayer. And we receive with gratitude—mostly (if we’re having a good day and remember to be open to love and generosity). Religious leaders have been saying this for centuries. They’ve been offering metaphors, images, art, poetry, and songs in thousands of languages. The message has always been about giving and receiving.”

Every March, when the Stewardship Campaign rolls around, I dig out my creativity wand to conjure up some new way to preach about Giving and Receiving. It’s one of the most dreaded and enticing challenges amongst the clergy – how will I frame the so-called “Sermon on the Amount” this time and implore my flock to be generous in their pledging. The framing changes, but the message remains the same – we need your financial stewardship to survive and thrive. As the Rev. Walker so eloquently and directly states it: “Let’s not make it more complicated than that.”

A hymn I think of often at these moments is #404 – “What Gift Can We Bring?” We sang it earlier in the service. I like the lyrics, especially the first verse, which asks:

*What gift can we bring,
What present, what token?
What words can convey it,
The joy of this day?
When grateful we come,
Remembering, rejoicing,
What song can we offer in honor and praise?*

No one would dare claim that we haven't brought forth our gifts in abundance these past four years. I am so impressed and inspired by our collective effort to keep Beacon strong and connected. I am so proud of you. Who could have predicted the pandemic-tinged challenges we faced, but look at what we've done.

Our good gifts have kept on giving. We have sustained excellent worship and music, revitalized our religious exploration programs and amplified our Social Justice presence. We've enjoyed social events again, the Yard sale and Auction made a comeback, and the building and grounds are beautiful and inviting. Our excellent leadership has kept Beacon running smoothly and solvently.

That said, I can't help but view this Sunday as the beginning of my farewell tour as your Minister and speak some hard truths about the cost of doing business and the cost of falling short. A new minister will want to enter a sturdy financial house in August. They will want to collaborate with intact and sturdy committees and teams. Yes, our budgets have been lean and cuts have been made...we've experienced that already and endured. I believe all will be well.

And, yes, new folks have joined Beacon and we are thankful for our growing Beloved Community and their presence, especially in leadership positions. However, we have also lost a bunch of long-time committed members who served as faithful stewards here and pledged very generously to our annual campaigns. To be clear, they have left Flagstaff to be closer to family. They have not left Beacon; in fact, leaving Beacon was one of the most painful aspects of leaving town.

All of our members and friends will receive a stewardship mailing this week with a letter, a pledge form and a return envelope. I wouldn't typically ask you for a specific pledge, but I am going to do that this morning. We need to make up the gap left by these former generous pledgers, so I am asking you, most respectfully, to consider increasing your pledge by 10%. More, if possible. If not, no judgement. Consider how this good gift will keep on giving and how the absence of Beacon UU would effect your life and the wider community we inhabit.

If we were in a Christian context here, I might compel you to come forward for an altar call. I might say, "We're going to sing and pray all day until we raise an additional \$10,000." Don't worry!

I might exhort you with *2 Corinthians, Chapter 9*: "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

Swap out the word “God” for any palatable image you choose, perhaps the face of your fellow worshippers in our Sanctuary this morning. We all love and appreciate a cheerful giver. And the congregation can bless itself with abundance, have all that it needs, and abound in every good work.

Alas, in this beloved community, we are the church and the church is us. As I’ve quipped before: “There is no free lunch in the free church.” It is our gifts alone that keep on giving. In this way, our free will pledging is a sacred form of gifting that is encouraged, deeply appreciated and impactful.

So, instead of further quoting St. Paul in Corinth, I offer the poet David Whyte, here in Flagstaff, as inspiration for your generosity. In his essay called “Giving,” from his collection entitled, Consolations. Whyte reminds us that:

“Giving is a difficult and almost contemplative art form that has to be practiced to be done well; to learn to give is almost always the simple, sometimes heartbreaking act of just giving again. To stop giving in any situation is to call an end to relationship. Giving is an essence of existence, and a test of our character; it asks deep questions about our connection to others, to ourselves, and strangely to time itself.”

“To give well,” he continues, “appropriately and often, is to establish a beautiful symmetry between the urgency within us that wishes to be generous, and the part of the world that is suddenly happy and surprised to receive”

“Giving has an enormous horizon and a breadth that is hard to compass; it is both a practicality and it creates bonds and dependencies necessary to our communal well-being. Giving means paying attention and creating imaginative contact with the one to whom we are giving. It is a form of attention itself, a way of acknowledging and giving thanks for lives other than our own.”

So, if you happen upon a “Bonnie” mug on your travels, please do not buy it for me. I already have one more than I need! Yet, I do hope you’ll think of me with a smile and that you’ll reflect on all the ways we’ve given and received to and from one another over these past four years. It has been a gift I will always cherish.

In the Rev. Walker’s words: “The Master Plan of the universe begins with one sacred gift: You and me. I believe we’re here to be present to one another, to be present to and faithful to what matters most. I believe we’re here to give and receive in the exchange of living in beloved community. Giving and Receiving. Let’s not make it more complicated than that.”

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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