

“The Generosity of God”

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, February 14, 2016
First Sunday in Lent**

Readings from Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Romans 10: 8b-13

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.” When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the alter of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Romans 10:8b-13

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we’ve heard read from sacred scripture, and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. Let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ’s faithful name. Amen.

We begin the season Lent mindful of the journey that Christ made in the wilderness for 40 days, not eating, being tempted by Satan, overcoming those temptations and preparing himself for the ministry that he was

about to enter into; a ministry of serving others, of offering healing and comfort, of providing God's grace to those in need and ultimately carrying the weight of all of our sins to the cross where he was crucified, dead and buried. We wait in the season of Lent for that celebration which is to come again, when we recognize that the stone has been rolled away, that the tomb is empty and that our Savior lives. This is a time of preparation, a time when we are invited in our journey to pay attention to how our life really is with God, not how we show it to be or how we want it to be, but instead how it really is with God. For many of us in our lives we find that we spend a lot of time and energy trying to do good and to be good and to be better. This seems to be the admonition for us as Christians, to carry on offering the grace of Jesus Christ, to serve in mission and ministry, to do good works in the name of our Savior. These are noble callings and good and worthy deeds. But in this season we are invited to pay attention to something else, not necessarily just our goodness but our brokenness as well. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday where we take last year's palms, burned now into ashes, and make the mark of the cross on our foreheads and remind ourselves that we are from dust and to dust we shall return. We don't spend much time celebrating our dustiness. We don't spend much time looking at those places in our lives that are dirty or marred or smeared, because like good people we want to move on and be better. But Lent invites us to slow down.

When Jesus was out in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, it seems to me that every one of his temptations was to try to be self-determined or to do it all in his own power, that somehow he could do it all. And if he did, good things would happen. What is surprising to me and finally makes sense as to why Romans was included in this week's readings, was in a sense Paul is talking about the same dilemma. In answering the question, "Why do some people of Israel believe in the Messiah and why do some people in Israel not believe?" Paul said that those who don't believe are trying to earn their righteousness on their own and so again and again he says, you can't do that. You cannot earn your way to be right before God. It is a grace that is given to you. It comes through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and nothing that a preacher or nothing that you do can make it real, except the power of the Holy Spirit.

Macrina Wiederkehr, a benedictine poet and writer, writes in one of her books that we as people created by God are dust and spirit dancing together all the time. It's what makes us alive. The vibrations of the Holy Spirit that live within us animate the dust of creation that we are and we have life, until that moment when we are called away and the Spirit leaves, and then there is just dust that remains. And so what I found for myself in this season of Lent, is that I want to pay attention to those dusty places and realize that it is there in that place that God's grace meets me most profoundly. It's not on the mountain tops necessarily. But sometimes it's down in the valleys where the presence of Christ is so real because I am so broken and so needy.

You may not be surprised that fasting is not one of my spiritual gifts. You know I am the guy that gives up buying the little Snickers at the checkout counter because I've got 17 at home. I don't need that. The Doritos--whatever it is. Some people are people who fast and I applaud them. I am not one of those people. And as I was thinking about what I could give up this year for Lent, what came to me was I'm going to give up fasting. And being the weird person that I am I thought about that and went wait a minute. That's not a bad idea because I live my life way too fast. Instead this year maybe I want to give up being fast for 40 days. I want to give up needing to be right and perfect and on the spot for 40 days. I want to slow down and breathe and pay attention to how God is at work in my life, in your lives and in the life of this church. What came to me as I was thinking about this was a conversation I had with someone who was talking about how important it is for fields to lie fallow for a time. That if a farmer keeps planting the field over and over and over and over again, at some point the crop will diminish, the harvest won't be as plentiful. That field needs to rest and nothing seems to be happening and yet God is at work making something rich and beautiful and nutritious, getting something ready for that which will spring forth life in its time.

So I have all this weird mix of wanting to slow down, being mindful of fallowness, dirt, the invitation to

realize that spirit and dirt mingle and mix and it's okay to pay attention to the dirty parts and all that's going around and I look up and I see a rock. When I was a child I collected rocks. I would go to my grandmother's house or anywhere, really, and collect rocks--big ones, little ones, anything I could stuff into my pockets and I would bring them home and I would take them upstairs and at the end of the hallway, up past my brother's and my bedroom there was an empty room and the rocks would all get laid out and I had my treasure of rocks. I even had my parents get me a hammer and a chisel one Christmas because I had to break them open to find the treasure that was inside of them. I still collect rocks. This one is from the Highlands in Scotland. It doesn't smell like peat but it should. I found it when I was on my sabbatical and I carried it with me. It reminds me of where I was and takes me back to a place where I hear the invitation of God still speaking, to live a smaller life and to live closer to the ground. It's with me as I continue to pray about what does that mean. It just seems like a rock and yet somehow it's so much more.

I think about all the times in our lives when something really hard has been going on. I think about the times in the life of this congregation when we have come to spend time with you in prayer, and I realize that in those hard and frustrating and uncertain times and times that seem about as lively as this rock, there are glimpses of the Holy.

I collect rocks, right? Sometimes they come to me as a gift. The Roberts are laughing because they know that this gift is a piece of the step coming into the sanctuary that one Robert Kelly gave to me on February 18, 2012, I wrote it down right here. Bob Kelly was an interesting man, an engineer, a brilliant guy, helped remodel the new building, always had a wild story--I'm still not sure if any of them were true--and never shy to let you know what was on his mind. So he called one day and said he and his wife, Marty, wanted to come to my office. So they came in. He had a plastic bag weighted with something, set it beside him and he - uh - let's just say he lit into me about all the things that needed to be taken care of in the church before there is a pipe organ or this or that. And you gotta take care of this and we're not taking care of that and on and on and on, and it was like he just kept rolling. What he kept saying was, you gotta take care of the basics. If you don't take care of the basics, everything falls apart. If you don't take care of the foundation, the house crumbles. You gotta take care of the basics- you gotta take care of the basics and on and on and on. He stopped and I'm like "Bob, we are taking care of them." "No you're not" and he picks up the bag and hands it to me and boom--this rock, the broken corner of the step to the sanctuary which I looked at and laughed and said, "I cannot wait to do your memorial service, buddy, 'cause I'm going to talk about the rock." And I did. But next to that rock was this one and what now I see in hindsight that I didn't see when he was sitting in my office, was that he was teaching me something, and teaching all of us something that I think is a good lesson in this season of Lent. We need to just take care of the basics and pay attention to the broken parts. And the good news is that when we do, God's grace will meet us there. Amen.