

November 14, 2010

Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski

“A Time to Love Like There’s No Tomorrow”

John 21.15-14

Today is Commitment Sunday. This is the day we culminate our Stewardship Campaign: See How They Love. It is the day we express our commitment as a church to respond to these difficult and challenging times by pledging ourselves to love like never before.

A stewardship chair in a previous church said to me, “You know, Steven, you would make my job as stewardship chair a lot easier if you would just stand up in the pulpit and say, ‘Okay folks, if you give a lot of money to this church, I can promise you you’ll go to heaven. And if you don’t, well, you know...we can then say a little prayer, bring out the bagpipes to play Amazing Grace and boom...mission accomplished.” What do you think? Should I give it a try? Pass out new pledge cards in case you have already submitted your pledge and then pour on the guilt and fear as heavy as I can.

No, I don’t think so. Instead, for those who have already submitted a pledge and for those who plan on submitting a pledge today or in the days to come, my heartfelt thanks to you. Thank you for responding to the urgent challenge to not retreat in fear in these challenging times but to step out in faith and love like never before.

These are difficult and fearful times. The only antidote to fear is not security. The Bible makes it clear that the only real antidote to fear is CHOOSING LOVE. As it says in I John, “Love casts out fear.” The more we give ourselves to love, the less fear we will have.

So we've emphasized stewardship isn't ultimately about fundraising. It's a spiritual practice that helps us grow in our capacity to love, grow in generosity, grow in trust in God, into the generous big-hearted people we were created to be. It helps us move from (arms crossed across chest) to (arms wide open).

A steward is some one who is entrusted with a gift. Life itself is a gift and we have been given this one life to live and we are called to live this life generously and responsibly.

Let's take a look at that word RESONSIBILITY. Response – ability. You have the ability to choose your response. You have the ability to choose how you will live this one, precious life you are given. You can choose to live for yourself or you can choose to live for something greater than yourself. You can choose fear or you can choose love.

William O'Malley in his book Quantum Spirituality wrote, "We are the only species whose choices are not branded into the fibers of our nature. We must choose to be who we are. But first we must discern what human beings are for. And we have only two backgrounds against which to measure our worth. Our lives are either speckles of light against infinite darkness or smudges of gray within infinite light. We are here on this earth to discover our shining."

I love that! We are here on this earth to discover our shining. That's what stewardship is all about. We are gifted and entrusted with this one and only precious life and we are called to make it shine as bright as possible. Jesus said, "You are light for all the world." Not you could be, should be, ought to be, - You are light.

When George Bernard Shaw was asked if he was saved, he said, "Saved? Who wants to be saved? When I die I want to be thoroughly spent...Life is no brief candle to me. Rather, it is a

splendid torch that I have hold of for this brief moment in time. I want to make it burn as bright as possible before I pass it on to future generations.”

Rather than helping people see the splendid torch called their lives that they are entrusted for this brief moment of time, the church has a long history of dousing the flame of our torch by making people feel bad about themselves and emphasizing our limitations and failures.

Sometimes I think our problem isn't thinking too highly of ourselves. Sometimes we don't think highly enough. Sometimes we don't acknowledge and understand our own significance and value in God's eyes.

This one precious life we have been entrusted bears the image of God. The Bible says we are created in the image of God and that the very nature of God is love. Thus, our essence, our truest nature is love. There is a you beyond your physical bodies, beyond your thoughts, beyond your fears, beyond your past and that you is mysteriously and wondrously connected to the expansiveness of God's love.

I love that quote by Marianne Williamson you might be familiar with: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. (We fear it because with that power comes responsibility).

It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. You are a child of god. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking.

We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is with in us. (We were born to make visible the love that is within us at the core of our being). It's

not just in some of us; it's in every one. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Here's the radical, startling conviction of our faith : God revealed God's heart in a helpless, vulnerable little child, not to overwhelm the world with divine power and might, but to call forth the love that is in every human heart, to redeem the world through the lives of ordinary folks like you and me, to redeem and save our souls not by delivering us from this sinful world, but by transforming us into lovers, to save us by showing us how to love, to love like Jesus.

My father before he died was on a ward in a nursing home where many of the residents there suffered from Alzheimer's and dementia. As I visited my dad who had Alzheimer's and visited many of the residents, they would ask my name but never remember it. They were not interested in my background and education or my bank account. They didn't care about the places I'd seen or the titles I'd held, my credentials.

What they did know was whether or not I was kind, gentle, patient, a good listener. What they understood was love.

Langdon Gilkey is considered by many as one of the most important theologians of the 20th century. This brilliant man wrote, “Our individual selves, become themselves and are fulfilled only if they are enabled to love – to be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more than being loved.” If some one asks me how to find God, I always say find some one to love generously and unconditionally and you will find God.

How will you spend the one precious life that has been entrusted to you? What will you do with that splendid torch you have been handed for this moment in time?

525, 600 minutes. How do you measure, measure a year?
How about love? How do you measure the life of a woman or
man? How about love?

The song is Seasons of Love from the Broadway musical Rent. It's
the story of a group of young adults struggling to just survive.
They are struggling to find out what life is all about while just
struggling to pay the rent. Reflecting on their fear-filled future,
they ask themselves, "Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care?"

They discover the only antidote to the fear that surrounds them is
love...the only thing worth measuring is love. And they sing,
"How do you measure a life? How about love?"

I love what Richard Rohr says, "I believe we have no real access to
who we really are and to what life really is about except in God.
Only when we rest in God's love can we find the safety,
spaciousness and scary freedom to be who we are, to be all that we
are, to be more than we are, and sometimes to even be less than we
are."

I love today's Bible story where the Risen Christ asks Peter, "Do
you love me?" You may remember Jesus had good reason for
asking. Just days earlier, on the night Jesus had been arrested and
taken away, Peter lied, saying he didn't know Jesus.

He was afraid. He retreated in fear. Who can blame him?
I suspect Peter blamed himself. He declared to Jesus at the last
supper that he would never betray Jesus. But when Jesus needed
him the most, Peter retreated in fear...not once, but three times.

My guess Peter was disappointed in himself. Perhaps, he carried a
sense of shame and guilt. My guess we all know what it's like to
not live up to our own expectations, yet alone other people's
expectations of us.

I love that Peter is so human. He has been following Jesus on this grand adventure of love and at a critical time when Jesus needed him the most he retreated in fear.

I so get that. Choosing love over fear in this world of ours is perhaps the greatest challenge we face. So many times I have played it safe and turned my back on the invitation to something greater than myself.

Jesus asks Peter three times, ‘Do you love me?’ Each time Peter answers, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’

Three times Peter turns his back on Jesus. Now Jesus allows this to be undone.

Jesus spends no time at all wanting Peter to explain what had happened. He doesn’t ask him to apologize. He doesn’t demand he promise not to do it again and make him go sit in the corner. He spends no time at all shaming him or making him feel guilty.

Instead, Jesus shows he believes in Peter, affirms Peter, and trusts Peter with the mission of his life. He says, “If you love me, here’s what you do. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Carry on my work.”

Jesus not only forgives Peter but affirms him and reminds him he has been entrusted with his one and only life and that he has a responsibility – a responsibility to others, a responsibility to the world. A responsibility to that one lost sheep who is hungry for love – hungry to know someone cares.

Response – ability. He can choose to love.

My guess is that every single one of us, like Peter, has those moments when we ourselves know ourselves called to something larger than ourselves, and we retreat in fear.

Christ comes to us today not with condemnation but with affirmation as to who we are as children of God.

Christ comes to us not with judgment binding us to our past but with forgiveness freeing us for the future.

Christ comes to us not to remind us how small and insignificant we are but to remind us how valued and important we are to God and God's purposes.

Christ comes to us not with ought's and shoulds but to remind us we are responsible. We have the ability to choose our response...to choose love.

How do you measure a life? How do you measure a church? You measure it in love!

Some one generously donated 500 tokens for a delicious meal at The Common Table to be given away today. These tokens are good for a meal at the Common Table.

There are instructions. There are so many people today who are hungry, hungry for food, hungry for love, hungry for acceptance, hungry for friendship, hungry for encouragement, hungry for hope. You are to take a token and give it away...maybe to some one in your family...maybe a neighbor having a tough time...maybe a stranger on the street in need of a meal.

But you are asked to give more than just the token. You are asked to give yourself in some way. Take the time to listen, maybe share a meal with them. Don't just give a token. Give love.

So please come and receive the gift of a token that you might give some one the gift of love.

And then I invite you to light a candle – as an expression of your commitment...to make the light of Christ's love and the light of your life burn as bright as possible in such a time as this.

How do you measure a life? You measure it in love. May we love today like there's no tomorrow.