

Rev. Kimberly B. Glenn

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen,

Just yesterday the fourteen members of the youth confirmation class went out together for a day of service. The preparation process culminates each year with a day of service. I work with Harry Sowers from Interfaith Rebuilds, which is an important part of the Interfaith Outreach organization. There is a lot of need in Lynchburg among the poor and disabled in regards to maintaining their homes as safe places for them to live. It turns out that a couple in need called Harry just this past week to report that they were experiencing a serious water leak that was causing a lot of damage to their basement. Harry inspected the property and realized he would need a lot of man and woman power to address it. It just so happened that our group of fourteen very able bodied young people were lined up to be working with him on the coming weekend; just the group to get the job done. God does work in mysterious ways!

The project that Harry defined was to dig trenches down to the piping that leads into the house. He needed a group of the youth to dig and explore the possible cause of the leak and another group of the youth to begin to clear out the damaged paneling and some damaged items that were being stored in the basement. When we arrived at the project site, Harry divided the group into two so that one team would man the shovels and the second team would tackle the interior.

Once inside the house, the team that would be working in the basement met the female head of the household. Her husband, the male head of the household worked with Harry and the shovel team outside the house. I'll call the homeowners Mr. and Mrs. H. Mrs. H. gathered the interior team in the living room and told us stories about

the life she and her husband had built together. Mr. H had served in the military and she had been a teacher in the public schools here in Lynchburg. She talked about her family and she talked about taking on the role of caretaker for her elderly mother. She talked a lot about giving. And she also told us how grateful she was to receive the help that we were bringing to her and Mr. H that day. She was so enormously grateful that she wanted to fix a meal for us, including homemade macaroni and cheese and a pound cake.

When she told me about the food, I was surprised. Harry had told me that the homeowner wanted to give the group “snacks.” I was thinking pretzels and chips, but this was a banquet! I began to protest ever so mildly. I told her we really didn’t need to burden her with fixing a meal for us, that it was very kind of her to offer but it really wasn’t necessary. She wouldn’t take no for an answer. She looked at me with clear, unwavering but very welcoming eyes and said, “Giving goes both ways.”

Of course, she’s right, isn’t she? Giving does go both ways. When we give to others, when we share something of ourselves, it feeds us; giving makes us feel satisfied. But it doesn’t end there, does it. It starts a chain reaction. The recipient of our gift usually feels a sense of satisfaction, too; and that sense penetrates and ignites an urge in the recipient to give back. That act of giving to and from each other is the stuff that makes relationships; whether it’s feelings or hugs or material things that are exchanged, the interaction back and forth binds us together.

This morning’s gospel reading is about the greatest gift ever given. It contains the infamous verse of scripture - John 3:16. When I was young, there was usually someone in every crowd who would hold up a sign that had a citation of that scripture

written on it, most often in large enough letters to be read all the way across the stadium. I'm going to have to admit that at that stage in my life I had no idea what specific words that citation referred to, but it was impossible not to remember the citation. "John 3:16" seemed to be etched in my brain. So I looked it up. You heard it this morning. John 3:16 says, and you can join in with me here if you know it by heart, too, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life."

God gave US a gift, the gift of a human being. And not just any human being, God gave us a part of Himself. God gave us his son.

Do we even realize the enormity of that gift? We are far enough away in time from the Jesus era, from that particular moment in human history, that it is easy to distance ourselves from it emotionally and spiritually. But like Mrs. H, I wonder if in the act of giving his son to us, God *felt* that he was initiating (or actually, RE-initiating) a two way relationship. I wonder if in that act of giving God had that same sense of satisfaction that gives birth to a chain reaction of giving.

It kind of makes me feel sad that so many people today disregard God's graciousness to us. Maybe they disregard it because they just don't understand how it can be true. Maybe it is because they don't associate their own feeling of deep gratitude for being alive, for having food given to us from this earth, for breathing in the freely available air of this immense universe, for dwelling among communities of people who care and share with each other; maybe they don't associate those gracious gifts with God at all. Faith and grace work together. Without faith one might not even perceive God's grace. Faith is a mystery and in this world we operate on facts.

In today's world facts are everywhere. We live in a society where if you don't know something you google it. In today's world, might we have lost the humility to admit that there are some things that are beyond our understanding? Maybe we have. Maybe that is why churches like ours are shrinking today. We at this church and most people who have faith believe in the mystery of the greatest gift ever given. We believe what St. Paul proclaimed, that we are saved by grace through faith. Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

By God's grace we have been given this incredible opportunity to walk through life knowing God is with us. Our very real relationship with God begins when we receive and accept the gift that he has given us; the gift we acknowledge at our baptism; the gift we reclaim at our confirmation; the gift we reclaim each time we say the baptismal covenant and the Nicene creed.

Even when we receive that gift we acknowledge it's mysterious nature. We choose not to ignore the mystery but to celebrate it. At St. John's and in the Episcopal Church we glory in the mystery. It's contained in our liturgies and in our worship. We carry that mysterious relationship with us everywhere we go. A fellow clergy person said this about the mystery of God: "Mystery is not an excuse for lack of understanding, but a journey into understanding that leads ever deeper into the fullness of comprehension and appreciation. With (this) mystery, the more we know, the more we realize that there is more to be known." And I would add, more to be appreciated.

Mrs. H. understands that this mystery has everything to do with why she wanted so much to feed us. Mrs. H. Is a woman of deep faith. She said as much to me. Let's not let our acceptance of her gift to us go unappreciated. We can respond by thanking her and then going on to pay it forward by sharing hospitality with all whom we encounter. Let us not let our acceptance of God's gift to us go unappreciated, either. Let us acknowledge it by showing up for worship and for service to our neighbor. And let's continue to explore together the mysterious relationship between us and God as it is revealed to us in scripture and in the world.

As we gather at the Lord's table together this morning, let us acknowledge and accept and believe through faith that in the Eucharist, in our common communion, God mysteriously transforms and redeems us then sends us out into the world to do all that he has called us to do.