

## Legacies of Love: A Kidney, a Hymn, and the Miletus Farewell

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
On May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018

*Acts 20:17-35*

Today our sermon series on texts in the Book of Acts that are rarely preached on because they don't appear in the lectionary continues. This morning we'll look at the last words of the Apostle Paul to the elders from the church of Ephesus before he sails on from Miletus towards his destiny in Jerusalem. Because today is Legacy Sunday, I want you to hear these words in the context of Paul's legacy. What does he want his hearers to remember? What is he leaving to them? Notice the very last words he speaks before

*From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. When they came to him, he said to them: 'You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus. And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.*

*'And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again. Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."'*

Earlier in this service, Brian and I talked in general terms about the process of how we write hymns together. Now I want to be a little more specific about how the hymn we'll be singing later today came to be. I'm going to give you a little inside baseball, if you will.

It started, of course, with Dean Silverman and Mary Beth Emmons, bidding on the writing of a hymn as an item at the Immanuel Auction two years ago. Then, when they were finally ready to cash in on that, Mary Beth emailed me and Brian with some ideas to prime the pump. They wanted the hymn to be about generosity, she said. Their inspiration, she told us, stemmed from an article Mary Beth had read about an IRS employee donating a kidney to an absolute stranger. The donor, in discussing what motivated this precious gift had said, among other things, "I once heard some wise

counsel to “never suppress a generous thought.” (You’ll note that this idea is picked up in the refrain of the hymn.)

That wise counsel about not suppressing a generous thought led this person to donate one of his kidneys to a stranger. That’s a mighty big generous thought. By the way, we are not strangers around here to this sort of donation, that sort of thought. We just a few weeks ago heard Elizabeth Hefferon report on how the bone marrow that her son Robbie donated some time ago continues to help the woman who received it in her fight for life. Thank God for people who do not suppress generous thoughts!

Stories of that sort of self-giving love have a way of humbling and inspiring us. They lead to songs of thanksgiving. Sometimes, they even lead to hymns of praise being written, which may in turn inspire others to give, leading to yet more blessings and more songs of praise. It’s a virtuous—and not a vicious--cycle.

Just for kicks, I did a Google search for the phrase “never suppress a generous thought.” Most of the results traced back to a speech given by a Mormon woman at BYU in 2007.<sup>i</sup> In that talk, she related how her daughter in law’s mother Susan, who was a gifted seamstress had—as a young person many years before—felt inspired to make a handmade silk necktie to give to the president of the Latter Day Saints. He happened to live in her neighborhood and she took it to his home and in presenting it became embarrassed about her handiwork. Who was she to think she could make something for someone who had that role? The president’s wife grabbed her by the shoulders and said, “Oh, Susan, never suppress a generous thought.” That sentiment, woven into a speech at a university years later, almost certainly became the wisdom that led an IRS employee who may or may not have been Mormon to donate a kidney, which became the inspiration for a Presbyterian hymn. All from the impulse to use one gifts to fashion a necktie and wise words said in response.

I find it interesting that after the Apostle Paul had left Ephesus and was getting ready to set sail from Miletus, he called for the elders of that community to meet with him one last time. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and almost certainly imprisonment and he knows he’ll probably never see them again in this life, so he has some wisdom he wants to pass on to them.

The Apostle never ever seemed to be at a loss for words, and he isn’t this time. Before we go any further, here are a few things I notice about his words.

1. Paul tells them that he is **a captive to the Spirit**, which is leading him to a place where he is not sure what will happen, but if the past is prelude, he might not like everything about where the Spirit is taking him. To be captive means that someone else is calling the shots and leading us places we might not go and actions we might not take if it were just up to us.
2. Paul warns them to watch out for people who like hungry wolves will come in behind him and **try to lead them astray from the message** of grace, unity, and welcome he has been trying to proclaim among them for three years. Calling people to go beyond tribalism and to practice compassion for the vulnerable, justice for the oppressed, love for the enemy, and hospitality to the stranger and outsider, will *always* lead to some opposition—and those opponents will always have an attractive message.
3. Nevertheless, Paul **commends them to God and the message of God’s grace**, essentially saying that he leaves them in God’s hands. Paul’s done what he can, now it’s up to them and God. Doesn’t that sound like a parent of an adult child might say?

But, last, what really grabs me is that the final words out of Paul's mouth are an admonition for them to support the weak ***for it is more blessed to give than to receive.***

If you are leaving someplace never ever to come back, if you are on your deathbed speaking your last words, heck, if you're dropping your child off at college for the first time, you want the last thing you choose to say to have maximum impact. It's sort of like, "Whatever else you do, don't forget this!" Don't forget to study because you're here to learn. Don't forget you're a beloved child of God. Don't forget to have a good time, you name it. In this case, Paul opts for his last words to be, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." That's how he sums it all up. That's what he wants to leave them with.

You might call it part of the legacy Paul left them. And us.

Before we say more about his legacy and how it lives on, it is worth putting "It is more blessed to give than to receive" in perspective.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana, who was our theologian in residence back in the Fall, talked with us about Improv Theology and saying "Yes, And" to life. Let's try it with: *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* Yes, AND sometimes we are so run down, so exhausted, so depleted of physical, emotional, spiritual, and material resources that we need to learn to receive. The most blessed thing we can do is receive. It's all we can do to receive. Because our cup isn't running over. It's bone dry. We have nothing left to give—so we need to get our cup filled because we can't pour from an empty vessel. But let's yes, and that again. Yes, AND when our cups get refilled, we will again find that we have something to share, and in the sharing we very often find that we ourselves blessed in return. This, by the way, is what alcoholics learn in 12 step recovery programs—they learn that once they get sober, the best way they can maintain their own sobriety is through helping another alcoholic to achieve sobriety.

There's a reason why "it is more blessed to give than to receive" has gotten traction over the centuries. So when those generous thoughts come. Pay attention to them. Don't suppress them. Give them sacred space. Maybe even let them take you captive and lead you to go places and to do things you might not otherwise do if left strictly to your own devices.

On this Legacy Sunday, we'll be celebrating in the Forum after this service how the proceeds of our endowment from the past year will be helping to fund eight different projects that are making a difference for others here and elsewhere around the world. Moreover, we can celebrate that the existence of the Endowment has led to increased energy for and awareness of and generosity towards around some other projects that didn't get funding. It's worth celebrating at least one Sunday a year that we have an endowment, and that it exists and grows because of people's generosity, and that we each have the opportunity to give towards it, either with end of life gifts or with special lifetime gifts given in honor or memory of someone or some occasion. They make a difference. YES, and...

The Apostle Paul's legacy goes beyond the important encouragement to give of our financial resources—it is about time, and talent, and energy, too. It's about ties sewn, and prayer shawls knitted, and time given, and ears lent, and hammers swung, and classes taught, and hymns sung. It's about well more than just our financial gifts. There is a blessing that comes in giving of ourselves in so many different arenas.

Later today at the evening service, we will be dedicating a weeping cherry tree given in honor of Betzi Robinson by her friends at the Sumi-E Art Society, to celebrate the impact of her teaching on their lives, and the way she lives on in them through the techniques she taught and the wisdom she shared. This is not the first tree given in memory of someone here, nor will it, I hope, be the last. Our campus is dotted with the trees given in memory of loved ones and a number of you have given them. Every time a tree is given and planted, it symbolizes the great truth of seeds and saplings that from tiny acts great things can grow. So it is also fitting that this evening, weather permitting, we'll begin our spring planting for the Immanuel Interfaith Garden.

So maybe this week, what we should all do is remember—even take them as a mantra—Paul's last words to the elders at Ephesus. "It's just like the Lord Jesus said, he told them, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

You know, of course, that Jesus never said exactly that. At least there is no record of it in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Perhaps it just didn't get written down. Maybe it was simply part of the oral tradition that never got recorded.

But Jesus is recorded saying on at least one occasion, "From those to whom much is given, much will be expected."

And on this communion Sunday, as we celebrate this meal, we give thanks for the gift of a life given to show us how to really live. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Personal Ministry: Sacred and Precious - BYU Speeches

[https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bonnie-d-parkin\\_personal-ministry-sacred-precious/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bonnie-d-parkin_personal-ministry-sacred-precious/)

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