

THE DIVINE INITIATIVE
2CORINTHIANS 9:7-15; JOHN 15: 16-17
MAY 21, 2006 – MITZVAH DAY
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There are moments in life when we make choices or some divine initiative in us, some power greater than us helps us make a choice that changes things for the good.

Last week I read in my alumni magazine how a Presbyterian minister, a Methodist minister, a Catholic priest and a rabbi – no this is not a joke – each gave their life jackets to fellow soldiers in the first seconds after the *USS Dorchester* was struck with a torpedo from a German U-boat. Over 900 troops were being transported to Europe on the *Dorchester*. The year was 1942.

For some reason there weren't enough life jackets. So the four chaplains gave theirs to four men who didn't have any. The soldier, who received a life jacket from the Presbyterian chaplain and graduate of my alma mater, said that the four chaplains, after giving away their jackets, went about quieting the panic, helping men who were "frozen" get into life boats, and were praying for the safety of the others as they went down with the ship.

There are moments in life when we make choices or some power greater than us helps us make a choice that bridges the walls that divide humans and changes things for the good.

That night on the *Dorchester* those four chaplains made such a choice. And based on their choice I submit to you that they were authentic servants of a great God.

Their selfless act that fateful night inspired a ministry in Philadelphia dedicated to people of all faiths; several novels and documentaries; and a foundation in Minnesota that honors those who have risked their lives to protect others of a different faith or race.

What I love about that story is if you think of 1942, it was another world. Protestant, Catholic and Jew did not mingle or talk much to one another in those days. But these four transcended those barriers.

I'd like to talk today about the impulse in our Christian faith to bridge the differences that divide people. It is a subject worthy of our consideration this Mitzvah Day when congregations of three different faiths with much current tension between them have chosen to work together for the common good.

This is a special day. And every time I tell someone from out of town about Mitzvah Day, as I did recently a classmate who is President of the United Church of Christ in Massachusetts, they say how remarkable this ministry is and how they wish their community had a Mitzvah Day.

Today's reading from 2 Corinthians picks up the theme of breaking down the dividing walls and cooperating for the good of the whole.

St. Paul writing to the church in Corinth was asking them to give money to an emergency relief fund he was collecting for poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

The significance of the fund is that it was given by Gentile Christians for Jewish Christians—two groups much at odds in the early church.

The disagreement was this: Jewish Christians believed that a person had to follow the law or the Torah in order to follow Jesus. This meant that Gentile Christians, in effect, would first need to become Jews before they could be Christians.

Paul offered the opposing view. He was a vigorous voice for the freedom of the faith—that anyone, Gentile, Jew or Greek could choose to follow Jesus and live the new commandment of love. This debate tore at the heart of the early church. It was every bit as divisive as the debate today on the standards of ordination.

Paul was amazing. It's hard to find a contemporary equivalent. Perhaps he was something like a combination of Madeleine Albright, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Billy Fucillo. A shrewd diplomat, a visionary prophet, and a car dealer unafraid of making a fool of himself.

What Paul said to the Gentile Christians in Corinth was this: if you give to the emergency fund for Jerusalem your act of giving will convince the Mother Church there, comprised of mostly Jewish Christians, of the authenticity of your faith.

God loves a cheerful giver, Paul told the Corinthians. Sow bountifully, reap bountifully. There should be no compulsion in giving nor any reluctance. Each person should give as he or she has decided for himself.

Don't you love the honesty of that statement? It's something like the honesty John Perry, one of our Habitat leaders conveys when he says "Give according to the degree God has blessed you. If God hasn't blessed you, don't give!" And he's serious. You decide. It's between you and God.

But lest you think this is a sermon about stewardship let me be quick to say that while Paul's motive was to raise the funds for the poor and suffering Christians in Jerusalem, his overarching motive was to unite the church; to heal the divisions in the body of Christ. His emergency appeal was an ingenious way to do both.

You see if the Gentile Christians gave generously to the mission fund for Jewish Christians then Jewish Christians would see their selfless act and accept the Gentiles as full-fledged followers of Jesus. No more breach in the body of Christ.

This is St. Paul talking not Tom Yorty. *The* measure, *the* benchmark for authentic Christian faith and practice, says St. Paul, is the cheerful and generous giving of oneself—including one's financial resources.

Christianity turns out to be more what we practice than what we know. We can debate theological principles all day long but if there is no alleviating of hunger or disease or homelessness or despair our theology—no matter how enlightened—doesn't matter at all.

Today's reading also tells us that if we really want to inspire someone then we need to reach across the barriers that divide us from some part of the human family. In other words, don't just do nice things for our family and friends. Reach out to those who are different and apart: conservative to liberal; black to white; gay to straight and vice-versa.

This is what Paul means by sowing in abundance. Put it out there. And God will always keep you rich enough to be generous. Give your life, your faith, and your resources away and God will keep replenishing you. That's a Biblical promise.

St. Paul's vision for bridging the walls that divide the human family couldn't be more relevant not just for Mitzvah Day, but for our time.

This week Barbara Wheeler and Gary Demarest will speak to our Presbytery. They represent the liberal and conservative wings of the church and they are suggesting a way that we can bridge the deep disagreement over the standards of ordination that have split Presbyterians for the past twenty years.

What they are promoting is mutual regard, mutual respect for one another. Barbara Wheeler is the President of Auburn Theological Seminary. I know her well. I see her a lot and I see how she practices what she preaches. Her message and life are inspiring and she has challenged me more than once to drop the easy use of stereotypes that continue to split the church.

But when we talk about healing the human family we're not just talking about our Presbyterian church. We are talking about our community, too.

Westminster's mission on the West Side of Buffalo envisions a street with 100% homeowners, a business mentoring program and ongoing tutoring for youngsters from the poorest parts of the West Side – this mission will do more to convey the authenticity of our Christian faith than anything else we do.

There's a process of replenishing that happens when congregations like ours start to give themselves away. God gives back so that we can give more. Sow sparingly, reap sparingly. Sow bountifully, reap bountifully. It is time to test that proposition of faith from the great apostle.

Finally, we're talking today about our nation too. Life since 9/11 has been edgy. Much of it centered on George Bush. I am no fan of George Bush. I think he's done much to turn the clock backward in domestic matters, foreign affairs and environmental protection.

But bashing George is no answer. I have heard lamenting about the quietude of the church. We need prophets in every age, but recycling a 1960s approach to social change would be disastrous. In fact, the aggression of the right wing of the church will run its course. May even now be showing signs of imploding.

I am not saying there aren't serious struggles ahead. We will always have to fight for justice and peace. What I'm saying today is that we can take a page from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We can seek to bridge the dividing walls for the good of the whole.

Mitzvah Day is powerful stuff. We ought not to let it be just one day a year. We could build on its spirit and vision and broaden our coming together across that which separates our church, our community and our nation.

My sense is that people are ready to respond to that kind of vision, bravery and hope rather than intimidation and fear and aggression.

A Presbyterian minister, a Methodist minister, a rabbi and a priest. Maybe that was some kind of holy joke all those years ago. A joke on the forces of darkness that banked on chaos and confusion destroying the spirit of the men on the *Dorchester*. Did you ever hear the one about the Presbyterian church, the Jewish synagogue and the Muslim congregation and how they breathed life into a dying and broken city? Amen.

