

From Here We Grow...First Church, a Great Cause  
Rev. Kathleen Owens  
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Welcome to Celebration Sunday – there is so much to celebrate; what a blessing it is to be here, in this place, with these great people – terrific choir and music, and a construction fence! For our visitors this morning, let me explain – we have been in a building project for many, many months and finally, we have a construction fence, which is a sign that we are progressing and that prep work and a soft demo of the building can begin soon. Also, as you saw from the two videos already, today is the Sunday where members and friends pledge their financial support for the next fiscal year, starting July 1. And if you are visiting, we're glad you're here; of course you are not expected to fill out a pledge form...but you are expected to give us a chance – this community might be your spiritual home. And you and everyone are welcome to a special social hour reception after the service – made so generously by our Chef Carlos Delgados. We have much to celebrate.

We've been talking about Spiritual Maturity this month as the transformational worship theme. And let me say – this will take longer than a month to fully mature – it's a process. But there are characteristics to detect a spiritually mature person...the six we have focused on already include openness, letting go, dying, faith, courage, and love. When these characteristics are observable in a person's life...when someone is open to a search for truth and meaning and not closed in their thoughts, attitudes or behavior...when someone has let go of their own expectations and are willing to consider other options/ways of being, spiritual maturity is growing. When a person has dealt with death – their own...and understand it's not only a physical death but a death to the ego,

those small deaths that can invite us into new life... when a person's faith is experienced as a verb that says we are still involved in our own salvation; that we must participate in life and have confidence in the good that come into being...even when it is uncertain or unclear spiritual maturity is occurring. When a person has courage – a willingness to do in spite of an unclear outcome, when love is at the center of their life and actions ...when these characteristics are alive in a person, spiritual maturity is alive in their being and growing. The final three characteristics to explore today are giving, receiving and gratitude.

For some, giving is not an easy activity or characteristic in a person's life. Some people have experienced so much loss in their lives that giving is difficult. For others, giving comes easy. Even as a congregation, we have experienced both of these behaviors about giving. Before January 2010, we gave away one offering collection a month which translated into about \$26,000 a year. And it was not easy to give that away, especially when we found ourselves with more expenses than income. And then, in November, Arvid, our lead minister, and I talked with the Board and we agreed that in January of 2010, we would give the entire offering away and as you heard earlier in the video, this year, we've given over \$71,000 away to agencies whose work reflect our values. At first, it was not easy – especially during the recession but it was the right thing to do and many of you believed it was the right thing to do as well and you increased your giving to the church because the church was now serious about giving to others. We also give of our time in monthly service projects, in teaching classes in children's and adult RE, in practicing in the choirs and plays. [We also need to be careful in what we give – as we don't want to give to one another our anxiety, or our fear.] My colleague, the Rev. Tom

Chulak talks about giving because this characteristic comes out of love. A spiritually mature person gives to themselves through taking care, gives to others and to their community.

This church community gives to you as well. This is the characteristic of receiving that is the eighth characteristics. This community gives support to you and to your family from cradle to grave. And by that I mean, we dedicate babies and children and give religious education to our children as they begin asking questions of why – why are we here? Is there a god and who is god? Why do some people suffer and others don't? Liz Jones and many volunteer teachers ensure a vital program for our children, both here and in the South Bay campus. We give our youth a group for their spiritual growth – not only to discuss ideas but ways to have fun together and offer service in a social justice project monthly. In fact, some of them are helping serve in today's social hour. Our young adult and campus ministry program gives young adults a chance for community and spiritual exploration. Members, friends and visitors here receive a gift in the way of spiritual nourishment and challenging ideas as they participate in small groups and service projects, and other ways to connect to something larger than themselves. Our lay ministers offer a gift through compassionate listening and others through practical care. We give support to those who are coming to the end of their life and this community of memory and hope offers memorial services that honor and celebrates a person's life journey. And I hope this church has given to you a community, a place of peace, an environment of hope and a place of learning...to become a leader, to be more than who you are now.

Receiving – on the surface, this can feel easy to do – but really? Is it??? How open are you to receiving...what about receiving news you don't want to hear? What about receiving honest feedback about your behavior? More importantly, what about receiving all that is good about you – poet Barbara Pescan's writes: "Imagine you are standing before a bodhisattva – Jesus, Buddha, the first mother – it does not matter what you call the holy one - ...shining from their faces is the beam of all their the compassion of their living...can you see yourself through those eyes? Can we know ourselves seen and know each other this same way until our restless hearts learn to abide in this knowing and this love? Can we live in this gaze of blessing?" Here is what I think people received from those teachers we call the Buddha, the Rabbi Jesus or others...this gaze of blessing, is love and acceptance of the person in who they are in the moment. This blessing, this gaze can be so hard to receive and yet we all yearn for it, need it and learning to accept it is the gift we give ourselves and to those who offer this blessing. It is a spiritually mature person that can be open to receive.

Gratitude is the final characteristic and an attitude of gratitude changes life totally. "Gratitude is a simple but powerful act that helps us get through the stressful times. We don't have to like what we're experiencing but gratitude helps us stop trying to control outcomes. It is a key that unlocks positive energy in our life." (From the Language of Letting Go by Melody Beattie, 1/18 and 8/1 entries). In my morning prayers – when my work feels like too much, I find myself thankful for work that is meaningful and cherished by others. When I am feeling overwhelmed, I give thanks for others who share the load. Gratitude takes problems and changes them into opportunities for something more; I often give thanks for health of body that brings us into this room...because not

everyone has health to be here...this can sound polyannish but what if you were to try it? Some of you have a gratitude journal and you have experienced the difference it makes. The difference I have found is that the recording of things for which I am thankful focuses my attention on all I have been given, rather than what might be missing. But how can we be grateful for our frustrations? For bad things that happen? A story from India:

“Long ago in India a king ruled the land. Always by his side was his minister, who was known for his wisdom, but also for a strange habit that often annoyed the king. For no matter what happened, he always responded by saying, ‘That is good, that is good.’

“One day the king was out hunting when his horse was startled by a large snake. The king was thrown from the horse and dragged some distance, in the process deeply cutting his foot and losing a toe. As his minister knelt beside him to inspect the damage he said, ‘that is good, that is good.’

“ ‘How can you say that is good?’ the king screamed in outrage. ‘What kind of minister are you? You are dismissed from your post immediately.’

“ ‘That is good,’ said the minister, ‘that is good,’ and off he went to the palace to pack his bags.

“The king returned home and his foot eventually healed, minus the toe. Again one day he decided to go hunting. This time he became separated from his hunting party. Suddenly he was ambushed by the tribal people who lived near those woods. He was tied up and taken back to their village.

“Now these tribal people had a custom of sacrificing their prisoners (the king in this case) to their god. They prepared him for the sacrificial celebration, washing and decorating him. The celebration began with music and dancing as he was led to the slaughtering place like a goat. The king shook with terror from head to foot. He nearly fainted when the priest came forward wavering a long knife. The priest danced around him, inspecting him from every angle. Suddenly he motioned for the music and dancing to stop. ‘This one is no good,’ he said. ‘He has been cut.’ He pointed to the missing toe. ‘We cannot sacrifice to God something that has already been cut.’ The priest slashed at the vines that bound the king’s hands and legs, and set him free. The king limped back to the palace as quickly he could.

“Once back in the safety of his palace, the king remembered his minister and called for him. He told him the story and said, ‘You were right. It was good that my toe was lost. Because of it, I was not sacrificed by the tribal people. But why did you say, ‘This is good’ when I fired you from your post?’

“ ‘There is always some good to come out of things, your highness,’ replied the minister. ‘If I had not been fired, I would have been with you that day when you were captured by the tribal people. Because I have all of my toes, I would have been next in line for the sacrifice.’

“ ‘You are truly right, my friend,’ said the king. ‘That was good, that was good indeed, and so is your wisdom.’ (“That Is Good” story from page 5 from *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain).

Sound a little too simplistic? Try it. What about the circumstance you are in right now. What good might come from it? What if you let the king’s minister be your guide

this week? When troubled or frustrated what if you asked: what can I learn from this?

What good can be found in it?

Spiritual maturity is a process. So where are you on this journey? What are some characteristics that may need more attention in your life? Do you need to let go and be more open? Do you need more courage and love? How might gratitude change your perception? This is why we gather here – in this community. This is where we learn and grow; First Church is a great cause – a great place for you to invest in, not just your finances, but more importantly, your energy, your time, your life. This community invites you to continue on the journey to maturity. Let's do more than just grow old – let us mature in a way that reflects our values. May it be so. //

Invitation to pledge: In your order of service – two forms – one a pledge sheet for you who have not already turned one in; (hold it up) the other (hold it up) is if you have automatic withdraw and we need to know if you want it continued. Now is the time to fill it out and bring them forward; enjoy the slides as you walk down.

Please rise in body or spirit and join in singing our closing hymn #1064 Blue Boat Home

Benediction: the mission of this congregation is to create community, to nurture spiritual growth and to act on our values to help heal the world. May we grow in faith and maturity as we work to fulfill this mission. Amen.