

“Generosity Beyond Applause”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Mark 8: 27-38 and Matthew 6: 1-6

*****Please note that later in this sermon, there are references to sexual assault.***

Whether we admit it or not, we love to have applause. Maybe not literal applause, but we like it when someone notices us or something we do. The “pat on the back” –as it were—when we do something good. There isn’t anything wrong with getting positive reinforcement for doing good things or sharing love with others. At the same time, one must admit that it can be over the top. Naming rights that change the name of our stadiums every couple of weeks. Grand plaques with the names of everything anyone ever gave to a non-profit. Grand celebrations to say, “look who did that!” can get out of control. Sometimes the celebration of a donation can be more about the donor than anyone who benefits from the donation. I’m sure you’ve seen such spectacle. The stark opposite of such attention is when Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone about him. It can be a confusing scripture because once again Jesus does the opposite of what most people would do in a given situation.

The disciples have finally figured out that Jesus is the Messiah. They name it and they claim it. Jesus responds with, “Don’t tell anyone.” Then, Jesus begins to describe what it means to be the Messiah (also called the Son of Man or other similar titles), and the disciples don’t like it. They want a hero. They want someone that they can build a monument to someday. They want someone who will overthrow the Romans and claim

earthly kingship. Jesus won't have any of it. His agenda is starkly the opposite of "look at me!" Further, Jesus is much more concerned with heart behind actions than he is about the actions themselves.

In his commentary on the passage from Mark, Rev. Larry Morris III remarks that the question of, "Who do you say that I am?" is not just about theology, but "a summons to unveil the true allegiance of the heart." We have talked a lot about heart over the past several weeks. Every week we hope to get to "the heart of the matter" about discipleship and ultimately about stewardship. You all know the church needs money to operate. At the same time, the push this fall has been far less about budgets and far more about faith and heart. The size of the gift is never the issue, but the heart of giver—for Jesus—is the most critical issue during stewardship time or anytime. "Stewardship, then," notes Rev. Morris, "is not merely about budgets and benevolence reports; it is about locating the gravity that pulls our hearts, the gravitational center around which money, time, energy, and hope orbit."

Rev. Morris continues, "Here we glimpse a different economy: an invitation to invest our hearts where applause cannot reach and where the return is measured in transformed lives rather than public praise." Rev. Morris' reflection is through a queer theological lens where "hiddenness as sacred boundary, generosity as subversive solidarity, stewardship as courageous alignment of heart and treasure—even when unseen, misunderstood, or costly" is the norm.

As we explore "Generosity Beyond Applause" it's important to note where this story takes place geographically. Jesus has led his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a Roman

administrative center built near the shrines to the Greek god Pan and to Caesar. It is here that Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” It is here, in this setting, that the disciples are requested to reject imperial claims and pledge ultimate loyalty to something other than Rome’s political patronage. A similar setting might be in front of the US Capital, or the White House, or a similar structure whose purpose is the nation, or the empire. Today we might phrase it, “Who comes first, Jesus Christ or the nation?” It may seem like a simple answer, but it becomes lived out when the direction of the nation is in stark contrast to the way of Jesus Christ. What do we do then? That is a whole other sermon.

Make no mistake, “generosity begins with re-directing allegiance—treasuring Christ’s reign over empire’s rewards.” This passage also reminds us that, “truth can be entrusted without being advertised; identity can be authentic without becoming spectacle.” Further, when Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him (also another whole sermon is possible on just that!), Jesus reframes discipleship as “stewardship of life itself, measured not by gain but by fidelity.”

Rev. Morris has a whole section in their commentary about Jesus’ command for silence here. I’m still working on it, because secrecy about a lot of things can be a good idea, but about a lot of other things, it’s a bad idea. When it comes to sexual orientation, I know that each individual approaches this secrecy differently. Some are “out and proud” while others still remain largely in what we’ve called “the closet.” Many are somewhere in between. But Morris believes that “Jesus’ command for silence about his messianic identity reveals that truth sometimes ripens best in secrecy.” They go on, “This is not cowardice but integrity: a refusal to commodify sacred vocation for applause or to let

premature acclaim distort divine purpose. Stewardship likewise is healthiest when rooted in alignment rather than optics.” I completely see how the last sentence is true about stewardship, but I’m conflicted when it comes to other areas of life.

I have pastoral colleague in Wisconsin who has been hurt and frustrated by the lack of response of the United Church of Christ to sexual violence and assault. Given the case at Cornell these days, she marks every day that our church is silent about the case and sexual assault in general, and she is adamant that the church must say something. The silence, the secrecy in this area is in Rev. Moira’s opinion (as a survivor) unfaithful. There is no doubt that this is difficult to talk about, and yet is this place where secrecy and silence are a good idea? I’m not a survivor, so I find it difficult to speak about these issues. And yet, I am a man, I know that we, as men, need to deal with the acceptance of violence against women (and children) as our problem as much or perhaps more than a problem for women to address. At the same time, we don’t raise these issues for applause. We don’t speak out so someone can tell us we did this right. We say what we know to the best of our ability, knowing that we have much more to learn before we claim any authority. Too many in our culture speak out without knowing much of what they are speaking about. And others of us are afraid to speak out because we are aware we don’t know much. Faithful integrity requires that we keep asking questions of ourselves and those knowledgeable so that we can stand for justice no matter how the community around us responds. That’s a tall order.

And yet, this stewardship study applies to so many other areas of our lives. Rev. Morris reminds us that “to practice hidden generosity is to trust that God’s gaze—not the crowd’s—is what matters. It liberates both giver and gift from the tyranny of recognition and

keeps our motives free from the corrosion of vanity. Such hidden stewardship is not small-minded privacy; it is a spacious discipline that keeps the heart's treasure unentangled from ego's craving for affirmation. In congregations, we often celebrate visible philanthropists while overlooking unseen caregivers, quiet donors, the one who sets the table or pays a neighbor's rent in cash slipped under a door. This text calls the church to honor unseen faithfulness as a profound act of discipleship—an investment of the heart that outlasts any plaque or ledger.”

The more we enter into this study, the more the main point becomes true. This study is about our hearts, our show of solidarity with those who are on the margins, and it is a call to discipleship. You are invited through this study to consider your own gifts of time, talent and treasure and ask yourself not “how much did I give and is it enough?” but instead to ask yourself, “with all of my being and to the best of my ability, have I been faithful?” And just know that your answer to that question may change from time to time. We are not always faithful, even when we want to be. We are not always doing good things without expecting recognition, even if that is our goal. We are not always on the right side of history, even though we desperately want to be. We will speak when we should not. We will not speak when we should. But every day, every hour it is the call of Jesus to ask us who we say he is, but also who we are as the followers of Christ—Jesus’ disciples—not people of religion, but people of the way.

People get all caught up in this “carry the cross” speech of Jesus. Ironically, we often compete for who wears the largest cross, or who can best say they are a martyr for Jesus. Almost always, the speaker is more about looking for applause than actual discipleship.

How do we claim our faith and our discipleship without losing focus on who gets the applause. It is God who is supposed to receive glory for the good that we do. Doesn't mean we can't ever get a pat on the back. It means that what we do for God must actually be for God and not for our own ego. For you see, as Rev. Morris writes, "The kingdom's power often germinates unseen—in kitchens, sick-rooms, prayer-circles, neighborhood bail funds—rather than on grand stages. To be generous in this way is to invest our heart's treasure where systems of prestige cannot manipulate it—an act of resistance as well as of love, a courageous defiance of the market-logic that prizes applause over mercy."

I want to explore carrying the cross more than I have in this sermon, but I think I've given you a lot to think about, to pray over and to consider. But let me make this point, with the help of Rev. Morris. "[Jesus] entrusted his messianic truth to friends rather than crowds; he poured his treasure—his very self—into God's redeeming mission. So also, our stewardship is not measured by applause but by alignment—hearts tethered to the treasure of divine love and to Christ's mission among the least and the lost. In a noisy world hungry for spectacle, the gospel calls us to a deeper investment: to stake our lives out generosity that is courageous, sometimes costly, often unseen, yet always transformative. Where our treasure is hidden in love, there our hearts will surely follow—and there, in Christ, we will find life."

In the many blessed names of God who continues to love and to challenge us all.
Amen.