

Christ Presbyterian Church

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Matt Moberg

Acts 2:42-47

We Sacrifice

Good morning, you guys. How are we doing? Great! I kind of mention this every time I come here, but it's because every time I come here, I'm really and truly blown away by how big a gift it is to hear choir music. We do rap and stuff at The Table, so thank you! That was really nice.

My name is Matt Moberg. I am the director of The Table which is our Sunday night worship community. If you have not come and visited us, you should. Mark it down on your calendars. It's at 5:00 on Sunday nights. We'd love to have you guys around. Before I get into the message this morning, I'd like to say in a Roger Anderson kind-of-way that I'm grateful for you guys. The last time I spoke here, it was back in July, I believe. It was a time I probably said a lot of crazy things because my head wasn't fully in the room. My wife was in the hospital, having some pregnancy complications with our second child and you guys showed up at the hospital in profound and beautiful ways and through calls and notes. By the time I got to the hospital that afternoon after doing the second service, I'm not kidding you, Lauren had plates full of cupcakes and flowers. It was amazing and the food was amazing and so I just want to say thank you. We are grateful. We don't experience that kind of profound and sincere love all the time, but we really did then and we were blessed by it.

I also want to tell you that all those complications from that day did result in the child being born the next day. This is a picture of my little boy Sawyer. Handsome little feller. [Slide shown.] That's kind of like a little power pose there. He was born in power, you know? You don't want to mess with that, man. Sawyer was in the hospital for about 40 days and 40 nights and now he's back home and he's healthy and he's happy as far as we can tell. We're happy and we love him. I mean at least intellectually we know that we love him. I mean, we are cognitively aware that we have deep affections for this child, but we're not always gushing all over the place. It's hard to tell you how much I love this kid because sometimes babies can be hard, right? I mean if you are somebody who enjoys things like sleep and quiet and maybe an uninterrupted evening with a glass of wine and a book, maybe a baby is not for you. Maybe you want to use a little caution before you jump into that decision.

I had one night about a week ago that was actually brutal. It just got ugly. Lauren and I had kind of decided we were going to split the night shift in two. I was taking the first shift and I was sitting there with Sawyer and then for no reason, like he had no reason to act this way, he just starts freaking out, screaming at the top of his lungs, and having a full-blown panic attack. I'm talking the incessant screaming that fringes upon, at what point do I get a doctor involved here? For guys, that's hard when you've tried everything. I am Googling for an answer. I am YouTubing for an answer. I am going outside and looking into the stars trying to find some kind of answer but I have absolutely nothing. Actually on one of my Googles, I found that people in older generations

used to dip NUKs in whiskey. They should be ashamed of themselves. I didn't do it. Thought about it, but I couldn't figure out how I would explain to my wife when I bring the baby up for her shift and his breath smells like he's been at a frat party all night.

In the midst of Sawyer's meltdown and us both like falling apart, this kid right here, he just kind of broke out into this big, fat smile. I don't think he was passing gas but none the less, it was a beautiful moment. I don't want to be overdramatic about it, but what happened was, when he smiled in the midst of not smiling at all, I remembered exactly what was in my hands. I remembered that this kid is not a burden but an incredible blessing. I remembered how probably a hundred years ago, babies born two months early wouldn't have made it out of the hospital. I remembered all of my friends who have been struggling to have kids for years and here I am holding this miracle of life and I'm a little bitter about the noise he is making and the sleep that he's taking from me.

The Psalmist talks about how, come the morning, God will turn our tears into joy, which is very good because for me, very often I turn my joy into tears. It is very easy to turn the things that I have received as gifts into sour celebrations, things that I lament. Do you easily forget about the gifts that are all around you? When you think about the pockets of joy and goodness that are in your lives, the things that fill your days, do you get caught up in the pattern of what needs to get done, the agendas, the expectations? Do you ever notice the smile and forget to notice the gift of what you are holding in your hands? If you have, I'm sure you have experienced that great fullness of what that gratitude feels like, that experience that is abundantly good that expands when you sit in it. Have you ever noticed how fragile and fleeting gratitude can be, how you can be grateful for a baby or a gift of any kind one moment, but at the first sign of pain or loss or envy or confusion, gratitude just runs in the opposite direction? What is the way to rebel against its fleeting nature, to rebel against how fragile it is and actually claim the gift that is in your life? What is the way to live inside of the gratefulness? I'm going to explore that today, so please pray with me as we go into the text.

Father God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, God, may they be acceptable to You and may they bring praise to You. We are Your people and are of the tribe of Jesus so that we can follow You. In Christ's Name, all of God's children, we all say together,

[All:] Amen.

We are in a series right now of looking back on how the early church did church so that we can know how today's church can know how to do church. Today I want to talk about living in that gratefulness and what that actually looks like. If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Acts, chapter 2, verse 1. If you do not have your Bibles, that's fine because we have it on the screen so you can read along with me. It reads like this.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

Where was that one place? That place was Jerusalem. During Pentecost, Jerusalem was much like Mardi Gras without the different things that make Mardi Gras, Mardi Gras. But think of Mardi Gras as far as the excitement, the celebratory nature of the environment, the loudness. The city was on fire at this time and people from all around the world at that time gathered there to celebrate. Pentecost was the time right after the barley harvest season and right before the

wheat harvest season when people came with their first fruits from the field to offer to the church in Jerusalem at the temple. Now, first fruits in classical Greek, Roman, Hebrew, and Christian religions were given to the church to fund how the church was going to operate. The House of the Lord was furnished and established and maintained with the first fruits of the offering. The people came into town to celebrate by bringing their first fruits to the church.

We would ask maybe, if you were harvesting food back home, what does that have to do with church? Why do you have to come all the way to Jerusalem to bring what is yours to give to the church? Why do your first fruits have to first go to God and the temple? That's a fair question, I think. It's a question I think we all ask in different ways, right? Especially when that offering plate comes by and it kind of feels like a hot potato. "Let's just get this thing moving" and maybe do a fake drop, just kind of rustle your fingers above it. No? Neither do I, but I've just heard people do that. But what does religion and Jerusalem have to do with the home town harvest?

You have to understand that if you were to ask those people at that time why they were coming here from there when the food from there had nothing to do with here, they would tell you, "Listen, here is the only thing we know. A few months back, we put seeds into the ground and sandwiches came forth." The ancients did not understand the process of germination. They only knew that what they planted was not what came up. All they knew was that their lives were filled with gifts so there must be a good giver behind these gifts. They came to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost and give credit where credit is due and say, "Thank you because that seed we put in the ground turned into a feast and we are grateful."

When was the last time you have seen the things in your life as gifts and actually made space to pause and say, "Thank you, God"? How do you intentionally go about living in that space where you realize that this is a gift? It is not something I took. It is not something I got on my own. It's a gift. How do you say thank you for the steady job, the warm friend, the warm food, the breath for another day, another chance to start over again? How do you live aware that all of this is a gift? The evidence of one who understands that what they have are gifts from the good giver is that then *they* become givers of good gifts. You see, when we think about all of our lives, our paychecks and our perks as earnings, we sweated for those things. The harvest back home has nothing to do with religion, nothing to do with the temple.

We think about everything as earnings. I get that. But earnings just bring validation. If we understand everything as gifts, gifts bring joy and joy always gives birth to generosity. I think one of the reasons, and maybe I'm alone in this, that's fine, but I think one of the reasons we struggle to understand life as gifts is because gifts can make us uncomfortable. If you're anything like me at least, grace can make you squirm a little bit because you can't pay grace back. You can only pay grace forward which is exactly the point of grace in the first place. Gifts, expressions of love, are not supposed to be rewards. They are supposed to be initiators. This is why Paul writes in Romans,

⁴ Do you have contempt for God, who is very kind to you, puts up with you, and deals patiently with you? Don't you realize that it is God's kindness that is trying to lead you to him and change the way you think and act? [Romans 2:4]

Do you have contempt for the riches of God's generosity? In other words, do you understand that if you keep the gift, you just might kill the gift, but if you give the gift away, the gift will grow in you and through you and with others, too? Do we understand this? I met a man once who

understood this very profoundly. He understood that all of life brings gifts to him so that the gifts can then go through him. When I was in college, I spent a month up in the British Columbia islands, working at a Young Life camp. There was beautiful scenery. There were whales, mountains, crisp air, great food but what I did was work in the kitchen. We were working like dogs. I mean I was on my feet for about 12 hours a day in a hot kitchen that stank like salmon and fish every day. People didn't talk to you. Here is a picture I happen to have from the kitchen. [Slide shown.] Now, that looks like I'm enjoying myself, but this is the only photo I have from that kitchen. Don't let it kid you. It's still not easy to talk about.

In the midst of this, in the midst of all this horrifying manual labor, we had heard that there was a man who lived on the island with his family. We heard that the man was a lawyer involved in government affairs, just a really busy man. We didn't know much about him, but we knew that he and his family were probably the only people on that island. There wasn't anybody else there. One day, it was a Saturday, after all the other campers had gone home and before more campers came and joined us, we received word that this man wanted us to come to his house. For what reason? Just to rest. So you have this man who is incredibly busy, who has a lot on his plate, a lot on his table, who said, "I want you all just to come over." We said yes, of course. Why wouldn't we? We take these back roads there and he's got this beautiful cabin. I'm thinking he's just going to hand over the keys and say to come on inside and take a load off, take a nap, enjoy yourselves. But we pulled up and the guy's whole family was standing outside from youngest to oldest. When we got out of the truck and walked up to the house and they hugged us and said, "Welcome home" and they said they were so happy that we were there.

Then they brought us inside and we went into the living room and it was like paradise. I mean there were pillows and blankets everywhere, food of every kind, candy and popcorn. They said, "We just want you to relax. We are going to be here all day if there is anything you need. We are grateful for the work you are doing at the camp down the road." I can't tell you how amazing it was to see that we were going to be able to just lie around all day. I was convinced that I just might spend the rest of my days in that living room. We watched movies and played games from early afternoon until evening. Then the man and his family cooked a huge feast for us and listened to our stories from the camp thus far. I still remember how amazing the Chicken Cordon Bleu sandwiches were which I'd never had before. So we had this huge feast with desserts and then they had a little mini concert for us.

I still remember how rich the conversations were that night. I've never felt the gift of generosity so profoundly wrapped around me like I did in those moments. This man was not obligated to do these things. He didn't know us. I mean, it's one thing for me to love on my little brother like that. I'll do that, but there is also a sense of obligation in that. But this was a complete stranger who let us completely take over his life for a day because he knew that when the gifts come to you, the gifts have to go through you. Despite the fact that this man was a lawyer and a government official and that his place was supposed to be a refuge for him, he was convinced at his core that love is not a reward but an initiator, that all gifts grow when they are given away and that life is best when others get in on the action with you.

So convinced was he that this idea of love, this idea that joy has to give birth to generosity, that a few years later this man wrote a book that became a New York Times best seller. It was called *Love Does*. The man's name was Bob Goff. Maybe some of you guys have read his books. What I love about this book and what I love about this man is that he is so convinced that this is the best way for us to live, that this is the path that is the best one for us. If you want to

experience the fullness of love, the fullness of life, you have to let your life go. Jesus says, "If you want to find your life, you have to lose your life."

²⁵ If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it [Matthew 6:25].

Bob Goff should have become fat and rich and happy, but he didn't take a dime from the proceeds from his best-selling book. He gave it all away to charities because he was afraid of what he might lose if he kept all that money to himself. Have you ever experienced that fear before? "I hope I don't keep too much of this." I haven't. That hasn't happened to me yet. I'm hoping it will, but it hasn't happened yet.

The beautiful thing about this teaching Bob adopted, that Christ first started, is that it's not just a philosophical or religious teaching. It's also a sociological fact. A few nights ago when Sawyer and I were up and exchanging some heated words with one another, I turned on a TED talk from a few years back. It was given by a guy by the name of Michael Norton, who is a Harvard business professor. If you haven't heard it yet, it was amazing. Using data from the Gallup organization and from across the world, he shows how generosity is the gateway to the Great Fullness, how the more generous Americans are, the more happiness, health, and purpose in life are theirs to enjoy. Gallup put out this major survey across the world and asked two main questions. "How happy are you with your life in general?" and "Did you donate money to charity recently?" The idea behind the study was to see if there is a correlation between people's happiness, the joy that Bob has experienced, that kind of life, and the money that you have given away.

The positive correlation shows up on this map in green. The negative correlation is in red. [Slide shown.] Look at this for a moment. As you can see, the world is crazily green. In almost every country in the world where we have this data, people who give money to charity are happier people than people who don't give money to charity. Joy through generosity is the story of the Christian faith, right? We think at first we are losing, but we end up winning. Do you see in your life the things that you hold dear as gifts or as earnings? I'll just beg the question, what if Jesus is telling the truth? What if Jesus wasn't just trying to restrict and restrain us but actually was trying to set us free? What if He had our best interests in mind? When Jesus said to love your neighbor as you have loved yourself, He probably was also thinking that it is impossible for you to love your neighbor without simultaneously loving yourself. In fact, if you are not loving your neighbor, you are not loving yourself. To experience the fullness of joy, the fullness of life, you have to let life go. It is the paradox of faith that we adopt and call our own.

In the middle of the Pentecost celebration, unbeknownst to the Jewish worshippers, the tribe of Jesus was starting to stir in the upper room. If you have not read the full story in Acts 2, it is a wonderful story and I would encourage you to do so. The Spirit falls on them just like Jesus had assured them. They are filled with foreign tongues and they head out into the street, speaking in languages that are not their own. They are excited and have a fever to them. Peter preaches a message that packs a punch. He tells the people that Jesus, the one they slaughtered and hung on a tree, didn't stay dead. He broke free from the grave. Peter says, "He was your Messiah and you became His murderers." Jaws just dropped. People are in town for a party and Peter says, "You murdered your Messiah." The people are overwhelmed and silence hangs in the air. The text reads:

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

What’s the play from here on out? What can we do about it now? In desperation, they ask, “How do we go on living now, knowing what we have done?” They couldn’t believe that they had murdered the one they had been waiting for. Peter said to them what God is always saying to us. “It’s not too late for you. You have not gone too far. Yes, you once were lost but now you’re found. You once were blind but now you see.”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Do you see what has just happened? The people were cut to the heart. They were in despair over guilt from what they had done, but Peter says God has delivered for them a gift that will mold what they will become. Do you remember the joy of your salvation? Do you remember that moment when you jumped into the tribe of Jesus Christ, when you realized that everything you might have done wrong or not well in the past has a possibility for redemption in this day? Do you remember what that was like for you, that abundance of joy, and do you have that still? Are you living in that? Peter tells them, “I have a gift for you.” These are people of Pentecost who know what to do with gifts. They know what Bob Goff knows. So in the opening scene of the church, we see gifts moving through people so that abundance is not an isolated affair for the individual, but a shared reality of celebration.

⁴⁴ All the believers

all these *new* believers,

were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Do we understand as a church community that it doesn’t matter if you *believe in* Jesus if you don’t *believe* Jesus? It doesn’t matter if you believe that there was a rabbi who died 2,000 years ago and then broke free from the grave if you also don’t believe Jesus when He said that love is better than hate, sharing is better than hoarding, unity is better than isolation, enemies can be family once more, and life is always victorious over death. What you think is loss is actually your gain. Do you believe Jesus? Peter is telling the newfound Christians at Pentecost to repent. To repent is to change the way that you see the world. Change your interior understanding of how life comes to you and through you. Change what success looks like. Change your idea of what abundance looks like. It’s a world shift. It’s interior posturing that gets nuanced. Peter says to live it out loud and get baptized. Let what happens *to* you come *through* you.

This past Thursday a few friends from The Table got baptized. They wanted to publicly declare that they are in the tribe of Jesus and are trying to believe that He knows best. We did this over at Lake Riley in Eden Prairie. Now mind you, it is late October. It is cold. This is stupid. Beautiful, holy, sacred but stupid. And in this holy, sacred moment, and it really was, we inched out into the water and stood there. One by one we came. It was so fascinating to me to see on the shore everybody who wasn’t getting baptized and was warm looking at us like, “You guys have lost your minds. What is wrong with you?”

That makes sense though because people on the shore never understand people in the water. I mean, the church should always be baffling to the world around it because of how we live. We should be confrontationally confusing by how generous we are, about how love flows to us but then also flows through us. The church has always been a confusing group of people for the world around it. There is a letter that has been preserved from someone in the second century writing to the Roman powers that be. He is saying, "Let me just try to explain to you who these people are, but even if I do, it's still not going to make sense." Let me read to you part of what is known as the *Letter to Diognetus*. This is what Diognetus is saying about the first tribe of Jesus.

They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. . . . They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and [but will be] restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

The bottom line at least in my interpretation is that the church is a group of people who are called out to make things weird. We are called out to live in a completely different way that is incongruent with the norms of the world. We express that by how we hold all things as gifts and love with such recklessness that people turn their heads and say, "It doesn't make sense to give with such freedom. Isn't that going to hurt you?" The question I want to leave us with this morning is, do our lives maybe make too much sense to the world around us? Are we making things weird enough? The great fullness is not fleeting. It is not fragile. If we remember the joy of our salvation, if we see all things as gifts that bring joy and invite others to jump in and share with us, the great fullness does not go away. Pray with me.

Jesus, now we know in Your story that You gave it all away. You emptied Yourself for our benefit and so, Father, we come before You. Teach us how to be generous. It is not our natural inclination. We are protective, fearful people but it is inspiring, compelling, to know that You, who this whole thing is based upon, founded upon, are our pioneer and perfecter. You gave it all up so that we could get in on the action. Christ, You are good. You are faithful and it is in God's Name that we all pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.