

**October 3, 2021**

**Genesis 1:26-31**

**Mark 10:13-16**

**Pastor Ann Hultquist**

Two people were marooned on a deserted island. One of them paced back and forth on the beach, wringing their hands, while the other one lay down in the shade of a palm tree with eyes closed. The worried one burst out “Aren’t you scared that we’ll die? I mean, we’re in the middle of nowhere all by ourselves.”

“Nope,” the calm one said. “You know, I make about \$10,000 a week and I tithe 10% to my congregation. It’s Stewardship Month at my church. Don’t worry--my pastor will definitely find me!”

Yep, it’s stewardship month at Augustana--in hearing that, please take a minute and decide not to tune out just yet. We all know our minds wander during sermons, but learning to give--giving--is at the center of what it means to call ourselves followers of Jesus. It’s a great month to be a part of this congregation--not so we can send out frantic emissaries to act as bill collectors; but so we can join together as a community to give thanks for all that God has given us, and celebrate what those gifts have done and will do when we give them back.

“Together for Joy” is our theme this year--so I want to ask you to think about that first word--”together”-- and how your use of that word changed during the last 18 months. “Let’s get together,” we might say off-handedly to friends, or family in the Before Time. And then suddenly there was no getting together, was there? Friends and family that you didn’t see except on a screen; no hugs; no hand holding; no being right there to help wipe away tears. It was terrible, wasn’t it? And we likely don’t really know yet how much it has marked us as individuals and as a society.

The gift of science has brought us the vaccine and the chance to gather again in so many ways and in so many places. Honestly, we’re a little tentative sometimes. And yet, there is joy in this place, isn’t there--we can feel it. Being in this space again, receiving Holy Communion together, hearing the organ and the choir, singing together (even if it’s with a mask on,) hearing and seeing people who mean

a lot to us--there is joy in worship, and in remembering that we are children of God in Christ.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image...’” We enter into the book of Genesis at almost the end of the story this morning. God has created everything else--sun and moon, land, oceans, animals--and after each thing God says they are good. Creation is made with joy and for joy. And then did you catch what God says about the creation of humanity? *Very good--very good*. That’s you--you, *very good* God says. Most of the time, we don’t believe that, do we? Life has a way of squashing that belief out of us, and people in our lives can often hurry that along with hurtful words and lack of acceptance. We unlearn that name *very good* and replace it with words that belittle the person we see in the mirror. Inevitably we bring that harsh judgment to bear on other people, forgetting that the person sitting next to you right now and the person whom you can’t stand and the one you disagree with are also *very good* in God’s eyes.

We don’t truly believe that goodness for ourselves or for anyone else--and there are all kinds of consequences to that, aren’t there? We compete to see who is better, we criticize, and also hang on tightly to all that we have (*all that we’ve been given*) as if our money, our achievements, our accumulated ‘stuff’ is a better measure of our lives than God’s naming of us is. It’s exhausting...and a dead end.

Our Gospel today--so familiar to most of us--is a powerful remedy, a relief even. Jesus embraces children, blesses them and then invites us to receive the kingdom of God like a child. What would that mean? To receive it with openness, with surrender, with joy, trusting that Christ’s love is for us and that we are always *enough*. Would that kind of trust free you? Would it help us love? Would it help us let go and give what we’ve been given? Would we rediscover joy as individuals and as a faith community? Would we give that joy away? (Yes!)

*Together* as a congregation, we are invited to share what God has already given us. Whether you give in the Sunday offering plate or through electronic giving, that money goes on to make an impact on the lives of other people in Denver and in the rest of the world; it makes possible all the ministry we share in our congregation; and it provides a place--a building--for our own ministries and for hundreds of

community organizations every year. Just as importantly, our giving changes *us*-- Because instead of hanging on to everything with a death grip, giving helps us learn to trust Christ with our whole lives: everything we have, everything we are.

If you are a member of Augustana, you'll be receiving a commitment card in the mail this week. I want to challenge you, invite you, to prayerfully complete that card with what you plan to give in 2022 and bring it with you to worship on Commitment Sunday, October 24th.

I can stand up here and sound like Colorado Public Radio "Your support is needed now more than ever..." but it's true. We have weathered the pandemic but the way ahead will not be easy. There is a misguided belief that our congregation has a whole bunch of money just sitting around so whether you give or not, it doesn't make a difference. Nothing could be further from the truth! Our ability to accomplish our day to day, yearly mission and ministry depends on all of us and how much we choose to give back from what God has already given us.

We are created as very good, loved so deeply in Christ--given the privilege of living with joy and giving that joy away.