



**First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati
Extended Ministry Sunday
February 15, 2009
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
Rev. Sharon Dittmar**

Speakers: Morita Marmo, Fran Turner, and Rev. Annie Foerster

**Homily I
The Biggest Committee in the Church
Morita Marmo**

In 2003, almost six years ago, my life changed. That was the year my husband, Mike, was diagnosed with metastatic prostate cancer-the prognosis: a life expectancy of 2-5 years. He lived 5 years until his death last March. This was not the journey we had planned; actually, it often seemed more like a forced march, but none-the-less there were some lessons learned from this life-changing event, and two of them have to do with the way I came to view this congregation.

I have several caveats before I begin:

- 1) First, this is not really a homily. I'm not sure what to call my presence up here, but if I were a Baptist I suspect I would call it "testifying" because I'm speaking today on the Power of this Congregation in my life. The Baptists might call it the Power of the Holy Spirit. I know it as the Power of Love.
- 2) The second thing you should know is that while, by nature, I'm a pretty analytical person, my words this morning are much more

experiential than analytical. I did do just a little research about the effects of “doing good” (I am, after all, a Unitarian, and research is mandatory). According to a study done at the University of Louisville, “the more people participated in meaningful activities, the happier they were and the more purposeful their lives felt.” While that may be true, I have a feeling that what motivates people to “do good” for others in a congregation is not that they (the doers) want to feel better, but rather that a sense of community compels the members of that community to care for one another.¹

Lessons from a long illness:

The first thing I learned during the course of Mike’s illness is that Extended Ministry is done by the whole congregation. It IS the largest committee in church. To paraphrase an old *Pogo* comic strip: “I have met the Extended Ministry committee and they are us.” When I passed along the word of Mike’s diagnosis, there were multiple life lines thrown our way. To be sure, the official Extended Ministry Committee was important. They sent cards, visited, and coordinated the reception after Mike’s Memorial Service. To be sure, the support from the minister was invaluable. But it is equally true that those two strands of support would not have been enough. Every card, every postcard, every e-mail, every call, every flower, every visit, every morsel of food, every hug helped to weave a basket of support that sustained Mike and me throughout the 5 years of his illness and continues to sustain me in the year since his death.

When Mike was first diagnosed, I remember feeling that he and I were isolated inside a bell jar labeled CANCER, and that everyone else was on the outside in a kind of parallel universe. It was a very lonely, scary feeling. Soon, however, those calls and cards and other shows of support cracked the jar of isolation and we were surrounded by the loving care and compassion of this congregation. The Baptists would call this the Spirit of God at work. I call it the Spirit of Love at work, and I can testify that it is powerful.

The second thing I learned during the course of Mike’s illness is that everything matters. The book Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff (and it’s all small stuff)

¹ Qtd from “Doing Good Can Make You Feel Good,” *MSNBC.COM*, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18488538_

may be a useful guide for not taking ourselves and all the minutia of our lives too seriously, but in the case of this congregation's support of us, everything did and does matter. That's why I start each Circle of Friends column with these words from Leo Buscaglia: "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."²

In the children's book, *An Angel for Solomon Singer*, by one of my favorite authors, Cynthia Rylant, Solomon Singer lives alone in a hotel for men in New York City. It has none of the things he loves: no balcony, no fireplace, no porch swing, and no picture window for watching birds. He can't have a cat or a dog or even paint his walls a different color. So he wanders and dreams of Indiana where he grew up. According to Rylant, "Soloman Singer was lonely and had no one to love and not even a place to love, and this was hard for him. He didn't feel happy as he wandered."³

Then one day, he wandered into the Westwood Café where, the menu said, "all your dreams come true." And the waiter smiled at him, which made him feel good, and asked him to come back, which he did. And he came back to the Westwood Café many nights after that and each time the smiling waiter named Angel greeted him. Solomon Singer gradually began to see the city in a different light:

"The streets began to move before him like fields of wheat and he thought them beautiful. The lights in the buildings twinkled and shone like stars and he thought them lovely. And the voices of all who passed were like the conversations of friendly crickets, and he felt friendly toward them."

The circumstances of Solomon Singer's life changed very little but the kindness of a waiter changed how he related to those circumstances.⁴

And it is all those acts of kindness, large and small, that sustained Mike and me during his long illness. You are so thoughtful, and though I have tried to express my gratitude along the way, I feel absolutely incapable of expressing that

² Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff (and it's all small stuff)* (Hyperion: New York, 1997); Leo Buscaglia quote can be found at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/leo_buscaglia.html.

³ Cynthia Rylant, *An Angel for Solomon Singer* (Orchard Books: New York, 1992): 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

gratitude in mere words. After telling you that it all matters, I can tell you there are some things that don't. It doesn't matter if your card was the first or the last, it doesn't matter if you sent a card or an e-mail, it doesn't matter if I knew you well or a little or not at all. Each act of kindness mattered a lot. We felt loved. We felt supported. You made us strong.

You had so many wonderful ways of supporting us that I'm not even going to try to mention them all or to mention people by name, but I do want to give you an idea of the myriad ways people reached out to us: first, cards and e-mails. What a wonderful way to let people know you are thinking about them! One of my favorites was from a child in our RE program who wrote: "I hope you get out of bed." I knew what he meant. I saved them all. It comforts me still to have them nearby. One church member sent a postcard every time he traveled. The latest was a few weeks ago. There were those who visited us in the hospital and at hospice: many were close friends, but some we were just getting to know. There were those folks who made a special visit or wrote a card to remind Mike of how he had impacted their lives. Some of you "sat" with Mike when he could no longer be alone. Many of you sent contributions to Mike's favorite charity. Some of you sent me flowers when Sue Koehler died, knowing that would be a hard time, and some of you remembered me this Christmas, knowing that might also be a difficult time, and yesterday I received a Valentine card from a church friend. The oldest person to reach me was 98, and the youngest babies in the nursery lifted my spirits. I loved the visit from a young family whose 5 year-old daughter asked me if I was sad that my father died (I knew what she meant, too) and I was able to tell her honestly that yes, I was sad, but that I felt much better because she was there.

We do "often underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring." But I don't underestimate them any more because I know the compassion of each touch, the love in a smile or kind word, the comfort of a listening ear, and the power of each and every act of caring. I have seen the Power of this Congregation; I have seen the Power of Love.⁵

⁵ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/1/leo_buscaglia.html..

Homily II
It's Not Easy Being Blue
Fran Turner

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

It has been my experience that it is a good deal easier to give rather than receive. I would much rather be on the giving end rather than the receiving end.

With the thought that others of you may have a similar problem in receiving or asking for help, I want to tell you about some of my experiences. For those of you who have no problem getting and receiving help, tune me out and reflect on what Morita said. I remember when I was about 15 years old, it was raining and I was walking down some wet stairs when a gentlemanly boy friend reached out to steady me. I had no idea what he was trying to do, so I pushed back and he ended up falling down the stairs. My response to receiving help, while perhaps not as physically violent, continued to be vigorously refused.

I thought that was the way supposed to be. I imagine that there are quite a few of you who were raised the same way. To be independent. To be able to take care of yourself.

Those are pretty good ideals but when the ideals become close to being self-destructive when they cut us off from other people, then we had better take a good look at them.

I went on in my gloriously independent way for many years and then my husband became ill with Multiple Sclerosis and it became very clear that we had better get some help or we were going down the drain. So I began to let selected people help. They had to be very close friends or relatives, people I cared about and trusted- not very many. Casual acquaintances did not count. Even Ministers. The Minister from our church came over to the house when we were halfway down the drain and I could not imagine what he was doing there or how to respond to him. I was bewildered.

What do you say to people who reach out to you? Well, “thank you” is a good beginning.

And for many years that was my sole response. If they asked what they could do to help, I hadn't a clue.

What started me thinking about this business of receiving help, or thoughtfulness, or kindness, was a remark that I heard one day. And that was the observation that it was a mark of generosity to accept another person's reaching out. That to hold back, to refuse was an act of selfishness. Now I had always prided myself on my generosity, and this stung. The more I thought about it, the wiser I

found it to be. So I began practicing the joys of receiving-with an intake of breath and an attempt of a smile. It was probably pretty chilling, but at least I began to have more conversation than ‘thank you.’”

As the utter lack of sincerity began to bother me I had to do some more thinking. I began to realize what was at the bottom of my need to go it alone. At the bottom was fear. Fear to expose my vulnerability. Fear to admit that I was, in many ways, helpless. If I did that, it felt as if I would totally collapse. Strangely enough, I was not worried about what you might think of me, what I was concerned about was the loss of myself. The loss of what I thought of myself. Even I could recognize that this was nuts. Well, it is not really nuts, it is just false pride. That never has done me any good.

You see, often for me, being kind or thoughtful was a way of distancing myself from the other person. Often I would think, “Oh look how kind and thoughtful I am being. Aren’t I wonderful?” Well, folks, this is not authentic compassion.

It took a lot of meditation to discover these unsavory things about myself. The good news is that I eventually discovered that giving and receiving were two sides to the same coin and what it was all about was connection. One person connecting to the other, without any defenses, without any motive except to connect. And if it is genuine, it really makes no difference who is the giver and who is the receiver. What matters is the connection. Furthermore, without being in touch with my own vulnerability, I am unable to be of service to anyone else. Without being able to receive help, I cannot know how to appropriately help someone else.

There is another aspect, I think, to receiving and that is we need to try to tell the other person who is trying to help just what it is that we need. Some people want hugs, some want someone to listen to them, and some want to be left alone. These desires should be honored. And then there are the people who want to be rescued. Well, at odd times we all want to be rescued. When I have these whiney moments, I do appreciate someone telling me, in a kindly way, that I really am capable of taking care of myself.

So whether it really is more blessed to give than to receive, I just don’t know. Either way is good, one no better than the other. What is a blessing, I think, is that we can acknowledge that we are all in this together that we are all vulnerable and that we all are here to help each other. Thank you for listening.

Homily III
I'm No Good At This
Annie Foerster

The children brought home a note from the Principal: *There is a severe outbreak of measles at school. You can expect your children to get them.*

We waited a few days, a week – no measles. *We're going to beat this!* And then, in the second week, *I* came down with measles. *Came down* is a very apt phrase. I crashed. On Friday I sent the children to school and slept until they came home. But what was I going to do with them on Saturday? We had only just recently moved to this town. I knew no one in the neighborhood. As a single parent, I was woefully understaffed and ill-prepared for this kind of event.

I broke my own rule and told them they could watch as much television as they wanted. Then I crawled back into bed. Periodically, my eight-year-old daughter came in to ask if she could fix me a cup of tea, the family cure for everything. Each time she delivered the tea she would say, “I bet you wish your mother were here;” and I would reassure her that, no, she was doing a great job taking care of me. With her last delivery of tea before she went to bed that night, she repeated, “I bet you wish your mother were here;” and, worn down, I answered, “I kind of do.”

She threw herself on the bed and began to sob. “I know,” she wept when she found her voice. “When you’re sick, all you want is your mother.” She had known in her heart that she was inadequate for the task right from the beginning.

I had that same sense of inadequacy when I was told at the beginning of seminary that I would have to spend at least one semester as a hospital chaplain before I could be fellowshiped as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Except for my daughter’s tonsillectomy, I had no experience with hospitals. In my family, no one got that sick, and if you did, you didn’t bother anyone with it. My mother had several surgeries, but here was the drill: My father would call, with no warning, and say, “I just wanted to let you know your mother is fine.” “Why would I think otherwise, Dad?” “Well, she had a little operation two days ago and she’s going home tomorrow, so don’t worry.” And that was all we would ever know.

“I don’t know how to be a hospital minister,” I told myself. “I’ve never met one, never seen one and I probably won’t be very good at it.” Like many adults, I

hate doing things I'm not good at. So I tried to figure out a way to rehearse before the event. I had two years to put myself into that role as an adequate participant.

I signed up to be a suicide hotline counselor because, one, it was on campus, and, two, that scared me even more than being in a hospital. I discovered that the philosophy of this organization was *befriending*. They listened; they were *there* for the callers. They did not trace calls or send rescuers to their homes. And this gentle, open, caring response worked – not a hundred percent, but most of the time.

I spent two years there as a volunteer, every Wednesday and Saturday evening. I learned where the pain of the world lived, in loneliness, in despair, in learned self-loathing, in unfair accident and in memories of abuse. I talked with people who needed their mother, and she wasn't there; I gave them psychological cups of tea; but mostly I listened. I listened and I learned how to be a pastoral minister. I got good at it.

Morita has told you that you are a part of the chaplaincy in this congregation. Fran has told you how difficult it is for so many of us to ask for or receive help. And I'm here to tell you that we know what you mean if you are hesitant, if you think you aren't good at this kind of work, if you're reluctant to participate. I'm here to tell you that you are better than you think you are. I'm here to tell you if you've ever been in pain, you know how to hear pain. If you've ever been in need, you know how to hear need. If you've ever been lonely, you know how to listen to lonely. If you've ever been afraid, fear is no stranger to you.

Sharing the ministry. Extending the ministry. It's all about befriending. Being there. Listening.

You don't have to fix it. You *can't* fix it. For the most part, the world is a good place. It's my favorite place to be. But, from time to time, and more frequently than we'd like, it sucks, it stinks, it's lame, it's wac. Here's what you do – extend your heart; it's that flexible. Extend your arms; hold my hand when I need you. We'll get through it together.

Because we need one another.