Diligo, Ergo Sum
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A sermon by
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United Church of Christ
Ephesians 2:12-22
Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Mark 8:1-8
In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.’ His disciples replied, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’ He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’ Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

I’m thinning out my personal library these days, and giving away hundreds of books. Some will end up in our church library, some I’m giving to Laura and Rachel, and the rest will go to an organization that donates theological books to new seminaries in Africa and Asia.

Some of my books have been faithful companions through my ministry; and I am quite happy to help them find a good home, now that I no longer need them. Although, there are some books that are like old friends that I just can’t part with.
And then there are those books that I purchased with all good intentions - but somehow never got around to reading. Maybe you have some of these on your bookshelf, too!

I came across one such book last week, and it seemed so interesting that I just stopped sorting, and sat right down and started reading it. (At this rate, I may never get all of my books sorted out!). The book is called, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* by Stephen Post.

Now, many of us are familiar with the book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Rabbi Kushner. It’s a great book, and I strongly recommend it to those who are going through grief or tragedy.

But the book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* is quite different. The main thesis is that those who are caring and giving, kind and compassionate, tend to live longer, and to have healthier, happier lives.

Apparently, in recent years, a lot of high-level empirical research has been done on “good people” who lead generous lives. These studies have shown that giving of ourselves is good for us; it protects our overall health better than any medicine, or any pill we can take. “Give back instead of Prozac”: that’s how the author puts it.

Here are some of the research findings so far. It turns out that giving of yourself when you are a teenager is a predictor of good health all the way into late adulthood. And even if you start later on, giving significantly reduces mortality in later life. Both of these studies, it turns out, were done at UC-Berkeley, by research teams in different areas.

A study at the University of Michigan showed that helping out your friends and relatives significantly reduced mortality - whether you give emotional support, or financial and material support, or both. However, being on the receiving end of this support did not improve mortality rates.

In fact, in the study, those who simply received, and didn’t do anything to help others, were more than twice as likely to die during the 5-year period of the
study. These findings held true, even when factors like physical health and mental health were ruled out.

There’s a study from the University of Texas that shows that people over 65 who do volunteer work are less prone to depression and are less likely to die than those who don’t do any volunteer work.

There’s even a study that show that praying for others leads to fewer health difficulties for people in their old age.

It’s as the famous psychiatrist Karl Menniger once said: “Love cures – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.”

Now, this book is not just research studies; it’s also full of stories about amazing people - like Suzie Valdez, who was born in the slums of Mexico City, dropped out of school at age 15, had four babies in quick succession, and no husband. Talk about a person with few prospects.

But one day, Suzie Valdez packed up her children and her few possessions and made her way to El Paso, where she spent the next 40 years caring for dirt-poor Mexicans like herself. She founded a mission. She raised funds for two medical centers, she got politicians to put money into the schools, and her organization fed more than 3000 people a day.

But it doesn’t have to be so heroic. One story tells about a California teenager named Brian who half-heartedly agreed to be part of a volunteer tutoring program for students struggling with math. He says, “I found out how much I like this, so I kept it up. I've learned to connect with these kids, which has given me a sense of what I can do for the world.”

Indeed, Why Good Things Happen to Good People is a book that is chock-full of stories and ideas to stimulate our thinking about how you and I can be involved in helping others.

The author, Dr. Post, thinks that Descartes had it wrong, when he said, “Cogito ergo sum; which means “I think, therefore I am.” He suggests we replace this with the adage, “Diligo, ergo sum” which means: “I love, therefore I am.”
Love is the very essence of our being.

Now, none of this should come as a surprise to us, who are followers of Jesus Christ. We know that love and giving of ourselves are at the very core of Christ’s teachings. And we know that Christ calls each one of us to the abundant life: a life of grace and joy, in which we are not so focused on ourselves; instead, we spend our lives loving and serving others.

We know this. But we also know that it is counter-intuitive, and it is counter-cultural as well. How do we get motivated to do be more loving?

Well, the book I’ve just described attempts to motivate us by showing us that it’s in our own self-interest to be more caring and more generous. It will make us happier and healthier. And that may well be true.

But my hunch is that “self-interest” may not be enough to make us into truly caring and giving people. We need some deeper motivation.

And so, I want to suggest to you today that the most significant motivation for us to love others, as Christ loved us, can be summed up in one word. One compelling word. This word appears frequently in the original gospel text. Unfortunately, it’s a Greek word that has no adequate translation in English.

I’m not talking about agape – which is the Greek word for self-giving love. Nor is this a bit of Greek that has become familiar to us - like koinonia, or kairos. In fact, I’m pretty sure that we’re never going to name a room after this word! - because it’s a real mouthful. The word I’m talking about is splanchnizomai (splang-NIDZ-oh-MAH-hee).

This is a great word, and it’s very common in the gospels. But if you don’t read Greek you’ve probably never heard of it – unless you happen to remember me preaching about it before – which I have. Because I believe that splanchnizomai is central to what Christianity is all about.

Splanchnizomai is a very earthy word, and quite graphic - which is not surprising, since “earthiness” is typ-
ical of Greek language, as opposed to the more heady and sophisticated Latin, on which English is based.

*Splanchnizomai* literally means — and I’m going to try to put this delicately — it literally means, “to be physically affected in one’s bowels”; that is, “to have your intestines churned up.”

There is nothing quite like this word in English (!), so it is inevitable that much has been lost in translation. Thus, even though *splanchnizomai* is right there in so many of the most familiar Bible stories, still this forceful imagery is largely unknown to us.

You see, in most English translations, *splanchnizomai* — having your intestines churn with emotion — is translated by the word “compassion.” Or sometimes, the translation is, “He was moved with pity.”

Now, this is fine. But I think you’ll agree that these expressions are pretty wimpy by comparison with the original Greek. They don’t have the visceral impact (!) of *splanchnizomai* — being affected in your bowels; having your innards all riled up. We know exactly what that means. We know what it feels like!

Jesus used this word a lot. In fact, it’s right there in the passage that Matthew read to us today from Mark. But if we rush too quickly into the food distribution part of the story, we may miss it.

It seems to me that the great drama of the Feeding of the 5000 actually begins in verse 2, when Jesus says, “I have compassion.” I have compassion for the crowd, because they have had nothing to eat.”

A more accurate translation would be, “My insides are churning. I’m having a physical reaction to the hunger and suffering of these people.”

And let’s take a look at two of the best-known parables. In Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we read that when the father saw his wayward son, off in the distance, the father “had compassion.”

But you see, what this passage really says, in the original Greek, is that when the father saw his son, he experienced *splanchnizomai*. That is, his stomach and his insides began to churn — as he recognized his long-lost
son, and as he took on the pain of this disgraced young man who was now returning home in defeat and humiliation.

The father took that in, and physically experienced his son’s pain. And what did the father do? He “ran to meet him, and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

Then, there’s the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10. It’s such a familiar story, about people passing by a man who’s been beaten up and left along road. But a careful reading of this parable reveals that the difference between the first two travelers and the third one, the Good Samaritan, is precisely this: that when he saw the wounded man, the Samaritan had *splanchnizomai*. That is, the Samaritan had a direct, physical reaction to the pain of the one who lay wounded by the side of the road. And so, he immediately knelt down and began to help him.

Again and again in the New Testament, *splanchnizomai* leads to loving action. It is the motivating force that moves people to action.

Thus, to be a compassionate Christian means that we do not discount or ignore the pain of the world and the pain of our neighbor: No! Instead, to be compassionate means that we see the suffering of others, and we feel it, instead of passing it by. And we are moved to do something about it.

Loving action begins with compassion and empathy. And I want to suggest to you today that this is the difference. This is what will motivate us to invest our time and energy in loving and serving others.

Marilyn Blair understood this. This sanctuary was packed yesterday for the Memorial Service of this quiet, unassuming woman who touched so many of our lives. Everyone who spoke talked about Marilyn’s loving spirit and her generous heart: for her family, to be sure; but also for her neighbor, for the world, and for those in need. She was a loving, compassionate, and generous soul.

Diligo ergo sum. “I love, therefore I am.” Love is the essence of our being. You and I spend our time and
our energy on so many other things. But this is the core of who we are called to be.

And, what do you know? It’s also good for us: the research clearly shows that good things happen to good people – better health, and happier lives.

Last week, Laura gave One Great Hour of Sharing coin boxes to the children. On the side of the box, it says, “Sharing brings joy - to us, to others, to God.”

Dear friends, by the grace of God, may we be sharing people - who bring joy to others, to ourselves, and to God.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.