

The Benevolence Societies
Acts 20:32-36 / James 1:22-25; 2:14-17
Colebrook Congregational Church
November 15, 2015 / Community Service Sunday

The first of today's selections chosen to honor the work of our communities' service organizations comes from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the continuation of Luke's Gospel, where he tells the story of the earliest followers of Jesus after His Ascension. The Acts of the Apostles, while progressing chronologically, the first half generally focuses on Peter and the Disciples' efforts in the area around Jerusalem, while the second half generally focuses on Paul and the missions to the Gentiles.

The selection is from the end of Paul's Farewell Speech to the Elders of the Churches in Ephesus, where he had spent at least 3 years living, given to them in a port city called Miletus, in present-day Turkey, on the Aegean Sea. Paul was on his fifth and final trip to Jerusalem, and some say that he knew that this was his last visit and his last opportunity to speak to any of the churches that he and his missionaries had founded, and so this speech, while directed to the Ephesians, was taken to heart by all of Paul's churches. After the speech, he went on to Jerusalem to deliver offerings to the poor, and he ended up causing controversy by appearing at the Temple, which was forbidden for non-Jews to enter, and many thought that Paul was no longer Jewish. This caused a riot and Paul voluntarily allowed himself to be arrested by the Romans, claiming his right as a Roman Citizen to have his case heard by Caesar in Rome.

It is human nature, if you know that an encounter will be the last one, to say the things that are truly important to you, a final chance to say what you feel needs to be heard. And in that position, what does Paul say? What is so important to him? He quotes Jesus, saying: "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive." So, serving others' needs holds that place of importance to Paul!

Due to the many similarities in the three of the Gospels, there is a theory that there is a book of Jesus' saying that has been lost to time, called the Q Source. Scholars believe that this verse is points to that missing book, because none of the Gospels in the Bible depict Jesus saying that! The writer

of Acts is the Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke, and he includes a saying in his second book that was not in his first, even. It sounds like something Jesus would say, though. And no one is perfect, so it just may not have been recorded by the Gospel writers.

The Letter of James is my favorite of the letters. It is a moral exhortation in the form of a general letter, issuing a Call to action. While the other letters focus on right thinking, James is advocating right acting. The letter is not addressed to any one group and seems to be written to be all inclusive of all types of early Christians. It uses Jewish-Christian titles and greetings, it quotes the Torah and is more God-centric for Jewish Messianic listeners, it affirms the Ten Commandments and Leviticus through Jesus' Law of Love, it displays a vast knowledge of Jesus' Teachings and Wisdom traditions from Greek moral philosophy to the Bible's Wisdom Books of Proverbs & Ecclesiastes, and its attacks on oppression echoes the Prophets Isaiah & Amos, the go-tos for social justice. Lastly, its structure is the Greek oral style called Diatribe, with short essays interspersed with short commandments.

While James is a general letter, neither claiming novelty nor depth, it is lively, direct, and passionate in voice, exhorting practical faith and active love.

In the selection, James is contrasting between faith that is merely verbal and faith that shows it life in actions. His point is that words without action is futile. Someone needy cannot be helped either by a blessing or benevolent attitude, but only by concrete actions that incarnate those faithful benevolent attitudes. Deeds rather than speech carry conviction.

This concept was central to Congregational theologian and father of this church's first pastor, Jonathan Edwards' Theology of Love, an active faith, with spirituality as service to others. With his early death to smallpox, his students Joseph Bellamy of Bethlehem, CT, and Samuel Hopkins spread his theology further for him with the New Divinity movement, between the two Great Awakenings. And Hopkins gave it a new name: Disinterested Benevolence.

The idea is: You should help someone in need, because they are in need and you are able to help, and you do so without hope or want of reward. You do it because it is the right and good thing to do, not because you want a reward or recognition. An active faith, leading to acts of selfless love, and in its purest form, no one, besides God, would even know what good thing you did to help someone in need.

This theology, combined with the general feelings of inter-denominational cooperation during the Great Awakening, led to different Protestant churches working together to form benevolence societies.

I wondered if there were organizations like this before Jonathan Edwards & I was having trouble thinking of any. To be sure, individual religious or civic organizations have served the needy, seen to the needs of those in their area, but those efforts were localized and part of the mission of that church or other religious or government organization, like how schools make sure their students have gloves in winter, or a church having a food pantry, not a separate organization, like the Lions or Scouts, or the Y, or the Colebrook Associates.

So, I tried looking it up. Apparently, the first recorded act of philanthropy was in 347 BC, when Plato left his farm to his nephew with instructions that the proceeds were to support the students and faculty of the academy he founded. A couple hundred years later, a Roman did the same thing. Then there seems to be nothing for millenia. There were government-run programs and boards in England & America starting with the Elizabethan age, but still no organizations. In 1630, John Winthrop, a prominent Congregational preacher, gave his famous "City on a Hill" sermon, but that was about individuals. In 1643, that community college in Cambridge, MA held the first recorded fund drive, raising £500 for a scholarship. It wasn't until 1657 that the first independent community service organization was founded. It was called the Scots Charitable Society of Boston, and it was set up to provide relief to local, "needy Scotch people, after proper investigation," and it became the prototype for all private charitable organizations in America.

Then we have Cotton Mather in 1702 publishing essays encouraging volunteerism. The first orphanage on this continent was founded in New Orleans in 1729. The St. Andrew's Society formed in 1730 to assist all people in distress, no matter their nation or profession. Then you have Jonathan Edwards' magnum opus *On Religious Affections* in 1746. A house for the poor in Philadelphia was created in 1767. And in 1770, the St. George's Society of New York was established to help the impoverished in New York City, and it still exists and is considered America's oldest charity.

And from then on, a whole plethora of societies generate out of this momentum of benevolence. They have changed through the centuries, meeting the needs as they develop over time. Focuses shift, needs vary, and groups sprang up or shifted to meet them.

After graduating from Divinity School, I joined AmeriCorps. I was assigned to a first grade classroom in a large elementary school in Worcester's ghetto. The teacher I was assigned to seemed to have reservations about AmeriCorps' presence. She was nice enough, but one day, she turned to me and asked in a borderline nasty way, Why would I or anyone else decide to join AmeriCorps?

I was taken aback by her question and tone. I didn't think that I had encountered an attitude like that to that depth. All my life, I have always been of service to my community. I started helping with programming at church as soon as I was big enough to be a go-for. I went from Tiger Cub to Eagle Scout. I joined the service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega, and volunteered with Rebuilding Together, Habitat for Humanity, 4-H, Boys & Girls Club, church youth programming, Scout Camps & Troops, and many other one-off service projects. I like to keep busy, and I've always felt drawn to answer Jesus' Call to serve others, so that has led me naturally to mostly be around like-minded people. So, being faced with that teacher's attitude, I was shaken. I tried to speak of patriotism, civic responsibility, and religious calling, but in that moment, my tone lacked confidence and conviction. She dismissed everything I said out of hand as nonsense. After some back & forth, I realized the futility of the conversation, and stopped trying. This is something that I wish I could do over.

While it is great when individuals serve one another, on their own, when a group of like-driven individuals band together into modern-day benevolence societies, a greater good can be achieved. Greater things can be achieved in a group that could not be by a single individual, through pooled resources & contacts & sheer manpower. A house built. Fuel aid rendered. Scholarships awarded. Glasses distributed. Eagle projects accomplished. A cemetery cleaned. Youth molded. Communities served and protected. And a community fed.

All these things and more have been accomplished by the service organizations of our communities. By you, in fellowship with others, working toward a common purpose. And another good thing about being part of a community service organization, is that as a group, each of you can feel the confidence and conviction of knowing that you are doing good for your community. Continue to serve with that confidence, and with our thanks.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

[Pause]

Creator God, You call us to love and serve You with body, mind, and spirit through loving Your creation and our sisters and brothers. Open our hearts in compassion and receive our petitions on behalf of the needs of the church and the world.

We thank You for Your blessings, and for giving us the strength to serve others. We thank You for those You have sent to help us in our daily lives. We thank you for the generous donations that will help us help our neighbors in need.

We know we are not perfect, so we pray for the forgiveness of our transgressions. We pray for your guidance to live our lives in more loving ways.

We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those who are held by troubles. We pray for the loosening of their burdens, & we pray for their caregivers. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to continue to be instruments of your divine love.

We are reminded of all in world who need our prayers. We pray for the families of the victims of violence. We pray for the refugees around the world, both home & abroad, for victims of natural disasters, please see them to safer places, and we give thanks to those who provide them shelter. We pray for those who are enduring drought & famine. We pray for all to have a safe place.

We especially pray for:
(France)

Redeeming Sustainer, visit Your people and pour out Your strength and courage upon us, that we may hurry to make You welcome not only in our concern for others, but by serving them generously and faithfully in Your name. Amen.

Acts 20:32-36

32 And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. 33 I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. 34 You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. 35 In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." '

36 When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed.

James 1:22-25; 2:14-17

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing.

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.