“Many Reasons to Celebrate”
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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eugene, Oregon
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
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6The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” 10He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, 14while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Introduction: As we come together on this Consecration Sunday, I fervently believe we have many reasons to celebrate! This morning, I am going to lift up a number of these blessings in a spirit of Thanksgiving. A quick Spoiler alert…. This room is filled with them! Would you please join me in prayer…

PRAYER:
Loving God, you call us to be your light in the shadow places, your voice in the wilderness, your hope for the hopeless. You give us strength in our weakness, peace and gentleness, caring words and boldness, to proclaim more of you and of us, less. Help us to claim this strength, this clarity of vision, this light of your love for the living of these days. And guide us as we strive to better reflect in our lives your generous spirit! Amen.

SERMON

Silence.
Silence is sometimes described as golden – that peace at the end of a miserable day when all of life’s chaos seemed to be in full voice.

Silence can also be awkward – like two young people possessing powerful feelings for one another but little knowledge in how to express themselves…. And so, they sit staring at their shoes, daring not look at each other.

And then, there are those times when silence reflects moments of deep connection – between beloved family members, or old friends, or people of faith trying to find their way together.

Holy Moments when souls touch.

As you may know, during the past two weeks, Lisa and I hosted 9 Gatherings at our home for conversations and heartfelt discussions around the theme: “What do you need the Church to be for the Living of these days?”

Can I just take a moment to thank Lisa for her gracious and caring companionship as she helped sponsor these gatherings in our home on Brookside Drive. As you may know these were the third series we offered
together. And each time I asked Lisa if we could have a few hundred people over... I received an immediate and enthusiastic, “Sure! When?” Lisa your generous spirit is truly an inspiration for me. Thank you!

To be honest, we both love doing them. We so enjoy the gift of connecting more deeply with each of you. (It also helps us keep our house reasonably-clean - at least a short stretch of time!)

Well, if you are one of the 137 that joined us in “the tree house,” as we like to call our home, you might remember the first exercise I offered and the discussions that followed…. I know I will never forget.

I asked everyone to write down three things on three Post It Notes. Three concerns, burdens, deep cares or worries - 3 things that keep us up at night.

Then, anonymously, to help preserve the desired atmosphere of safety, I shared them aloud with the group, one by one, and put them each on a big board. Concerns about our world, our nation, our families, our selves, even questions about our very existence here on earth.

And something happened every single time I read the notes, a hush would fall over the room - as the burdens of each person were acknowledged in silent reverence.

It was a moment when souls touched. Remember what we shared after I finished reading them…

We had no idea that we carried such heavy burdens wherever we went. (Weren’t we just laughing together a short time ago – seemingly carefree?)

We had no idea that others had the same concerns that we carried – I no longer feel so alone.

It felt good to share together, being church for one another, finding strength in our common faith and growing sense of community.

Yes, in that silence there was moment of deep listening and then souls touched.

This then led to an exercise to help us address a challenge that stands before us - where is our ministry emphasis today and where will the spirit, speaking through the hearts of the many who gathered, possibly guide us.

We discussed the challenge of being a church that strives to be a place of spiritual enrichment, activism, advocacy, and Sanctuary.

And we addressed the need for ministry balance.

What a blessing it was for me, as a pastor, to be part of those discussions.

We truly listened to one another (how rare is that in these days of polarization) and in the process, I believe we heard the voice of God…

Now, we are still discerning what it all might mean…. But, this I can say with some assurance… There is a deep need for Sanctuary, a place to repair our souls and find strength for the Living of these Days.

I invite you to see the results of our Gatherings as recorded on Eight of the large sheets from our discussions that are now up on a poster board in the Atrium.

In our meetings together, a ministry challenge was engaged through deep listening and by generous caring spirits.

This morning, on this Consecration Sunday, we have another ministry challenge before us.

To help us meet this challenge, our Stewardship Committee adopted a theme, “Celebrating a Generous Life!” We did so because we felt that this was what God was calling us to be and do as a community of faith. We also felt strongly that as a church we have many generous caring souls who set the tone for this incredible ministry.

Let me lift up just two examples…

The first came from last week’s worship service. Were you here? What an inspiring worship service our Elders offered for all of us! So, incredibly touching and beautiful!
And during that service, to help set the tone for this week, Don Gall shared how he decided to sell his home in order to reduce his monthly expenses so he might live more fully into a life reflective of God’s generosity. The money he saved gave him the freedom to generously support the organizations he believed in.

From this pulpit, Don said, “…for me, stewardship is an attitude of gratitude that is expressed through a willful sharing of my time, talent, and treasure in proportion to what I’ve received. It is also the willful ordering of my life and possessions in a way that expresses my deepest beliefs and promotes my highest values.”

Wow! Don’s example of generosity is so inspiring!

I would like to lift up another person in our midst who inspires me and all those who know her. She is bit younger than Don. And I have her permission to share…

It started not too long ago when she was 4 years-old. Her mother told me that while reading stories from the Children’s Bible to her daughter she would be totally engrossed and would often say, "this is what I needed to know! Keep going!"

It wasn’t long before she started carrying her own little cat shaped purse full of her coins and a couple dollars...whatever she had… which wasn't much. Her mother asked one day why she needed the purse full of change. After all, she didn't need to spend her own money usually. With a shy and embarrassed look her little daughter explained, "because I want to have money to give to the people on the street in case we see them"

Her sincerity was born out one particular day when she saw a man at a traffic light on Willamette Street holding a sign asking for help. While strapped in her booster seat the 4-year old leaned over to roll down the back window. A bit surprised the man came over and looked in. Then with delight he accepted her generous gift as she gave him her little wad of a paper dollar and a bunch of coins from her little purse. With tears in his eyes he responded to the incredibly generous offering of the little one by saying "Thank you Sweetheart" and then from the heart, "God Bless you!" With tears in her eyes her mother offered her blessings too. The sweet generosity and care of her little girl brought three souls in touch that day. This was not an isolated event…. The joy of a generosity continues into this day.

I understand birthdays are seen as an opportunity to raise money for whatever cause is near and dear to her heart.

The first year she donated a couple hundred dollars to WWF shark fund. She explained to everyone on a poster she made for her party that humans were much more of a risk to sharks than they are to us.

The next year she collected another couple of hundred for the Malala Fund after she read "I Am Malala" and was inspired by her story.

Last year, she wanted to act more locally. After some research, she chose First Place Family Center. So, at her very rainy birthday park party she collected lots of money again. She also had material available, so people could make cards for the families at First Place. Then, she took the cards, the envelope of money, and a couple large bags of her toys and stuffed animals for the kids, to the center with her mom the next day. The receptionist at First Place gratefully received her gifts and told her what a wonderful thing she'd done and how very generous she was….