



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Motivation

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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How many of you have ever worked somewhere that had a contribution basket in the coffee room? You get your cup of coffee or tea and you are expected to throw something in the basket to share the expense. Have you ever taken your caffeine of choice without putting anything in? Well at the University of Newcastle, a team of researchers did some research on this very case. They posted suggested prices for the various beverages in the coffee room. Each week the poster had a picture on the top, either flowers or a pair of eyes. By the end of a ten week period, the experiment showed that when the price list had the pair of eyes, people put three times as much in the "honesty box." Apparently even the suggestion of being watched makes us more honest. And there are probably several other interesting lessons in that research well.

Clearly there's a lot of brain stuff going on here. Our brains are particularly adept at processing facial features, especially eyes, because that is such an important component of being the highly "social animals" that we are. How we are perceived often has an impact on our social standing or success, and our brains are constantly scanning the faces of those from whom we seek approval. So when we perceive that we are being watched, apparently even if that occurs in the form of just the image of two eyes, we instinctively sense that our behavior is under scrutiny, and we act the way we want people to think of us. Not many people would want to be seen as dishonest, as a cheater, or a crook.

This notion that we want to be perceived within our communities in a certain light, and what motivates us to behave so that we might be perceived that way is relevant to today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews, which happens to contain one of my favorite passages - "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

This passage evokes the thrilling idea of playing host to some heavenly being in disguise because it prompts us to wonder why they might be in our midst, where they might be headed and on what kind of mission. Did they just need a place to rest or were they really here for us? What do they want with us? Was it to bring us something wonderful or were they checking up on us, like the disembodied eyes in the Newcastle researchers' case study.

Then as I read this text again, I suddenly wasn't so sure how I felt about it, in particular the admonition "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." You might ask, what's troubling about that? We strive to follow the teaching to do good and share what we have all of the time here. But deeply embedded in that command is the much tougher question of, "Why is it that we do such things and what is our motivation?"

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The phrase "because such things are pleasing to God" has an important sub-text. First of all, you must be clear about how you understand the concept of God. The language of the Bible and our tradition overwhelmingly casts God as a supreme being, with overtones of supreme judge. This being is somewhere outside of us. We are told to love God but also to fear the Lord, to worship and praise, to petition, and to strive to please. With a god like this, we might obey the instructions because we are afraid not to. I ask you, is that the best motivation we can summon?

The mission and work of Christ, I believe, is to deconstruct these images of a distant God so unlike us and to provide us with motivations other than pleasing a supreme and judgmental God. Jesus tried, over and over again, to redefine things. The Kingdom of God (or heaven) is not something that you must wait to be brought by someone else, it is here, in your midst, if you will learn to see it. Using himself as the example, he said - "God is in me and I am in God." Oh, and by the way, the same holds for you." God is in you and you are in God. So the idea of pleasing some distant being as motivation for kindness and generosity begins to unravel.

The purest motivation for anything that we do is love. Doing something because you love frees you from the fear of judgment, the need for approval, insecurity and the old favorite "I'm not enough so I can't do that." Trust in the teachings of Jesus - he understood that the law was about love not fear. People who are motivated by universal love don't hurt others, they don't steal or kill, they don't pursue wealth at any cost, they're not likely to pursue social status because they are perfectly comfortable in their positions within community. They don't need a pair of eyes or the promise of angels to remind them to behave in a certain way, because they are already motivated to see love in others and want to do what is best for them.

And so, don't neglect to show hospitality because hospitality is an expression of the love that you are. Be kind and generous because love makes you want to. So here's a true story about some people who get it. They call themselves the 9 Nanas.

35 years ago in a town near Memphis, TN, a group of women were reminiscing about the grandmother who had raised 4 of them after their mother had died. This grandmother always paid attention to what was going on in the town and if she learned of someone who was going through a hard time, grief or loss or trouble, she would send one of her special pound cakes. She didn't have to know the family; she just wanted to put a smile on their faces. The nine nanas, as they like to call themselves, began to wonder what they could do to make a difference, to make happiness happen. What if they had some mad money. The idea that they came up with was to begin doing their own laundry, including their husband's shirts, and saving the money to put toward their enterprise. At first it garnered them about \$400 a month and they went to work, listening, in the beauty parlor, grocery store, wherever they were. If they heard of someone who was having trouble paying their utilities, they would step in and pay the bill anonymously and drop off one of a pound cake with a note that said simply, "someone loves you." They were like pound cake ninjas and no one, not even their husbands knew. And then they got bolder.

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One of them tells with delight, "We gave new meaning to the term drive-by." "We'd drive through low-income neighborhoods and look for homes that had fans in the window. That told us that the people who lived there didn't have air-conditioning. Or we'd see that there were no lights on at night, which meant there was a good chance their utilities had been turned off. Then we'd return before the sun came up, like cat burglars, and drop off a little care package."

For three decades they got away with it. Then one of the husbands noticed unaccounted for miles on the car and withdrawals from the bank account and confronted his wife, Mary Ellen, with his evidence. She said, recalling the horror she felt, "I tried to explain that I had bought some things, but he had this look on his face that I'd never seen before -- and I realized what he must have been thinking. I called the sisters and said, 'You all need to get over here right away.'"

The nine nanas and their husbands gathered in Mary Ellen's living room and the women confessed their secret lives. The husbands were astonished at what had gone on under their noses and then asked how they could help. The nanas put the men to work tracking down addresses of people who needed a little happiness in their lives. Not long after, they told their children, who encouraged their mothers to begin selling the pound cakes on line so that they could have even more money to help. Soon there were over 100 orders a day. They moved operations to a commercial kitchen and now ship pound cakes all over the place. In their nearly 35 years of ninja baking, they have contributed over \$900,000 worth of happiness in their community and now it is spreading.

These women were not motivated by trying to please someone or to find favor with God. They acted out of love. What else is there to say?

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