

There is an Irish fable from County Clare that best illustrates the mystery of abundance and the call to graciousness that is the theme for this morning's sermon. It's called the Legend of the *Glas Gabhna*, and it goes like this: in the mountains near Carron in County Clare there lived a smith who owned a magical cow that gave an endless supply of milk. When she was milked, she could fill any vessel. The smith knew how valuable she was, and one of his seven sons always watched over her. Over a long period of time, the cow gave an endless supply of milk. Her fame and magic spread everywhere.

One day, while on his watch, one of the sons fell fatally asleep. An old woman came by and saw that the magical cow was left unguarded. She had a sieve with her, and she began to milk the cow into the sieve. She milked and milked and milked and the milk flowed endlessly on the earth until the cow fell down. When the son awoke, he saw the ground white with milk beneath the fallen cow – and called for help. When the father and his sons returned, the cow had gone away, and she was never heard from again. Sometime after she departed, seven streams broke forth from the spot where she had fallen. They can be seen there today and are known as the Seven Streams of Toasca.

This legend might sound cautionary, but I hear it as invitational. In my mind, Trinity is the cow because for our little church, 2017 really was the land of ever flowing milk and honey. Here, in this place, within this community, abundant gifts flowed and flowed and flowed. I went on sabbatical – and that is the gift that keeps on giving. It was during this time that I renewed and strengthened my relationships – with God, myself, spouse, children, extended family, friends, neighbors, colleagues. I rode my bike across Iowa. I chanted psalms with the brothers at a monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I cleaned the heck out of my house, painted my home office, and did yoga. I read, thought, and prayed. I stood on an island and stared into the Baltic Sea from a lighthouse that my great grandfather ran, and his father, and his father. I returned to Trinity full of peace, energy and commitment plus LOTS of sermon fodder!

Back at Trinity, I found that you had similarly enjoyed the abundant flow of God's gifts. You, too, seemed peaceful and energetic and committed in a new way. What I witnessed was a Vestry that stepped up and *led the parish* with a considerate, gracious presence. I saw long-time *relationships* strengthened and new relationships formed – manifest in the coming together for a combined summer worship every Sunday, and the sharing of spiritual autobiographies from the pulpit. What I witnessed, in ways both profound and subtle, was *genuine delight in one another*. St. Augustine said: 'The soul is weighted in the balance by what delights her. Delight or enjoyment sets the soul in her ordered place. Where the delight is, there is the treasure.' It's almost as if you discovered the hidden treasure of Trinity embodied in the hearts and souls of each other. Richard Niebuhr once said, "Other than baptism and eucharist, the person sitting next to you is the greatest sacrament."

The other thing I witnessed at Trinity this fall was a *spiritual deepening*. I saw it in an increased intensity and attention during worship. I saw it in the way a group of parishioners teamed up with Andrew and not only hosted, but designed, our Advent Service of Remembrance which, to my mind, was the very best one we've ever offered. I saw it in the stunning, moving liturgy of committing Addie Pearson's ashes to our columbarium, written by Anne and then led on a Sunday in between the services.

How thrilling it was to watch the spiritual pieces connect as our children carried their dripping hands, wet from the baptismal font, to the columbarium, to touch Addie's final resting place. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" never felt more real, or more holy, or made so much sense. I also saw evidence of spiritual hunger among so many of you – inquiring minds, a longing to go deeper, a craving for silence or an experience of God. Many of you practiced Centering Prayer in the chapel, or connected at Women's Circle, or traveled with Trinity Brothers to the House of Prayer, or made meals for parishioners in need.

Yes, the inner life is well and thriving -- outwardly reflected by a kind of *calmness* in the parish. The 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart always encouraged such calmness. He called it *Gelassenheit*. Over against the world with all its turbulence, distraction and worry, Eckhart said, one should cultivate a style of mind that can reach through to an inner stillness and calm. The world cannot ruffle the dignity of a soul that dwells in its own tranquility. Gradually, Eckhart believed, this serenity begins to pervade our seeing and change the way we look at things. And I believe this deepening is happening at Trinity Church.

There's a song that dates back over 1000 years that is sung on the Jewish holiday of Passover, called *Dayenu*. The song is about being grateful to God for all of the gifts God gave the people Israel. The word *Dayenu* translates as: "it would have been enough," or "it would have been sufficient," or "it would have sufficed." *It would have been enough, that you gave us life, O God, but you gave us the prophets and Torah. It would have been enough that you saved us from slavery, but you gave us manna in the wilderness.* So, when I look back on this past year at Trinity, what comes to my mind is: *Dayenu*. It would have been enough to give us our respective sabbaticals. It would have sufficed that God gave us that time to deepen our relationships, and increase our delight in each other, and awaken our inner lives. Any one of those gifts would have been sufficient, but God gave us more. For 2017 was the "year of the initiative" – with prophetic expressions of our faith popping up in new ministries and groups. They include, as I've already mentioned, the Centering Prayer group, and the new Women's Circle, and the deepening of the offerings of Trinity Brothers – through spiritual development, fellowship, and service. *Dayenu*. We also saw the launch of a Trinity Titans baseball team, the Trinity Care Team, Red Cross blood drives, and a new Thursday Men group. *Dayenu*. We were given resources to renovate our nursery, and make capital improvements to our building, partner with Excelsior Books, welcome new members, and pilot an outreach ministry with Common Bond. *Dayenu*. Any *one* of these gifts would have been enough. At today's Annual Meeting, our Senior Warden, Sally Browne, will elaborate on these and others of God's many gifts of 2017. We are, simply, awash in goodness and blessing, and our hearts runneth over. *Dayenu*.

So, the question that I pose this morning is this: how do we respond to God's abundance? Harkening back to the Legend of *Glas Gabhna*, we can choose the sieve or we can choose the vessel. The legend isn't very subtle. The way we are called to engage abundance is to have, within us as a community, the life form that can engage, graciously, the gifts that we are receiving. The thing about the vessel was that it always held the milk. The thing about the sieve was always about emptying, distaining, allowing the gift to flow through – blindly – without recognizing its beauty or its abundance or its graciousness. So often we are vulnerable to living like paupers in the midst of abundance, simply because we're not paying attention and default to the sieve instead of some vessel which can actually hold the God's gifts and allow us to enter into the blessing that the gifts actually want to confer in us.

What I propose today, our focus, perhaps, for 2018 – is to build a vessel to hold the gifts in order to build upon, and deepen, those gifts over time. To me, the vessel building, in this moment in time, can take three forms: *securing our financial future, investing in our “inner lives,” and reclaiming our missional tradition.*

If Trinity is to sustain itself into the future, if we are to continue caring for souls, and worshipping God, and impactfully ministering to our community - we have some work to do with regards to planning, financially, for our future. Trinity has been standing on some very strong and generous shoulders for a long time. Recently, the Vestry considered statistics about giving at Trinity, the most striking of which is that 41% of our current pledging base comes from parishioners who are 70 years or older. This reality presents a challenge and an opportunity – not a crisis! I think it wise, if we are interested in opting for a vessel rather than a sieve, to focus, in 2018, on the ministry of financial giving and stewardship – and to learn from each other about the part that stewardship plays in the spiritual life. While on sabbatical I came across the most wonderful obituary in the Star Tribune about Angus Wurtele – a prolific arts philanthropist and former CEO of Valspar. The portrait was of a humble man with tremendous business acumen and a heart for investing in the city. The best part was the quote from his wife Margaret. “I think the creative act, whether it’s writing a poem or writing a book or performing in a play, is really the highest expression of the human spirit and that’s what we want to nurture in our giving.” What an inspiring concept! *Giving as facilitating creative acts, but also giving as the highest expression of the human spirit, a creative act in and of itself.* We owe it to ourselves and to our church to dig in and come to a place where we can better understand giving – our giving -- as a creative act, and an essential part of what it means to practice the Christian faith.

Also, in the spirit of building the financial part of our vessel, with the Vestry’s blessing, we have launched the second phase of a Planned Giving program. Planned giving is the invitation for parishioners to consider setting something aside for Trinity in their estate planning. This next Planned Giving team stands on the shoulders of the first team, made up of Dale Anderson, Mark Capaldini, and Matt Frerichs who had the vision and foresight, two years ago, to begin this process and lay the foundation from which we launch phase two. More on that later.

The Vestry will also, in the spirit of vessel building, begin to consider the need and viability of a capital campaign at Trinity. Planning for our future holds exciting possibilities of making our physical plant more accessible and user-friendly to existing and future parishioners, and surrounding community partners. Some capital improvements could have the capacity to bring operating costs down in the future and ease, perhaps, the level of pledge income needed to operate. And our endowment, relatively small for the size and operating budget of our church, would benefit greatly from such a campaign, and provide dependable financial resources that would equip Trinity to not only weather whatever the future brings but support its ongoing mission and ministry in the world.

Because God gave Trinity what feels like an awakening of the *inner life* this past year, what would it look like to build a vessel to hold and grow that gift? Today the Vestry will present to you a balanced budget for 2018. This amazing feat is brought to you by the wizardry and hard work of Scott Hultgren and our two Treasurers (incoming and outgoing). It is also brought to you by the staff who found line-items to cut and tighten for 2018, by everyone who pledged, and by those of you who responded to our December plea to contribute just a little bit more to close what was, at the time, a daunting budget deficit. Through these efforts, we will have enough to hire a part time person to work alongside Anne

Miner-Pearson in children's ministry. This hire will give Anne time and energy to focus her limitless gifts and talents on adult faith formation. I don't know what the vessel will look like – with Anne you never do. But be assured that Anne will meet each of us where we are, work collaboratively, and create opportunities - for those of us who long to go deeper – to meet and experience the living God. As Anne says, “faith formation is not about information – it's about transformation.” What an exciting future for the work of relationship building and spiritual inquiry Trinity engaged this past year.

And finally – building on the gifts of 2017, I believe, has something to do with reclaiming, and reengaging, Trinity's rich tradition of *mission and outreach*. In a recent magazine Q&A, Whoopi Goldberg was asked to name the living person she most admired. “Pope Francis,” she responded. “Yeah...,” she added, “he's goin' with the original program.” I love that response – because I suspect most of us recognize and connect to it. We know that the ‘original program’ is about living the Gospel with joy and always being mindful of the poor, the struggling, the cast-offs. We know that the Gospel is an invitation to the margins, knowing that if we stand there, the margins get erased. It's not about taking the right stand on issues, but about standing in the right place, with the excluded and the demonized, and the misunderstood and the dirty. There are over 200 references in our holy scriptures that ask us to take special care of the poor. So, I'm guessing, it's important. It is this preferential care and love for the poor that sets the stage for the original program. And Trinity has an excellent and effective original program in our 30-year history of Refugee Resettlement, and in our Mental Health Initiative. I don't think we have to recreate the wheel or dream up something flashy or new. When we are filled to the brim with more gifts than we can possibly handle, as we are in this moment, the only reasonable response – really the only Christian response - is to turn around and give to other people. I wonder if a fitting vessel isn't recommitting to *our* original program and returning to those ministries that have, for so long, defined who we are, and bound us to so many people outside our walls?

The last thing I'd like to offer is my personal contribution to the vessel. Because Trinity's leadership has taken the reigns like never before this past year, I find my role shifting from that of a “guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage.” And this is the higher calling, really. I will dedicate 2018 to learning how to better coach and encourage, honing the craft of supporting *your* initiatives, *your* ideas.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said of church: “it's not the place you go to, it's the place you go from.” Church is where we build Christian relationships by practicing compassion, listening, and mutual support. Church is where we worship. Church is where we watch for, and experience, and talk about God's gifts. Church is where we practice discipleship. But ultimately, it's the place that hopefully fills us enough that we are able to go from here, out into the world, to be the church, to proclaim the Gospel, to love and give and minister. God has given Trinity every single gift it needs to fill and send us. How we will name, gather, and build on those gifts is our work to do in 2018. *Dayenu*. AMEN.

Sources:

The Legend of *Glas Gabhna* comes from “Beauty: Rediscovering the True Sources of Compassion, Serenity, and Hope,” by John O’Donohue, pp.52-53.

The St. Augustine quote about delight is also found in “Beauty,” pp. 13-14, and the Meister Eckhart reference is found on pp. 17-18.

Dayenu (song): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtLKOcFwct4>

“Going with the original program” quote and subsequent commentary comes from: “Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship” by Gregory Boyle, pp.153, 159, 164, and 207.