

What Does God Want from Us?

First Congregational Church Sermon, August 5, 2018

Delivered by Beverly Daniel Tatum, Ph.D.

Thank you for inviting me, on behalf of the Board of Trustees, to be the speaker this morning. I am truly grateful to be here. It is always good to be in the house of the Lord, and I am especially excited today to share my message. I have a story to tell, and I am grateful to be able to tell it.

I titled my message “What Does God Want from Us?” but it really stems from my search to understand what God wants from *me*. That was a question that really started burning for me in the fall of 1991 – 27 years ago. I know, some of you weren’t even alive then! But here’s what happened.

In 1991 I was living with my husband, Dr. Travis Tatum, and our two sons in Northampton, Massachusetts. I was a psychology professor at Mount Holyoke College. When I wasn’t at work or with my family, I was leading workshops about racism – traveling all over the country co-leading “unlearning racism” workshops with another trainer, and on this occasion she and I were leading a weekend retreat for an interfaith group of clergy in St. Louis. In the opening session of our workshop, a theological disagreement erupted. One of the participants made a provocative statement about sexuality that other clergy disagreed with, and a heated discussion ensued. My workshop partner was facilitating the discussion, but while it was going on, something happened to me. It’s hard to explain exactly what happened, but it was like I got zapped. While I was standing on the stage, listening to the back and forth, I felt this tingle all over, like a low-level shock. And at that moment, I had a heightened awareness that what we were doing – leading that workshop – was *really important*. While this was not a new idea, after all I had already been teaching a course on the psychology of racism for over a decade, there was something more powerful about this experience than any other I had ever had. After a while, the clergy debate that had erupted subsided, and we got back to talking about racism. But because it was a retreat, during mealtimes, several of the clergy continued their earlier discussion, which I found riveting.

What was especially intriguing to me was the fact that though there were disagreements, each person used the Bible to defend their point of view. How is it, I wondered, that they could use the same source and yet have such different opinions? This really puzzled me, and I kept thinking about it. All I can say for certain was that I was *fired up* when I got home, with questions that I felt could only be answered by greater knowledge of the Bible. I was *obsessed* with finding the answers to these questions.

As it happened, at that time, my husband and I had just joined a new church, one we had been attending for a few months. We liked the pastor and his Sunday messages, but we didn't know him very well. When I got home from the St. Louis retreat, I was so preoccupied with the conversations I heard there that I called up my new pastor, and I asked if I could meet with him. What I wanted to know is why there was so much disagreement about what the Bible said. I decided I needed to read the relevant passages myself, but I didn't know which ones they were, so I asked my pastor to point me in the right direction. (Keep in mind, this was before Google!)

Now, just to be clear, I grew up in a Congregational Church in Massachusetts, I attended Sunday School, sang in the youth choir, memorized the 23rd Psalm, and a few other scriptures, but I was not what we might call "Biblically literate." So, I didn't know where to look to find out what I wanted to know. The pastor gave me that information, and I began to read the Bible – not just a little bit, but voraciously, cover to cover. I felt like I was on fire, and the only way to put the fire out was to keep reading. As I did that, I came across passages that puzzled me more – things like "Slaves, obey your masters," and some troublesome passages about women. I made another appointment with my pastor to ask him about what I was reading. We talked, I read some more. I was back again with more questions. (I should mention that I was on sabbatical that semester, so I had more free time than usual).

After 2 or 3 of these conversations, the pastor said, "You know, many people come to see me, but most of them don't have the questions you have." He suggested that my experience in St. Louis was a sign of God trying to get my attention. I was *skeptical* about that, but it was clear to me that *something* had happened that seemed completely beyond my control, something that had riveted my attention on my spiritual life.

The pastor said, "I think God is trying to have a conversation with you, and you need to listen." I left his office thinking – why would God be trying to have a conversation with *me*?

What does God want?? The pastor gave me some advice. He told me to spend time everyday meditating, doing spiritual reading and keeping a journal. I started doing that – reading, writing, meditating – spending hours a day at first. What was driving me was a deep desire to know, “*What does God want from me?*” I want to tell you what I found out, because I learned that what God wants from me is also what God wants from *you* – what God wants from *all of us*.

I’m calling the answers I found the 4 Ts.

The first T is Time – God wants our Time. I learned during that intense period of spiritual exploration that God wants to be in relationship with us, and you can’t have a successful relationship with anyone without investing Time. Friendships wane when we don’t take the time to connect with our friends, marriages sour when we don’t spend quality time together. So it is with our spiritual life. We can’t deepen our relationship with God without investing TIME.

Psalm 46:10 says “*Be still and know that I am God.*” I had to “Be Still” and take the time in meditation to LISTEN. I learned that if I made the TIME to LISTEN, I could sometimes hear a still, small voice that would guide me. If I made the TIME to READ, I could find WISDOM in the pages of my Bible and other spiritual texts. I concluded that if God *was* trying to get my attention in St. Louis, maybe it was because God wanted more of my TIME.

Which brings me to the second T.

As I gave God more of my TIME in meditation and in reading the Bible and other spiritual texts, it became clear to me that God wanted my TALENT. But not just mine - God wants yours, too. God wants ALL of our TALENT to build God’s KINGDOM ON EARTH.

Every Sunday we recite the Lord’s Prayer – as we did today:

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

(Matthew 6:9-10)

I don't know about you, but I memorized those words when I was young, and recited them often, but didn't always focus on what I was saying. There was also a time when I was young when I believed that the answer to this prayer request would be the sudden, miraculous change of this world into a heavenly kingdom. My job in this scenario was the faithful recitation of the request. But during this time of spiritual exploration, I came to understand the words differently. I came to understand that God wants us not only to *pray*, but to *act* in the world as God's agents of change. God will act THROUGH us – but WE have to be God's hands and feet. God wants our TALENT – and we all have some.

We heard it read this morning –1 Corinthians 12: 4-12

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. **To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.***

The scripture text goes on, but let's pause there - ***For the common good*** – our talents are not just for our own benefit or enrichment. They are to be used in God's service in some way, *for the common good.*

In the 1st letter to the Corinthians, the writer, Paul, goes on to say:

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

When I was on my quest to answer the question, “what does God want from me?” I read that passage, and thought, “what does this have to do with me?” These spiritual gifts – wisdom, knowledge, healing, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues – all seemed quite separate from *my* daily life. But as I read other writers, spent more TIME (reading, writing, meditating), I came to see that ALL of our TALENTS matter-

Some can sing or play the flute, others are good with their hands, I can write, somebody else has a way with children, another can read financial statements, or is a technology wiz, or can

drive a car safely without road rage, or can organize in the midst of chaos, or can cook, or can solve puzzles, or can grow food, or encourage other people – each TALENT – these and more – can be used to build God’s Kingdom.

One of my favorite spiritual writers is the late Henri Nouwen, and I have read many of his books. One of them is called *Life of the Beloved* (1992). In it, I read this passage:

*The fruitfulness of our little life, once we recognize it and live it as the life of the Beloved, is **beyond anything we ourselves can imagine**. One of the greatest acts of faith is to believe that the few years we live on this earth are like a little seed planted in a very rich soil. For this seed to bear fruit, it must die. We often see or feel only the dying, but the harvest will be abundant even when we ourselves are not the harvesters.*

How different would our life be were we truly able to trust that it multiplied in being given away! How different would our life be if we could but believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it...” (p. 98)

When I first read that, more than 20 years ago, I wrote in my journal: “This passage tells me that I don’t have to be everywhere, doing everything – but I can trust that the small things I do in God will have a big and lasting impact!”

And I started asking myself important questions: “*What is the best use of my time and talent?*” Is this what God wants me to do? Am I being a good steward of the gifts that I have been given? From that time on, I made my career decisions based on that question: *Is this the best use of my time and talent? Is this where God wants me to be right now?* I believe each of us should ask ourselves these questions because God wants our TIME and God wants our TALENT. God doesn’t want us to squander either of these precious resources.

Now we come across the word TALENT in the Bible – in Matthew 25, we can find the Parable of the Talents. I’ll read you just the beginning of that parable (verses 14-18):

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who

had two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

The parable goes on to tell us that when the master returns, he is pleased with those servants who made good use of the talents, and was angry with the one who buried the talent in the ground. Though the word “talent” is used in this parable, we know in this context Matthew is not referring to a special ability, he is talking about money. The footnote in my Bible tells me that a talent was actually quite a lot of money – worth more than fifteen years’ wages of a laborer. This parable is about putting what God gives you to good use.

Which brings me to our third T.

This parable tells us about the third T – our TREASURE. It is not to be hoarded, buried in the ground. We are supposed to be put it to good use.

To paraphrase Henri Nouwen, how different would our world be, how different would God’s kingdom on earth be – the beloved community – our church – if *we were truly able to trust that our TREASURE multiplied in being given away!*

Proverbs 3: 9-10 tells us what is expected of us:

Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Honor the Lord with your SUBSTANCE and with the FIRST fruits of your produce (not the leftovers, not the remainder, but the SUBSTANCE, the FIRST fruits. Bring God your best, we are told!

Proverbs 11: 24-25 has more to say on this subject:

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.

As a college president, I spent a lot of my time asking people for money to support the institution, and I learned a lot about the joy of giving. At the beginning I was nervous about asking people for money, but then I came to realize that inviting others to participate in something important was a gift to them. Because it is true that generosity is its own reward. To see your “treasure” put to good use - whether it is the “widow’s mite” measured in dollar bills or

the affluent person's check measured in thousands – the act of giving sacrificially is a blessing in itself.

What Does God Want from Us? God wants our *gratitude*, and if we are here and still breathing, we all have something to be grateful for. In the Bible we are instructed to express our gratitude tangibly, by the return of just a fraction of what God has given to us. The Bible tells us that fraction is 10%. That is what the word *tithe* literally means – tenth.

Each Sunday we hear Reverend Andrews recite the words of Malachi 3:10-12:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

When I was really trying to understand what God wanted from me, and I understood that to be a *tenth*, that gave me cause to pause. A tenth? *Really?*

Sometimes we ask a question, and we don't really want the answer. 27 years ago, our kids were young. From the cost of toddler day care straight through until they graduated from college, there was always tuition to pay, and seemingly never enough money. 10%? REALLY? How is that possible? That's what I was thinking.

Now, I know that some people debate this tithing concept – some will say God wants 10% to go to the church. Others might say the intent is for 10% to go to good work in the community (including through the church, but not only the church).

Either way, it was clear to me then that God wanted more of my treasure than I was giving. Someone suggested that I do the checkbook test (or now maybe it would be the bank card statement test). That is, look at everything you spent in a month and see where your treasure is. Matthew 6:21 says: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

When I did that, I realized there were some things I seemed to value more than my response to God's ask. In my checkbook, I saw evidence of "impulse shopping," buying things I didn't really need, sometimes small items, sometimes large – but I *could* see that I could get closer to my 10% if I made that a priority. Around that time, I read a book called *The Monday Connection* by William Diehl that introduced me to the concept of the "theology of enough." The basic idea was that overconsumption was not in line with being a good steward. It was *not* what Jesus would do.

So, that year during the season of Lent, I decided instead of giving up the usual sweets or chocolate, for example, I would give up *all non-essential spending*. No impulse purchase of a magazine at the checkout counter, no “it was too good of a bargain to pass up” purchases at the mall of stuff I didn’t need, and I would keep track of what I didn’t spend (estimating the temptations I had passed up). Then at Easter, I would make a gift of the money I had saved to the church. It was *startling* how much I saved, and how *good* it felt to make that sacrificial gift.

I realized I had to get in the habit of asking another question: *Am I making the best use – not just of my time, not just of my talent – am I making the best use of the treasure God has given to me?* However much that is, am I honoring the Lord with my SUBSTANCE and with the FIRST fruits of my labor? Am I demonstrating my gratitude for God’s blessings in a *meaningful and playful* way?

Malachi tells us to:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts;

Then he reminds us of God’s promise:

see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. In my experience, *that* is a promise you can count on.

TIME, TALENT, TREASURE... You may be saying I have heard these three Ts before. What is the 4th T that God wants from us?

I learned that the 4th T is TEAMWORK! Nothing great is accomplished alone. *Teamwork makes the Dream work!* To build God’s kingdom on Earth – the Beloved Community – requires our COLLECTIVE EFFORT.

I learned this lesson later than the first three. It was made plain to me at Spelman. A college is not the same as a church, but it has some things in common. There is a leader, the president is at the head (like the pastor is the head of a church) – and there are long-time members. In the case of the College, it’s the alumnae – and the college, like the church, is dependent on its members’ support through consistent giving of thoughtful and meaningful gifts,

reflecting gratitude for what has been given to them. In one case, it is the life-changing education received at the college; in the other case, it is the many blessings received from God. The mission of a college is like the mission of a church in that it is about helping others – and it can't be accomplished without resources.

Yet sometimes people *withhold* their resources – maybe someone at the College did something they didn't like, or they had an unpleasant experience at the Church, or maybe they just hadn't been asked. There is no perfect college, and there is no perfect church. We can encourage each other toward *continuous improvement*, but the irony is, you usually can't improve without the resources to do it. So, speaking of the College, it was clear to me that we had to have *everyone's* participation to achieve our mission with the excellence our students and our community deserves. NO ONE on the team could be sitting on the sidelines if we were going to achieve success. The same is true here at First Congregational.

In the letter to the Ephesians (Chapter 4: verses 15-16), Paul tells us this about the Church. He says to the Church members, “speaking the truth in love, we must *grow up in every way* into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom *the whole body*, joined and knit together *by every ligament* with which it is equipped, as each part...working properly, promotes the *body's growth* in building itself up in love.”

And that's what God wants from us – *to be knit together by every ligament* – each one of us making our contribution to the team – to build the Beloved Community here on the corner of Courtland and John Wesley Dobbs, where for 150 years we have been quenching thirsty spirits.

Giving God our TIME, our TALENT, our TREASURE and our TEAMWORK will make sure that because of our OBEDIENCE, here on this corner, in the words of Henri Nouwen:

every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it...” (p. 98)

And That's What God Wants from Us.

Thank you for listening.