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Texts: Matthew 21: 12-13; Luke 8: 1-3; John 19: 38-42; Romans 16: 1-2

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On Gifts, Giving, and Generosity¹

In the middle of the 19th century, a curious phenomenon took place here in New England. That's when a wave of creative inspiration swept through Shaker communities in Massachusetts and New York. Some of you may have visited the Shaker Village in Hancock, Massachusetts, and so you know a little about their distinctive style, the simple and austere designs of their furniture and architecture. You may know of their hymn, made famous by Aaron Copland, "Tis a Gift To Be Simple," which we have twice used today. And you may know of their commitment to celibacy, which led, gradually, to their decline. But what you may not have known about is their commitment to artistic inspiration. From the late 1830's until the mid 1850's, members of the Shaker community, in this case almost always women, produced what came to be known as "gift drawings." Some 200 remain, though countless others were apparently destroyed when their creators died.

One such gift drawing is found on the cover of your bulletin. It's called "Basket of Apples," painted by an artist named Hannah Cohoon in 1856. It illustrates the Shaker understanding of inspiration, and of gifts. Apples float within a transparent basket. Their color is gold, though tinged with fiery orange. That golden flame represents the gift of inspiration, a kind of glowing energy, which the Shakers believed came from the world of the Spirit, where each individual communes with God in some portion of their being. Each glowing apple, then, can be understood to be a single Shaker, aflame with an inner passion, an inner light, inspiration itself. You'll notice as well that each apple is contained by a basket, another gift, which represents the bonds of community. As one Shaker song puts it, "You can't go to heaven alone." And then in the space at the top and bottom of the drawing, you can make out some words, which would have been from a song that came to the artist as she was creating the drawing. The Shakers described themselves as "laboring for a gift," laboring on behalf of the inspiration they had been given, and the drawings were concrete representations of that gift. Each of the drawings circulated through the community as gifts, objects that could not be owned, but that could only be exchanged in a form of ritual giving and receiving.

The Shakers reveal something powerful about inspiration, and gifts, that can be instructive for us nearly two centuries later. Indeed, they open up a whole set of questions and possibilities that I find alluring on a Sunday such as this, when we consider the tasks and responsibilities formally known around here as Stewardship, but that really have to do with gifts and giving. In what follows, I'll begin by talking about how art and commerce are necessarily intertwined. After that, I'll make my way into religion and the church, and yes, toward my periodic plea to each of you to consider offering a gift to this place, to FCCOL. You know from the outset, in other words, where this is going. But I'd like to take you through a few twists and turns having to do with gifts before we arrive there.

Let's return to the Shakers for a moment. I wonder if you've ever felt something like what happened to those Shaker women, open somehow to inspiration in a way you couldn't

¹ This sermon is working with ideas laid out in Lewis Hyde's volume, *The Gift*, a book whose cover image is "Basket of Apples," by Hannah Cohoon. Much of what follows was inspired by Hyde's insights.

explain. Your creative juices began to flow, and you felt on fire with a kind of burning energy. If you're an artist, it's probably happened to you at some point, but it can happen in other ways too - an inexplicable drive to learn something, to figure something out, to build something, to write something. It comes in all sorts of ways. That drive, that inner inspiration, is the gift. If it hasn't happened to you in quite that way, it may be that you've stood in proximity to that kind of inspiration. Think about it: in certain blessed moments, we stand before a painting, and something awakens inside of us. Or we read a poem, and we feel grateful to have entered a dimension that is ordinarily closed to us. Or we hear a piece of music and it reaches deep inside of our souls, reminding us (for we often need reminding) that there is such a thing as a soul in the first place, animating our lives. That too is a part of the gift. We approach an artistic expression, a gift of inspiration like Anna Cohoon's apples, and it awakens in us that part of our own being which is itself a gift, which is to say, that part of ourselves which is not a thing, not a commodity, but is rather the holy itself, living deep inside us all. When have you felt such a reality? When have you entered such a clearing? And what brought you there?

Now let me ask another set of questions. Let's say moments like that are what help us to hold onto an essential part of what it is to be a human being. Would that not be an experience of infinite worth? If that's true, what might we owe the creator of such experiences? Say it's a piece of music, played by a symphony. What do we owe the composer, and what do we owe the players, for reminding us of this spiritual dimension that exists in the world, that exists inside each of us? How do we place a value upon an experience of infinite worth? More to the point, how do we recognize the material needs of those who mediate such experiences for us? The musicians, after all, must be housed and they must eat. They must be given time - spent in years - to train. And they must be given further time - spent in hours and days - to practice and to maintain their craft. The musicians, like the Shakers, are laboring for a gift, a gift which we happily receive. How do we show our appreciation for that gift, while also ensuring that such gifts can keep on occurring?

Well, it seems to me that the Shakers can be placed at one end of a continuum of gifts and gift giving. For them, appreciation for the gift was shown not by an exchange of money, but by the generation of another gift - another painting that could be given as an expression of gratitude. They lived in a monastic setting, and so their material needs were not dependent upon the proceeds earned from their creative labor. That allowed the gift drawings to circulate with some independence from economic questions. On the other end of the spectrum, we might think of an art auction, where a sketch by Picasso, say, might be purchased for millions upon millions of dollars. Between those two extremes, we might place the experience of a Taylor Swift concert, where fans pay hundreds, and sometimes thousands of dollars to be in proximity to the gift. But somewhere along the continuum, you would also have the experience of watching a film or reading a poem. Wherever we might land on the spectrum of the gift, questions of worth and value inevitably arise. Questions like: what is this experience worth to me? How do I value it? How do I show my gratitude for it? And how do I recognize the material and economic necessities that have helped produce that experience for me?

In the digital era, and maybe long before that, many people have assumed that proximity to inspiration should be free. After all, the original inspiration, the inner glow represented by the apples, *is* free, more or less, and so why should the product of inspiration not also be free? That assumption has led to a chronic underfunding of the arts, which has only been exacerbated in the digital age by streaming and illegal downloads. Another outgrowth of the assumption that the product of inspiration should be free can be found in the writers' and actors' strike going on in

Hollywood. That's a direct challenge to efforts on the part of studios to remove the artist altogether, to eliminate the human vessel of the gift, and to replace that vessel with AI - where computers would generate scripts and holographic or digitized actors would populate the shows we watch. It all raises an interesting question: can the gift be replicated by a computer? Can the inner glow of inspiration represented by Hannah Cohoon's apples be generated by an algorithm? We'll see, but no one I know seems especially interested in reading a novel or a poem generated by AI. Even if the algorithms got smarter, and they will, I suspect that most of us will come to recognize that a mysterious inner core is missing in AI generated works, which is the gift. There are no shortcuts to it, and it won't be outsourced. Which is a way of saying that we'll have to keep finding ways to encourage, to support, and yes, to fund the cultivation of the gift in human lives. The gift is never entirely free.

If I have been overlong in describing the situation in the arts, that is because it parallels, almost exactly, our situation in a church. As in the arts, a church is attempting to clear a pathway for inspiration, for the incoming of the Spirit. As with a poem, the words (and sometimes the silence) of a prayer or the sound of a choral anthem, is an attempt to place each one of us in some proximity to that glowing inner core that we all share. As with a painting, the words of a sermon or the instruction of children are an attempt to recall the inner flame that gives to each human being a worth and a value, where we understand that we are spiritual beings, and not commodities. As in the arts, so too our outreach, our ministries on behalf of human rights and social justice, are an attempt to create the conditions such that all people, and not only the privileged few, might experience a depth of being that eludes far too many in our world. Just like the arts, in religion too there are those who believe it should all come without a cost, that it should all be free. There are those who just assume such a thing as art, or religion, will continue to exist in the world without their own participation.

That seems especially true of churches. We do, after all, fall closer to the Shakers on the continuum I sketched earlier than we do to the art auction. Even so, there are, occasionally, those who would like to detach religion from all economic considerations. Grace is free, we reason, the gifts of the Spirit are free, and so why must churches be worried about something as pedestrian, as degraded, as money? Did Jesus not kick out the money changers from the Temple, accusing them, in essence, of turning the gift of divine inspiration, of the gift, into a form of economic exchange? And wasn't the Protestant Reformation brought into being when Martin Luther objected to the medieval Church's practice of selling indulgences, another reduction of the gift to an economic transaction? That's all true, but the issue in both of those examples is not that economics and the spirit, that money and the gift, must always be at odds with one another. The issue, rather, is a betrayal of the gift, treating it as a mere thing, a unit of economic exchange that can be bought and sold at will. But whether in the realm of art or the church, the gift doesn't work like that. It must be accorded the highest honor and respect that we can muster. If it is to remain a gift, it must be answered with another gift.

There are many biblical passages that can help us to understand that point. In Luke chapter 8, for example, we learn that Joanna, Susanna, and many others that the text does not name, used their wealth to sponsor the work of Jesus and his disciples. We can imagine that they, like so many others, were confronted with the question of value in relation to the labor of the gift that Jesus enacted among them. The very presence of Jesus created the conditions of the gift among the people he encountered, convincing them of their own divine worth. But being embodied, Jesus and his disciples required the means to sustain that gift. When Joanna, Susanna, and the others were confronted by that reality, they didn't flinch. They gave generously, not in

order to purchase a divine favor. They did it in order to keep the gift of Jesus, the gift of faith, in circulation.

So too, at the end of Matthew's and John's Gospel, we learn that Joseph of Arimathea offered the gift of a garden tomb in which to lay the body of Jesus, which represented a considerable sum of money. In the same passage, we also learn that Nicodemus brought some 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe with which to bury Jesus, which someone has estimated to be worth nearly \$500,000 in today's economy. A lavish, and some would say, a wasteful gift, in other words. But here again, it was a gift made in response to the gift that Joseph and Nicodemus had encountered in Jesus. It was a declaration of the value they placed upon that original gift, which was also a way of keeping the gift of Jesus's teachings about generosity in circulation.

Or again, we find the same pattern at play among the Apostles, when Paul's ministry (a labor on behalf of the gift of faith) is supported by the wealth - the material gifts - of those like Phoebe, as reported in the book of Romans. Like all the others, those women were placed in proximity to a gift, and it raised for them the question of value. They responded by giving generously, not to enact an economic exchange - money for miracles or dollars for deliverance - but to honor the fact of inspiration, of being filled by the Spirit, and of keeping that gift in motion. It's a way of honoring, of valuing, the original gift, which in this case is the event of Jesus the Christ, who, Paul tells us, is the gift of God freely given to the world.

I come finally to my appeal. As ministers and as a lay community, we at FCCOL all participate in laboring for a gift. We are all attempting to reach that clearing inside, where we glow with that inner light represented by Hannah Cohoon's apples. We are all bearers of that golden fire. But we all seek to be in proximity to it as well, to be reminded of the ways we ourselves are not a thing, but a gift. Our worship services, our guest speakers, our music concerts, and our educational offerings, are all attempts to usher us into the realm of the gift. Our children's ministries, our pastoral care, and our global partnerships, are all attempts to respond to that experience of the gift. Our work on behalf of human rights and social justice is an attempt to live in right relationship to the gift. What, exactly, is that worth? What sort of value should we attach to it all? How do we keep the gift in circulation?

That's a question that we all must answer, each in our own way. It may be that you don't attach a whole lot of value to this at all, and if that's true, well, there are probably better things you could be doing with yourself on a Sunday. If, on the other hand, you do attach some value to what happens here, to what we try to do both here and in various parts of the globe (and I think your very presence indicates that at some level you do find such value), well, I want to urge you to consider how much you value it. And then I want you to consider what it would mean to respond to the gift that we are trying to nurture in this place with a gift of your own. It might be a gift of time, but I also hope that it will involve a gift of your financial resources. Some can do a little, some can do a lot, and some can do a whole lot more than they think. As with a painting, as with a symphony, as with a poem, I merely ask you to consider the question of worth, and to respond accordingly. Is what we give commensurate with the value that we actually experience in a place like this? How shall we respond to the gift that is FCCOL?

I return one final time to Hannah Cohoon's glowing apples, held within the bounds of a transparent basket. You too have that glow within you. And just like those apples, we too are held within the sacred bonds of this community, which itself glows with the fire of a gift - the gift of inspiration. What gift might we give in order that the gift we have all received might continue to circulate?

