

## **The Gift of Giving**

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Pacific Beach United Methodist Church

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### **Opening Prayer**

Dear Great God, Universal One, Divine Light,

Lord of strength and beauty,

We thank you for the many gifts you have given us –

We ask that you help us appreciate and use all those gifts to our fullest potential.

Please be with me as I deliver this morning's message.

May these words be the words that our congregation, your people, our community need to hear in order to propel our church forward, to use and expand on the gifts you have given to us individually, so that we may more fully realize our mission as a church, to make this world a more loving, open and joyful place for all.

In your blessed name we pray. Amen

### **ALL IN**

Hello! Before I dive into my interpretation on the "Gift of Giving," Please indulge me by allowing me to share a bit about me. In recent years, I have learned to view my gift of empathy as a superpower, rather than weakness. Along my spiritual journey, I've come across speakers such as Oprah Winfrey and Brene Brown who view vulnerability as a strength. I used to think that strength was not showing weakness, and so I didn't let people in to my "inner circle." But I've come to realize that by showing our vulnerability, sharing our stories, we build strength and resilience in ourselves and others. So here is a bit of my story.

My name is Su-Yen. I was blessed to start attending this church over 20 years ago, when my husband was first stationed in San Diego. In total, we (I always say "we" since it is a team effort) have been assigned to 11 duty stations across the country in his Navy career. So, I'm actually a boomerang member of this church. My husband and I have two, bright, healthy, joyous kids, ages 15 and 10, who constantly fill me with wonder, appreciation and humility.

I have always been full of smiles, but also the typical Type A personality, pretty tightly wound, rigid, wanting things to be done my way. This probably added to my stress, which I now accept as contributing factors to my two breast cancer diagnoses in 2015 & 2016. After multiple surgeries, radiation and chemo, as well as a deep dive into self-introspection, learning about health, nutrition, mindfulness, prayer, self-care and spirituality – which continues today, and hopefully for many healthy years to come, I am happy to report that I am better than when I started my cancer journey. I feel more grounded, closer to God, with a deeper understanding of the world around me. God shoved me from my day to day life of "Comfort Zone" into "Panic Zone" with the cancer diagnosis, but this allowed me to settle into my current "Growth Zone".

One of the ways I have learned to grow is through free cancer survivor retreats. Yes! They exist! At the beginning of a recent retreat, I was asked "What is it like to show up as my best self?" I wrote:

- Be ALL IN.
- Get out what you put in
- Be Spacious

- Be Present
- Make Deep Connections
- Be Mindful

And, as I was thinking about this talk today, what our church needs, this list popped into my mind, so I grabbed my journal from that weekend, and literally, as I was writing those things down, our talented and dedicated choir director, Mr. Ron Jessee, called me and said, “Su-Yen, I have just found the PERFECT choir anthem for this Sunday. I read the words and they will go so well with your message. It’s called “I Give My All.”

Huh, how about that, some may call it a sign from God. Some may call it synchronicity. Me, I just call it the title of my talk today. “All In.” Now, I have to admit, I’m a little nervous about being up here talking, so I need a bit of support and love from all of you – which I KNOW you can do. Would you please dig deep, find your strength & joy, and repeat with all your heart & soul – “ALL IN!!” “ALL IN!”

Thank you. Ok, now we’re ready to rock & roll!

In our crazy Navy life, civilians always ask me, “Isn’t it hard to move so many times?” While certainly a challenge, to repeatedly move, uproot, make new friends & maintain a career, a piece of advice has stuck with me from my younger days with The Junior League of Palo Alto, “As with anything in life, you get out of it, what you put into it.”

You get out of it what you put into it.

Perhaps this came from part of our morning’s scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6 Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop.

The more time, work & resources we put into something, the more we will get out of it. This is also known as a virtuous circle. You do good, it makes you feel good, you want to do more good. You plant flowers, you enjoy the beauty, and want to plant more flowers. Not only does this apply to flowers, sowers, farmers, parents, business owners, but it applies to our church, our volunteer organizations, our family and our community.

If we truly love this church, the people in the church, the community we serve, ALL OF GOD’S PEOPLE, then we need to put our time, work, money & resources to make this church grow. We need to be ALL IN. We are a place of abundance. We have extraordinary people. We have dedicated leadership. This is a special place. But, our church needs our help to spread the word of how awesome we are. We need INSPIRATION, we need PEOPLE to take leadership, we need a YOUTH DIRECTOR, we need YOU to lead beloved events such as church picnic, church camp, or start new programs if you don’t see what you want or need, and yes, dare I say it, we need money to pay our pastor and staff a living wage, to show that we value their talents, their commitment.

I heard recently that one of our long-time members went to another church because there weren’t the programs she needed here. Well, we need that feedback, but we also need to CREATE what we need. The one who plants generously will get a generous crop.

One of life's lessons I have learned from cancer is to ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED. I remember a new mom's support group I attended many moons ago. The sage leader said, "Your spouse couldn't read your mind before you had a baby and he can't read your mind now. You need to ask for what you need." That was an AHA moment for me. I had always thought if I leave enough hints, surely he would get the point, and surely he could see that I needed X, Y or Z. But no, we cannot presume to know what others know, what their needs are, what is going on in their lives. So, no, the church cannot read your minds. As a member of this church who loves this church, I'm asking for what the church needs – which is YOU. We need you. We need you need to participate, get on a committee, make this church even more FABULOUS than it is today. This is OUR church. So, let's create the church of our dreams.

What do you love doing? Or what do you hate doing but want to get better at? I have to admit, I was so painfully shy & timid as a child. But I still remember my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Jane Sicks, in Amherst, Massachusetts, preparing us third graders for reading scripture at the pulpit, telling me, PROJECT to the back of the sanctuary, speak from your belly. So, church gave me a safe outlet to practice these skills. Even as an adult, I still wasn't comfortable with public speaking, so in business school, I made it a priority to VOLUNTEER for every opportunity for public speaking so that I could get over my fear.

Now, I've learned that this is called "Exposure Therapy." Mr. Jia Jiang, from his TEDx Talk used this to get over his fear of rejection. Every day he would challenge himself to get rejected at least once. He moved out of his comfort zone so that he could get into his growth zone. He confronted his fear, practiced this skill and created a better person. And in so doing, he found he was getting rejected less often. How can we as a church move out of our comfort zone, into our growth zone and be a better church? What can we do as individuals to help our church do this?

I ask you to quiet your mind sometime, do some self-introspection, spend some time with God, ask the all-knowing: what talents do I need to share? What are you, God, telling me I need to do at this time?

Do you have a passion for children? Help Malea with Sunday School or help us find our next AMAZING youth leader.

Do you love to sing? Then join the choir, sing in the Christmas Musical, offer to play an instrument or sing on a Sunday – Ron would love you forever. Yes, I could present you with scientific evidence why it is good for your health to sing in a choir, but do it because you want to, because you want to share your gifts that God has given you, you want to cultivate your gifts from a seed to a plant to nourish others in their growth.

If we sit on the fence, and just attend church, but don't open our hearts, we are missing out on the true gifts of God and our community. We need to put our love into action. What does it mean to you to be ALL IN? What gifts do you have to share? Who can you bring along with you?

We can look around and see what needs to be done – and go ALL IN and do it! Perhaps you can be like Hope Anderson, who saw that Ron needed an Assistant Director for the Christmas Musical and stepped up and said, "I can do that!" Ron does a million things, some of them seen and others unseen, but we all need help sometimes. Ron gives us the gift of music every week and doesn't expect or ask for anything in return. His gift is a multiplier for the church. People are drawn to the church, inspired by the music. And Hope saw that he needed some support and jumped in.

We all have ideas, resources, capacities, God-given talents, & interests that can help this church grow, making it a better place. I see Louis making this church beautiful every week so that it is a warm & welcoming place. He is like a cyclone running around the church, and in his wake, he creates beauty and marvel, like these seasonal decorations, flowers, even the Pride Parade Float. And I saw him asking our church more and more frequently to remember to make donations to the Flower Fund, so I offered to make a simple posterboard for the year (which is now displayed in the Narthex), so it is an easy, visual reminder of the availability of weeks of sponsorship. It made me feel good to see that the first 3 months were filled very quickly (reminder that December has openings!!) I didn't do this to feel good, but it is a certainly a valid by-product.

I don't have to tell you that it feels good to give, and perhaps that is why many of us do it, and do it repeatedly. As Mavi mentioned last week, there is a physiological response to giving. I will refer you to [happify.com](http://happify.com) if you want more information. When you GIVE to someone, your brain's pleasure sensors light up as if you were the RECIPIENT not the giver. You get a dose of endorphins – like a runner's high. Oxytocin floods your body, making you feel connected to others. A dose of oxytocin will cause you to give more generously and have more empathy (so I ask you to do lots of kind & generous things immediately before filling out your pledge cards). This is why recipients of kindness like to pay it forward and keep on giving. They will know we are Christians by our love.

During cancer treatment, I was so grateful for all the help. Friends set up a meal train, drove my kids to/from school, brought my family meals, sent me cards, called, wrote, texted, made me feel loved, took up generous donations to support me, excused me from my traditional roles as giver, provider, choir member and event coordinator.

It was truly a blessing of a village. And I needed all of that love and support. I needed that time for my body, mind and soul to heal; and WE ALL need that support sometimes. Just because I no longer have cancer doesn't mean I don't need that support. Just because you NEVER had cancer, doesn't mean you don't need that same support.

But I will share that it was hard to accept the help. It was REALLY hard. My story isn't unusual; all of us have dignity. All of us like to give. We are wired that way. But I also HAVE to stand up here and say, "IT IS RIGHT AND JUST to receive as well. Giving and receiving go hand in hand. When you need help, please accept it, please ask for it. Don't be afraid to ask. You are not weak for asking for help. You are strong. You are strong in your vulnerability as a human being. Sometimes, we just need to be a human being, and not a human doing. As I have learned from my cancer community, it is oftentimes easier to give than accept help.

I had to teach my mom recently, it is GIFT to others to give them the opportunity to help you. As many of you know, my 81-year-old mom was in a horrific car accident about a month ago. She was hit at high speed on Miramar Road and was in the ICU as a precaution for a few days. Thankfully, she is ok. If you think I'm a giver, I learned from only the best. My mom is a giver on steroids. She used to cook 100 person meals each week for her church, she sang in the choir, she hosted Bible Studies, she would be the wedding coordinator & stand-in "mom" for Chinese and Taiwanese graduate students who got married in her Chinese American church. She would give of her time, efforts and resources selflessly and tirelessly. She sowed and planted generously.

As word got around that she was in the hospital, we had a stream of visitors checking on her, praying for her, bringing us food. At one point, she had a group of 21 visitors (we filled the visitors station) and they

sang a hymn in Chinese to lift her spirits. She sowed and planted generously. She reaped generously. Our assigned ICU nurse later told us, that the other nurses asked what was going on. She responded proudly, “That’s MY patient. She’s a rock star.” This is just one example of how they will know we are Christians by our love.

However, my mom was uncomfortable receiving help. Especially now that she does not have a vehicle and has been advised not to drive. She didn’t want to ask for rides and was even ashamed to accept help. She was used to being the giver and didn’t want to be a receiver. I had to share with her that it is gift to her friends to allow them to help. It makes them feel good. It makes them feel like they are doing God’s work. Ironically, it is a gift to receive. OK, I’ll get off my tangential soap box now. It may be better to give than to receive, but it is not shameful to receive. It took some time for that to sink deep into my heart, but once I did, I felt a great weight lifted.

Now back on track to our scripture. 2 Corinthians 9:7 You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don’t give reluctantly or in response to pressure. “For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.”

- Don’t give because I am telling you.
- Don’t give out of guilt.
- Don’t give because you are supposed to.
- Don’t give because you feel that you get something out of it (whether it is oxytocin, dopamine, a pat on the back, a place in heaven or something in return.)

As parents (or even as children), we remember what it’s like being forced to say you are sorry or give something back to someone before we are truly ready to do it with a willing heart. We may go through the actions, but truly our heart isn’t in it.

We (including myself) have to remember that the money, time, talents all came from God. If we begrudgingly give those gifts out of sense of guilt, it really isn’t a gift. We aren’t ready yet. And so, before you fill out your pledge cards, I ask you to do some acts of kindness and generosity. Get yourself in the mood. Get in the right mindset, and then prayerfully have a conversation with God of how to best use the talents and gifts He has given to you. DO give out of love.

For me, I’m still learning to trust God. I love God, but being the practical Virgo I am, I am still learning to trust God – that He really will...8...generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.

9As the Scriptures say,

“They share freely and give generously to the poor.

Their good deeds will be remembered forever.”

I am still working on the believing that time, money, resources are not finite, despite what I might think. These resources are an extension of love. And love is not finite. In fact, the more love we give away, the more love we have. When we give time, money & resources to those we love, they, in turn, give more time, money & resources. It is the ultimate pyramid scheme for God’s Glory, and it perpetuates for generations to come.

So, what is it that you can give to our community that would best use your talents, money, resources, skills? How can we work together so that our results are more than the sum of our parts? How can we

give cheerfully with a willing heart? How can we pass on God's Love? How can we move into our Growth Zone? How can we go ALL IN?

Does it mean to start regular giving?

Perhaps by automated giving?

Increase your giving by 1%, 10%? 100%?

Not let a person go by without a smile or hello?

Connect with someone in your pew, a shut-in in your neighborhood?

Give 5 acknowledgments to people each day, showing, "I see you?"

Pick up trash on your way back to your car?

Find ways to make deeper connections with fellow church members?

Start a small group at church?

Find ways to bring in new people?

Any one of these actions can be a way to pass on God's love.

Let's find a meaningful way to leverage our gifts to benefit the church so that we can continue to be a place with Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. Let's go ALL IN.

Let us pray.

Dear Great God, Universal One, Divine Light,

Lord of strength and beauty,

We thank you for the many gifts you have given us –

Please help us use those gifts to glorify You and help us understand we are all one.

In your blessed name we pray.

Amen.