

Presbyterian Sermon

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RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF GIVING FOR LIFE

The transfusion of blood and the transplantation of body organs are possible because of recent developments in medical technology. However, blood transfusions and organ transplantation also depend upon the willingness of persons to give or donate for the sake of others. Only if the new medical technologies are combined with one of the oldest themes of Judeo-Christian tradition – concern for the other as neighbor—will persons be aided.

The opportunity to “love your neighbor as yourself” is portrayed as a positive human possibility and obligation in the Scriptures of both Judaism and Christianity. In both traditions, moreover, response to the neighbor is grounded in the prior perception of the reality of God.

Giving blood and donating organs express and embody concern for the other as neighbor. Christians and Jews interpret these voluntary acts, which depend upon the generosity and self-initiative, as expressions of good will toward fellow human beings under God. Mutuality and human interdependence are gifts of God. There is no greater symbol of our common humanity, and probably no more direct expression of our belief that we are made in the image of God, than the fact that our organs can be transplanted from one body to another and that our blood can be transfused from one person to another. Our conviction is that persons are creatures similarly endowed by the Creator. We embody and express our common humanity under God by giving to others.

The free gift of body or blood fosters and expresses a sense of community. It serves a need and evokes the profound gratitude of recipients to others in the human community whom they have never met and on whom they depend. It strengthens the social fabric of interdependence in which we are all sustained by God.

THE IMPACT OF GIVING

The powerful symbol of the gift relationship may be used to describe four distinct benefits of giving blood and donating organs. A gift does not create servitude. It expresses reciprocity. Gifts must be given and received. A genuine gift is offered freely, but an offer does not become a gift if it is refused. It must be accepted. One thinks, for example, of engagement rings or the bestowal of presents at a child’s birthday. gift-giving and gift-receiving embody human interdependence.

The first and most visible result of giving blood or organs, of course, is its impact on recipients. Persons in need are helped, frequently in dramatic ways. The receipt of blood or organs is a life-giving and life-sustaining matter.

A second result of giving is its impact on the giver. People who give these gifts have a sense of doing something worthwhile. True gifts are motivated by a concern for others, not by a sense of moral superiority. This concern for others is captured by the phrase, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

A third result of giving is its impact on the donor’s family. Signing a donor document enables a person to make known his or her thoughts to the immediate family before death occurs. This saves a distraught family from having to make a last-minute decision just after a relative has died. The mutuality of clear communication before death enables a family to say with conviction, “That is what our loved one would have wanted.” Signing a donor card is a gift to one’s family.

A fourth result of giving is its impact on community. People who give blood or who plan to donate an organ at death have a sense of contributing to the well-being of others. Recipients of blood or organs speak with profound gratitude of receiving a life-sustaining gift. This sense of gratitude is one reason to keep the identity of donors anonymous. Anonymity prevents an unhealthy sense of dependence upon a particular person or family. This giving and receiving fosters a sense of community because individuals are sustained and nourished through relations with others whom they have not met. It is captured by the phrase, "Freely have I received from others, freely will I give to others."

A CENTRAL FEATURE OF THE PROGRAMS

The voluntary dimension of the programs through which blood and organs are donated is a key feature. Indeed, the significance of Giving for Life is destroyed if it is not done freely. Voluntary giving, a condition for human survival and flourishing, requires generosity and self-initiative.

The impact of this moral requirement may be discerned in both programs. People who receive payment for donating blood are not "giving" freely; they are motivated by selfish interests as much as by a concern for others. Moreover, selfish interests provide a reason to be untruthful about medical conditions that should bar a person from donating blood. The experience of blood programs throughout the world is that the most effective and efficient screening device for securing healthy blood is to make blood programs voluntary. Generosity is the foundation for the survival and flourishing of human life together.

The Uniform Anatomical Gift Act also has a voluntary dimension. The donation of organs at death is legal when the donor makes a voluntary decision before death occurs. This program differs from proposals that organs be routinely procured from all who die. The Uniform Anatomical Gift Act depends upon a concern for others and respects the human capacity to act voluntarily. It recognizes that persons express their humanity when they exercise self-initiative. Generosity toward others is a foundation for the survival and flourishing of human life together.