

“O-”

Sermon by Brian Russo

October 17, 2010, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Proverbs 31:10-31

2 Corinthians 9:10-15

An allegory is like an ancient tapestry, made up of various yarns and symbols. This sermon weaves its own, to what effect, you'll have to tell me. Amen.

Every 56 days, I receive a call. No, not a call from God, but rather, a phone call from an anonymous number. I do not know why it always comes up anonymous, or restricted, but every 56 days, it never fails. And when it rings, a conglomeration of senses pump throughout my veins... regret, annoyance, unchecked frustration, these are just some to name a few. And yet I know just why it is that I'm getting that call, why they are so persistent in finding me. They know something about me, you see. They want me to come in. They are The American Red Cross.

Oh yes, they love me down there. They've had my blood before and they want it again. I'm O+, you see, and they by science tell me that means something to their cause; that my lifeline can provide for at least three others; that "Mr. Russo, you have idea how far your blood can go!" I must say, it can be quite an ego-trip, quite the venture down Arrogance Lane. And yet, even though I'm fully aware of what my donation can offer, I still sometimes encounter that negative range of aforementioned emotions when the phone begins to ring.

But why? Why should I ever feel regret at the prospect, indeed even the reality, of saving three other lives? Well, in an amazing display of candor, I must say that on some of those 56th days, I do ignore the call. I know, it's awful. You see, I convince myself that it's not them calling, saying, eh, it's probably just one of those automated messages asking me to rate the service performed upon my car, or some magazine company inquiring about a new subscription. And I'm pretty sure I know why I do this; I think it has a lot to do with the sense of *obligation*.

Feeling obligated to do something is one of my biggest hang-ups. Now of course, this does not mean that I'm entirely unreliable, undependable, or untrustworthy. I would hope my record here so far has earned your respect to the contrary. That said, there are nonetheless times in my life where I find myself less-than-happily obliging, or not obliging at all, to do what must be done. For instance... Anya, my girlfriend, has this habit of wanting a kiss-hello and a kiss-goodbye in every possible situation that she thinks calls for such. I could be at the other end of stadium parking lot, in the middle of blizzard, struggling to open the snowy door to my icy car, but if she doesn't get that kiss before we officially part, it might as well be that the Abominable Snowman also stole my keys, for truly I'm not going anywhere. I tell you, it's that kind of obligatory response that just really kills me. Sorry Honey.

And I think sometimes it kills you too. I think when you sometimes hear, over and again, that you are scripturally and theologically obligated to give, it perhaps makes you a little less inclined to do just that. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm right. I honestly don't know, for I can't get into each of your individual psyches to determine verity from fallacy. All I know is that for me, obligation is a tricky word, and for many of us who mentally engage in this post-modernistic time where claims on individuality reign supreme, it's simply difficult to hear that what you have earned actually belongs to someone or something else.

But, I also know that that something else, which is indeed this place, also belongs to you. It is here for you. It is here to give back to you. My friends, it is the proverbial O-, a universal donor, and it is here to transfuse to you an abundance that your paycheck could never ever provide. For our church is indeed a mighty fortress, a rock upon which your faith can stand, a foundation upon which you and your children can be raised. It is a capable wife who is far more precious than jewels, and it perceives that all her merchandise, indeed all of you, are profitable and her lamp will not go out at night. She opens her hand to the poor at Our Brothers Place, and reaches out her hands to the needy at NPIHN; she brings Brad and Lindsay together in marriage, and baptizes the beautiful daughter of Nate and Martha Sarpong. Strength and dignity are her clothing for she opens her mouth though the wisdom of Cindy; and the teaching of Diane is kindness on her tongue. Her children rise up in service in Montana and glory in Moscow and all praise is due to Mark for excellently surpassing all others. So give her a share in the fruit of your hands, my friends, and let her works be praised throughout all the gates of this city! I dare say, can I get an Amen?

But my friends, even though she is a good wife, she is indeed an aging wife, a widow several times over. Her physical needs are many, and all one has to do is look up to see just that. Yes, over the baptismal font that we used this very day, we see some beautiful water damage. It certainly does look like a nice piece of abstract art if that's your thing, but other than that, it's merely just another expense. As Cindy says, this building is both a blessing and a curse for us. It is what it is.

And do forgive me for speaking so plainly now, but you need not just look upwards, you can simply read through your novel of a bulletin. We have a million programs going on these days, which is awesome in the truest sense of its definition, for it clearly shows an connected interest on the part of staff as well as yourselves to make this place a part, perhaps even the part, of your weekly life. But acknowledging this, on top of what the church does outside of this place in its commitment to missions, and as well as what we're doing inside our newly constructed Center on the Hill just downstairs, it comes perhaps without a shock that we ourselves are in need of several transfusions.

We are told by science that an O- can donate to anyone and everyone, which is certainly the premier desire of our mission statement here, but it is also understood that an O- can only receive a donation from an exact match. Ideally, of course, it wouldn't be that way; ideally we would be a self-sustaining O-, and you an AB+, universally receiving anything and everything from us without question. But idealistic thinking rarely encounters the constructs of reality on its discourse.

And thus, here we are, face to face in this state and in this place. As an O-, this church needs an exact match, in financial support yes, but also in bodily spirit and determination. It's the only way all of this works. But none of it works if you merely look at it as an obligation, or because Brian said so, or because Cindy so, or because scripture said so. It only works if you yourselves want it enough. If you elect to follow the places your soul is leading you toward. And that's what it's all about anyway. Forget the obligations, forget the demands and certainly forget Mark Bernstein's baseball bat from last week. It's about you wanting this ministry to be relevant and alive, to be as enriching as blood, becoming the lifeline for you, your spirit, your children's and your grandchildren's. Isn't that after all why you are here in the first place?

Trust me, no one is asking you to put your spirit or your wallet into anaphylactic shock by over-committing yourselves. We are merely asking for you to look around. To look at each other. To look up to the choir loft, to sit and gaze in awe at this

beautiful place. To dream of what Arianna and all of the children will grow up to be, and how we can help provide for their spiritual education and direction. To reflect on the passing of all those like Bob Dyer, and how we can enrich the heart that is so strong in the surviving Hopes. And, mostly, to know that we are family, unified as one, such that an event like that which happened two weeks ago when we all gathered together for the Mission Trip Slideshow can be replicated over and again.

So leave this place this morning without worry that we're after you like a ghost in the night. Instead, keep these symbolic words close to your heart, which encapsulate what you can make as a return on your lifeline's donation to this place, our church, our foundation:

"He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!"

Thanks be to God for the gift that is the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, a church and a place that is forever yearning to be a universal donor to all of you.

So will you pick up the call? Will you be our match?

Amen.

Return to [Sermons](#)

Return to [Home Page](#)