

Stay Open and Receive

by **Pastor Helga Jansons** Director for Evangelical Mission

In the season of Thanksgiving, we often take extra time to think about those things for which we are grateful; family, friends, food, the church, God, health, a home, love... and so we name these and even say a prayer of thanks for these good things. We become more attentive to these gifts for a moment or for a longer while in-between our Thanksgiving preparations.

I would like to share with you what I am doing this year as my way of being grateful. It is not easy. I am trying to both stay open and to receive what God is giving me. Mostly I know what I want, and I try to make that happen. But the trouble is that many things are beyond my control. Fancy that!

Good relationships and love for example are not things where my will is going to make those work. I have tried. Love is a gift and it cannot be forced. I have discovered that we cannot even force ourselves to love someone. We can “be loving” but not necessarily feel love for someone.

The same holds true for faith, it cannot be forced. There are people who really want to believe in God, but can't. I know someone who studied religion in college, went to church and yet he simply could not believe in God. Then one day he admitted it to a group of people at a bible study, and they prayed for him, and overnight he was given the gift of faith. Suddenly everything he had learned and known came together, and he believed.

Living in an open hearted way without trying to determine the outcome is hard. I feel vulnerable. When something is painful, a loss for example, I just want to close my heart and get on, so I don't have to feel the pain. When anxious, I want to rationalize and fix things, or plan how they will go. It also means being aware of how the world is hurting; our children, fellow parishioners and voters. You may know the quote by Ian MacLaren “Be kind. Everyone you meet is carrying a heavy burden.” Even tears that are shed with us, are a gift of sharing what matters to someone. No one sheds tears if they don't care.

From a “stewardship” standpoint, everything we have and are, all of life, is a gift from God. Our role is to stay open and receive every little thing, every moment, and every person who enters into our lives; appreciate their laugh, their kind words, or their searching mind. I am recognizing how much the church matters to people and how hard people are trying to serve their church and community. I pick up on enthusiasm, and a good story teller and pay attention when I see two people look at each other with love. I even dare ask to hear their story. I pick up on a skill or talent and comment on it, and sometimes ask boldly if they would like to serve the synod in some way. I sure hear it when people are honest about their disappointments and fears. Those words are also from the heart, and can be a gift when shared. When someone is receptive to help, that is an opportunity to use our gifts, which is a blessing.

There is a very big part of me that wants our synod and every church in it to grow in leaps and bounds. I want to shout out loud in every community – “Come to this wonderful church where you will know the love of God!” I want our synod to thrive and for everyone to see how wonderful it is to be the church together. But all I have is each moment and opportunity that is given to me, to share what I have received from God through the church and our synod.

To receive fully is a way to recognize, and live by, God's grace. It is certainly a way to connect with people in a deeper way. It is a source of great joy. For this I give thanks.

