

Sermon: November 15, 2009  
“A new kind of PROVOKING”

It's so easy to get “provoked” today ... so, I was a bit concerned when I saw this word in the lesson from “Hebrews” this morning. But ... it is used in a good way ... LISTEN:

*“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds ...”*

In a way ... this is who we are ... we are in the business of PROVOKING GOODNESS.  
We should do and say things here ... so, when you walk out the door ... you can't wait to do something GOOD for someone else ---- i.e. PROVOKE GOODNESS.

Do you spend a lot of time “being provoked” ... or maybe being the “provoker”????

*\*somebody cuts you off in traffic ...*

*\*your insurance company tells you again why “you aren't covered” ...*

*\*your “significant other” once again does something without consulting you ...*

*\*the people you work with are driving you nuts ...*

*\*your kids ... the school ... your coach ... your team ----- one thing provoking you after another ...*

Every day ... I read the newspaper ... and I try to watch the “news” at night.  
After all ... if we are going to be a church with a message making a difference ... it somehow has to relate to what you go through & deal with “in your real world.”

This morning ... 90 percent of the stuff I read in the paper is about being PROVOKED.

*\*Bear-fans are provoked. (At least we have a Bear-free Sunday today!!)*

*\*Notre Dame fans are provoked.*

*\*The citizens of Illinois are provoked.*

*\*Democrats are provoked ... and so are the Republicans.*

*\*Israelites and Palestinians have been provoked at each other since the beginning of time.*

*\*Our financial situation ... the lack of jobs ... people wondering if they can survive one more month ---- it's all soil provoking us more than ever.*

*\*More and more people randomly drop-by the church ... claiming to be desperate and broke.*

Sometimes we can help ... sometimes we can't. When you say “no” ... they are provoked. When they don't say “thanks” ... then I am provoked.

I don't like being provoked ... and I don't like myself when I provoke others.

I take no joy in being bitter, or angry, or self-righteous ... it's not attractive.

The other night I turned into some late-night tv-religion. I guess I am surprised at how much “angry religion” there is out there. Religion feeding on peoples' prejudices ... feeding on our fears and lack of tolerance and acceptance. Religion provoking folks to be judgmental to those who are different.

THIS IS NOT JESUS.

Read the book ... close your eyes ... picture the way Jesus walked.

Sure --- Jesus did provoke lots of people. Why? ----- because he roamed leper colonies ... he ate with sinners ... he over-turned the tables in the Temple when he saw people cheating.

He gave prostitutes a second chance ... he made the forgotten & victims of prejudice feel like the most special people in the world.

Jesus wasn't interested in rule books designed to keep others out ... he wasn't into factions and cults ... who turn Jesus into someone he was never meant to be.

Jesus cared only about one thing: *PROVOKING GOODNESS.*

I think about our church ... our love-bucket. I think about life, the newspaper I just read.

In the midst of all this ... we have one mission ----- to provoke goodness in our world.

Recently someone took me to task ... in a good way. He says: *Don, I want to talk to you about your weekly children's sermon give-aways. Every Sunday ... these kids come here ---- with their hands out ... expecting to be given something.*

Maybe they do. In life ----- lots of people have their "hands out." Lots of people "milk the system." Their world is one of "give-and-take" ----- YOU GIVE, AND I'LL TAKE. Such is life ... it's the way some people are.

But these kids? ... I want them to expect goodness. I want them to relish in what it means to receive ... with gratitude in their hearts. I want them to see and experience THE GOODNESS OF LIFE.

As I get older ... as I look at myself, my life, my family, my journey. As I reflect on what I do have and on what I don't ----- I just know in my heart: ***giving is fun, giving is a blast!!***

Giving gives me goose-bumps ... talking about it sends a chill up-and-down my spine.

We know how good GIVING can make us feel.

And ----- if we give from the depths of who we are ... then maybe ----- when the day comes when we can't give. When the day comes when we are the ones in the nursing home ... when we are the ones confined to our house ... when we are a bit down-and-out ... when we can't "do it" on our own ...

maybe then we'll be open TO ACCEPT WHAT OTHERS GIVE ... BECAUSE WE KNOW how good it feels!!

I look at our kids' eyes when they come up here for the children's sermon. They listen to bad music from an aging preacher ... they roll their eyes at my bad jokes ... and, yes, their hands are out ... but so are their hearts!!

All kids deserve to live with a sense of expectation ----- expecting that God is good ... their parents care ... that being good makes a difference in the world.

There are too many kids in our world whose "sense of expectation" is dashed at an early age. That "web of love" isn't there ... violence and hardship become a way of life.

I'm not sure how to change this ... but we'll try, on a small scale, with our love-bucket this Christmas.

In the meantime ----- we need to PROVOKE OUR KIDS ...

--- to keep their eyes wide open ...

--- to expect "good things" in life ...

--- to receive what they are given ... and to say "thank-you" over & over again ...

--- to see God and Jesus in the simple & common moments of life ...

Yes ... they need to be provoked ... so as they get older ... they can't wait to WALK OUT THAT DOOR, and be "ambassadors of goodness" in the world.

This isn't just about kids ... it's about all of us.

May we never lose that "child-like spirit" ... so "all the saints" can be provokers of goodness & grace.

Tomorrow we go to the Veteran's Home in Manteno. We play bingo ... and we bring a "stack of single dollars" that won't quit ----- thanks to your generosity. We pass them out until we run out. It's so much fun to give stuff away ... especially to men and women who have served our country and made it possible for us to be where we are today.

It's good. It's fun. And ----- it's *provoked!!*

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*March 15, 2009*

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