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Arlington Street Church  
17 May 2020

## **I Got You**

I don't know where my colleague Bill Neely grew up — he serves our congregation in Princeton, New Jersey now — but in grade school, he used to like to take the bus to the mall on weekends. The buses didn't run very often past his apartment complex in the suburbs; he did an impressive job navigating the local bus schedule to get him there in time to see a movie and play a few video games before heading back home again. If he missed the bus, he might have to wait hours for the next one, or make a very, very long walk home.

Bill worried about accidentally spending his return fare on snacks or extra games, but figured out that he could put his bus money in his left pocket and only spend what was in his right pocket. He was extra careful, actually, always putting in a little bit more than the fare, just in case. The only time he reached into his left pocket was when he boarded the bus home.

And so you can imagine what it was like for this little kid, visiting the arcade to play Pole Position, his favorite race car game, and munching on popcorn while watching “Ghostbusters” (the original), to board the bus for home, reach into his left pocket, and find it empty.

There was no money in his left pocket and no money in his right pocket, either.

He says, “.... I stepped out of the way of the people behind me.... I checked my back pockets and my jacket pockets and there was no money anywhere. I had no idea what to do. The line ... cleared ... and the driver was watching me frantically patting my pockets.... But before [he closed] the door, the last man to board the bus ... looked at me and said,

‘I got you.’

“He was dressed in jeans and a brown work shirt.... [He] probably worked maintenance at the mall and was headed home. And [when] he saw ... the mess I

was in, ... with a simple ‘I got you,’ he put my fare in the box so ... I could go home.

“I said, ‘Thank you so much,’ ... to which he replied, ‘No problem,’ and he did it with that smooth, quiet, head-nod thing that made him seem [even cooler]....

“... That was the first and last time I saw him, but he has stayed with me — he and his ‘I got you.’ He got that something had gone wrong ... and I was in a tricky situation.... I thought ... I was independent; he got that I wasn’t....

“I may have been a kid who could manage a bus trip to the mall, but [I learned that day] there would be times ... I would need help getting home; times when I couldn’t do it alone; times when I would need the kindness of strangers.... [He got] that we are all in this together....”<sup>12</sup>

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I can say, without reservation, that this pandemic has brought out the very best in us, in this beloved spiritual community. The Tech Team leapt into action to connect us virtually. The Indulge Team put our auction online, and we bid our hearts out. Five people donated computer equipment to get folks up onto Zoom. Five teams assembled themselves to deliver groceries. Several of you joined neighborhood mutual aid societies. Your generosity in the virtual collection plate — giving now more than ever — has made it possible to continue to pay our staff. You have shown up for worship and gathered in the Arlington Street Zoom room week after week with kindness, care, and encouragement for each other and for me. We have never been farther apart nor closer together. In 10,000 ways, we have assured one another,

“I got you.”

Today, on Covenant Renewal Sunday, we renew our great covenant of love and service and pledge gifts of financial support for this beloved spiritual community. It’s a little different from my childhood church in Concord, where Covenant Renewal began at small cocktail parties at people’s homes. Having been plied with alcohol, everyone filled out their pledge cards and then walked to the church — thankfully, no one had to drive — to attend a fancy, celebratory dinner, prepared by the Women’s Alliance and served by the youth group. More than one group came piling into the vestibule shouting raucously and even singing. Perhaps it was their joy at giving.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Bill Neely, “The Guy on the Bus,” 3/5/17. Please see [uaa.org/sites/live-new.uaa.org/files/the\\_guy\\_on\\_the\\_bus\\_2017\\_stewardship\\_sermon\\_award\\_winner.pdf](http://uaa.org/sites/live-new.uaa.org/files/the_guy_on_the_bus_2017_stewardship_sermon_award_winner.pdf)

I remember the year I was assigned to table number one to serve Harvey Wheeler and his guests. Mr. Wheeler was beloved. A pillar. The Harvey Wheeler Community Center was named for him. What I remember about that evening is that things were really, really bad at home. I was struggling to deflect any curiosity and make sure nobody — nobody — knew. Except I was pretty sure Mr. Wheeler knew. He was a trustee of the church — he knew everything — and some of my family mess had been public

There was a little paper tent at the head of table where Mr. Wheeler was seated; it said, “Kim #1.” I had been instructed to serve him first, then the rest of the table, and to stand just behind him, where he could ask me for anything he might need. At some point mid-meal, while he held court among Concord’s finest, he took the paper tent and folded it flat at his place setting, took out a Sharpie, and wrote the word “is” between “Kim” and “number one.” Then he turned around and handed it to me.

I don’t think he said anything. He didn’t need to. But if he had — if he’d even had this combination of words available to him — he would have said,  
 “I got you.”

I still have that little paper tent — a reminder of an extravagant gesture of empathy and kindness.

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There are many, many studies of generosity that all draw the same conclusions: Generosity is good for us. When we give, our brains release chemicals bringing feelings of joy and peace. Giving lowers our stress levels, and is positively correlated with longevity. People who give by volunteering around four hours a week are 40 percent less likely to develop high blood pressure.<sup>3</sup> People in Alcoholics Anonymous double their chances of successful recovery when they help others.<sup>4</sup> Givers experience something called “giver’s glow;” we literally light up.<sup>5</sup> And when we give, we uplift others, inspiring them to give, too.

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In 1831, the Choctaw people of Oklahoma were the first tribe to be driven from their native land and forcibly marched thousands of miles along the infamous

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<sup>3</sup> This study was conducted at Carnegie Mellon University in 2013.

<sup>4</sup> This study was done by Project MATCH, a comprehensive alcoholism treatment trial

<sup>5</sup> This research was conducted at Stony Brook University

Trail of Tears. Four thousand died. But just sixteen years later, in 1847, the Choctaw opened their hearts to donate to others who were in dire straights: Some 4,000 miles away, the Irish people were starving in the Potato Famine. Between 1845 and 1849, some one million Irish people died of hunger or disease, and another million emigrated then or shortly afterward.

The amount the Choctaw gave was extraordinary: \$170, the equivalent of more than \$5,000 in today's currency. The Kindred Spirits Choctaw Monument is a beautiful art installation in Midleton, Ireland, commemorating their donation.<sup>6</sup> In 1995, then-president of Ireland Mary Robinson visited the Choctaws to thank them.<sup>7</sup>

Today, hundreds of Irish people are repaying the Choctaw's ancient kindness, donating more than \$3.6 million to help supply clean water, food, and health supplies for Native American tribes suffering in the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the Navajo nation, which has one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in the United States.

"The Choctaw ancestors planted that seed a long time ago," says fundraiser Cassandra Begay. "It is a dark time for us. The support from Ireland is phenomenal."<sup>8</sup> The Choctaw say,

"I got you."

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Lois told us last week that her father taught her the difference between wants and needs ... and that she needs Arlington Street. If we didn't know it before, we know it now. After our meeting this week, the Covenant Renewal team sent me some amazing emails and agreed to let me tell you about them.

Lois wrote to say she's taking the leap to increase her pledge to five percent of her income. So much is uncertain, now, it's a good time to invest in a sure bet, and we're her sure bet. Lois is grateful that she's still working; she's making sure to

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<sup>6</sup> Dedicated in 2017

<sup>7</sup> Over the years, Choctaw representatives have taken part in the annual Famine Walk in County Mayo, commemorating a forced march in terrible weather by hundreds of starving people hoping for government relief.

<sup>8</sup> Ed O'Loughlin and Mihir Zaveri, "Irish Return and Old Favor, Helping Native Americans Battling the Virus," The New York Times, 5/5/20. Please see [nytimes.com/2020/05005/world/coronavirus-ireland-native-american-tribes.html?smid=em-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05005/world/coronavirus-ireland-native-american-tribes.html?smid=em-share)

help cover those who aren't. Then there's that something extra the federal government sent out — our money, to be sure, but not that we expected to see it.

Liz wrote, “Dawn & I will be pledging \$5,000 this year. Knowing Rev. Beth is matching Kem's and your pledge was a real push! I sold it to Dawn by comparing it to golf. We spend about that much on golf each year, and church is way more important to me than golf!”

Dawn sent a follow-up email: “For clarification's sake: I enjoy spending money on things that bring me joy. I enjoy golf and I enjoy church!”

Another member of the team wrote, “I'm increasing my pledge by 20 percent, making Arlington Street 65 percent of my total annual charitable giving.” I happen to know he throws in extra, too.

I never cease to be amazed by the generosity of this beloved spiritual community.

We give because we cherish  
what we are creating together.  
We give in alignment with our values.  
We give to this experience,  
this opportunity to grow a soul,  
and our shared mission  
of love, service, justice, and peace.

A standard formula among progressive people is to give five percent of our income to our places of worship ... and to stretch to give more. For each of us, the idea is for us to give what we can.

And let me be very clear, if you can't give,  
we got you.

I want to close by sharing again one of my very favorite stories of generosity. It's from my beloved friend and colleague, Rev. Dr. Patrick T. O'Neill. He writes,

“As you might guess from my name, I was not a born and raised Unitarian Universalist. I grew up in an Irish Catholic family, and a lot of what I know about church community I ... learned by watching the folks who were part of the working-class Catholic parish where I grew up in New Jersey.

“This particular story is about a man in our church named Bill. Bill was an immigrant laborer who worked as a longshoreman on the docks of New York. He lived across the street from the church with his wife and seven children, and he was a devout churchman.

“One year ... Bill was laid off ... in an extended strike, and he was unable to pay his financial pledge to the church. ... This was a serious blow to Bill’s pride ... [and he] knew it was a poor parish that needed all the contributions it could get.

“ ... As my mother later told the story, Bill went to the pastor and volunteered to contribute his services as the unpaid evening custodian for the church school, until he could afford to resume his financial pledge. ‘It’s something the church needs,’ he said. ‘And instead of paying for this service, the church can use the money to do good work.’

“So each evening he worked several hours, for no pay, sweeping and mopping the church school classrooms and hallways and staircases. On snowy days, in those years before snow blowers, Bill got up early to shovel the church school sidewalks before the children arrived for classes. Unable to contribute financially to his church, he found a workingman’s way to contribute his fair share.

“[Some months later, the] dock strike ended ..., and Bill was once again able to resume his full-time day job and ... his financial pledge to the church. But he decided, in addition to his pledge, to continue working as the unpaid night custodian of the church, which he did — for the next thirty years.

“I know ... this story is true,” Patrick O’Neill concludes, “because Bill was my father.”<sup>9</sup>

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Like the guy on the bus, we pledge “to pay someone else’s fare; to pledge to pay as many fares as possible,”<sup>10</sup> because there are so many who are struggling.

Like Harvey Wheeler, we pledge to uphold the church and the congregation — this physical place we love and everyone who passes through its doors — as well

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<sup>9</sup> Rev. Dr. Patrick T. O’Neill, “The Shoemakers Window,” 2/19/03. Please see [uua.org/worship/words/sermon/14308.shtml](http://uua.org/worship/words/sermon/14308.shtml)

as people everywhere to whom we might show kindness and mercy and generosity of spirit.

Like the Choctaw, we remember those who were generous to us. In 1729, a scrappy bunch of Scots-Irish immigrants gathered in a barn and put in some mighty work to begin this congregation. Generations of people have sustained it, creating a beloved spiritual community to which we could come home.

Today, we pledge to pay it forward.

Thank you for joining me in giving — joyfully, generously — because if there's anything we've learned during this time we're apart, it's that we come home to one another.

I know that you've got me.  
I got you.

Amen