

DEFINED BY GENEROSITY

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo¹
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Proverbs 11:24-25, 22:9
1 Timothy 6:17-19

Today I conclude my series of sermons on money and possessions. So far we've considered how we relate to material things and how they can be a bane or a blessing to our efforts to live faithfully and contentedly as Christians. This morning I'd like to focus on the idea of generosity. Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get. But we make a life by what we give." I want to make the case that our money and possessions will never bring us joy or abundant life until we learn the gift of generosity.

It seems logical to me that if we human beings are made in God's image, then we are by nature generous, because that is God's nature. But I find in my own life that there are a couple of voices in my head that war against my natural impulse towards generosity. One of them is the voice of fear. It tells me that if I give away what is or could be mine, there may not be enough left over for me. Maybe that comes from growing up as one of five children. We weren't rich by any means. You certainly didn't get everything you wanted. Taking turns and sharing were a way of life—and not one we feuding siblings always embraced gracefully. So when I got older and had the chance to accumulate something for myself, it was like I was making up for lost time.

The other voice that I hear is saying, "if you give, you're not going to be able to get the stuff that's going to make you happy." We've talked about this before: how our culture tells us that we measure our lives by the abundance of our possessions. Jesus taught that that's a lie. I know that, and yet I still find myself tempted to believe it sometimes. I tell myself that, of course, my life will be fuller and happier if I can party with my friends when I want to and buy the things I want to buy and do every extravagant thing I want to do. If I give to God—to the church, to charities, to folks in need—well, my life, my pleasure will be diminished by the things I have to forego.

I suspect those two voices—the voice of fear and the voice of pleasure—continue to compete with our impulse towards generosity for our entire lives. But I also believe that living as disciples helps us to quiet those voices, to keep them in their place. The longer we walk the walk with Christ, the more we grow in our conviction that we do not belong to ourselves, but to God. That hymn we sang a couple of weeks ago, "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee"—it's a prayer, really—captures the sense of that for me as no other. We sang it at my ordination service. "Take my life...my hands...my feet...my voice...my silver and gold...my intellect...my will...my heart...and let all of me be useful to you, Lord. Take myself, and I will be Ever, only, all for Thee, Ever, only, all for Thee."

¹ Dr. DeGarmo acknowledges with thanks the critical reading of this sermon in draft by his wife, Sarah Finlayson.

Prayers like that, prayed regularly, change us. They move our focus bit by bit away from ourselves and toward the things God calls us to do and be. The Holy Spirit works in us, helping us to see other people as God sees them, to see the needs they have, and to wonder “well, if I don’t do something, who will?” Things that might seem crazy or impossible when I’m only thinking about me suddenly become within reach when undertaken in God’s service.

I have found that there is more joy in doing things for other people, and for God, than there ever was in just looking out for myself. Which is, of course, what Jesus was saying when he said “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”² Somehow in the very act of losing, you find life, Jesus said.³ We follow him, and somehow, we begin to change.

Now, generosity as a way of life has a strong theological foundation. It is “that everything on the earth belongs to God. You didn’t bring any of it with you when you came into this world. And you won’t take any of it with you when you leave. Life is a gift, and it all, ultimately, belongs to God. Even your capacity to make wealth is a gift from God. Your life is a gift from God...So what does it mean to *own* anything? We don’t own it. God owns it. The Psalmist says it this way: ‘The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it. The world and all who dwell therein.’⁴ [In the book of Leviticus, the Lord] says, ‘the land is mine, and you are but aliens and [my] tenants. Isn’t that interesting? That you are a tenant on God’s land. You are a manager or a steward of God’s resources, [which include the planet’s resources, all the things that you have, and your very life.]

“[W]e are stewards of the blessings of God. Our goal is to try to figure out what does God want us to do with the resources that we have at our disposal...[Meeting our needs and more is certainly a part of what God intends. God is not a tightwad; fruitfulness and abundance are a part of God’s intention for all. Yet God] also expects us to do more than just focus on ourselves. [How do we balance taking care of ourselves with a Christ-like generosity to those in need and the broader purposes of God?]⁵

I have a friend in New York who is not a Christian, but she is sharp as a tack and I often think knows the Bible better than I do. She reads my sermons and never lets me get away with anything. When I said in the sermon several weeks ago that God expects us to use our resources first to take care of our families and those close to us and then in service to Christ and the world, she fired off a letter straight away, reminding me that Jesus had some pretty harsh things to say about earthly families and left little doubt that his followers were to put kingdom work ahead of mundane family ties: ‘Whoever comes to me,’ Jesus said, ‘and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.’⁶ And when Peter complained that the disciples had left everything to follow Jesus, he responded, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the

² Acts 20:35.

³ John 12:25.

⁴ Psalm 24:1.

⁵ Adam Hamilton, “Defined By Generosity,” Sermon preached at United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, Leewood, Kansas, November 4, 2007.

⁶ Luke 14:26.

kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.⁷

Yes, Jesus challenges the traditional concept of family. He stretches it, it seems to me, so that it includes more than just the people under our roof or on the nearest branches of our family tree. In his kingdom, we are attuned to our common kinship as children of God. We feel the same mutual and personal obligation with others in our spiritual family as we do with our blood relatives. As he does so often in his teaching, Jesus draws on an ordinary experience we know and can relate to—the love of family—to help us see something less familiar—the way as his disciples we are to love one another, our neighbors, even our enemies.

So, I don't believe Jesus is teaching us to abandon our families or ignore their needs as a general rule. Loving our families, caring for our families is the most basic way, it seems to me, we think about the needs of others and not just our own. But we can't stop there. We're to help the poor. We're to give to those who are in need. We're to have eyes and heart for the bigger picture: people in our community, people in our world.

Now, obviously the needs of the world are so large, not even a Bill Gates, giving away everything he has, would put a dent in them. Are we supposed to go around feeling guilty all the time because we haven't yet fixed the world and we still have money in the bank? How much generosity is enough?

Historically, one of the ways God's people have tried to answer this question is through the tithe, that is, through setting aside a tenth of their wealth or income for dedication to God's purposes. The tithe was part of the law of Moses.⁸ The first fruits, the best of you had, the first tenth went to the Lord's work, to God's glory. It would be distributed through the temple, or later the church.

Today, most of us I imagine give through the church, but also to charities and other good works outside the church. There's nothing wrong with that. I think tithing is still a reasonable, biblically based guide for our lives today, although it is a challenging idea for many of us. A tithe still leaves nine-tenths for you, but even a tenth for others may seem an impossible stretch, especially if you're new to the discipline of generosity and the voices of fear and pleasure are screaming at you full blast. If you're in that situation, I recommend you start where you are and move in the right direction. If you're keeping everything for yourself right now, set aside 1 percent this year. See if you can increase that to 1½ percent or 2 percent next year. Keep that up, and one day you will be tithing. In fact, you may find your generosity taking you beyond a tithe!

Sarah and I have been married nearly 21 years, and we've made that kind of systematic approach to giving a regular part of our budget. We add up all our income—Sarah's, mine, my housing allowance, any interest or dividends on our investments—and then we subtract the income taxes we pay, the Social Security withholding and the money we've put toward retirement. (We subtract savings for retirement, because we plan to keep this disciple going even after we're retired; we'll tithe on that money then.) Then we just take a percentage of what's left—10 percent or more these days—and set it aside for

⁷ Luke 18:28-32.

⁸ Leviticus 27:30.

giving away. The biggest chunk every year goes to the church, but we contribute to a lot of different charities. We like to have the flexibility, when someone comes to us and says, “Can you help with this cause I’m involved with,” to say “Yes.” We’ve also set up our wills this way, so that a sizeable portion of our estates when we die will go to help others.

Ours is not the only way to approach tithing, but whatever approach you decide is best for you, I encourage you to be deliberate and systematic about following it. Generosity has a way of snowballing. “It changes our hearts so that when we’re generous, it makes us want to be more generous...It’s like love. It makes you more loving [when you do] something loving. [We may have to somewhat deliberate about our generosity at first and it doesn’t feel natural at all. But over time,] our hearts become generous. Generosity begins to define us.

“[I’m convinced that] generosity is a great blessing in our lives, and by the act of being generous we find blessings flow back into our lives that we’re not even expecting. That we’re surprised by. We find out generosity changes the world. Our generosity changes other people with whom we spend time. And somewhere along the way we look back and go, wow, look what happened. We find ourselves blessed. We find joy in our generosity.

“Which is, I think what Jesus had in mind when he says this in Luke’s Gospel. He says, ‘Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’⁹ And in Malachi, God [says to his people when they are neglecting to be generous,] ‘Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house and thus put me to the test says the Lord of Hosts. See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.’

“[Now, don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that] you should give so you get back [even more—like some sort of calculated investment]. That is not how it works...We don’t give to God so that we can get something back. But the amazing thing is that when we give to God, and we give to others, the blessings seem to come back. I’m not going to guarantee that if you tithe, you’re never going to lose your job. Life doesn’t work that way. I’m not going to guarantee you that bad things aren’t going to happen if you tithe. I’m just going to tell you that somehow the blessings of God flow in our lives when we become generous.

“You know, whenever I am preparing a funeral service for a parishioner, I sit down with his or her family to plan the service. I always ask the folks to tell me about their loved one. I may know the person pretty well, but there’s always so much I don’t know. It’s amazing [and humbling] to hear those stories about their lives. One question I ask is ‘tell me what defined your husband? What was the defining characteristic of your wife? What was it that people would say about them, who knew them from the workplace, or the neighborhood, or friends? What were those defining characteristics?’ And I write those things down. And then I ask, ‘if I were to talk to your loved one before they passed away and asked them what do you want to be remembered for, what would they say?’ I write those things down.

⁹ Luke 6:38.

“Now someday, someone’s going to come and sit with your family or your friends, and they’re going to ask questions like that. What will the answers be? What are the defining characteristics that you hope to cultivate in your life? You may not be there yet, but what would you like to become?”

“My hope is that one of those defining characteristics for you would be generosity. I would like people to say about every member of this church, ‘You know what? She was generous. When there was a need, he helped. She was faithful in her giving to God. She made a difference in the world. He sacrificed so that other people might have. She was that kind of person. He was that kind of man.’”¹⁰

‘They were defined by generosity.’

Amen.

¹⁰ Hamilton, “Defined By Generosity.”