

## Sermon #4: Defined by Generosity

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;  
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.  
A generous person will be enriched,  
and one who gives water will get water. (Proverbs 11:24-25)

Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor. (Proverbs 22:9)

### I. Intro

Last week's noisy bucket offering reminded me of "Penny Sunday" in my first parish. The tradition had started before I got there – each month on a given Sunday, they would do a "penny march." Members of the congregation had saved pennies (and nickels, dimes, quarters and bills), to support an orphan in Zimbabwe. The congregation had supported Will, who was then 7 years old since he was a baby. And as they brought the pennies forward, they would sing "the magic penny song."

*Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away  
Love is something if you give it away you end up having more*

*It's just like a magic penny. Hold on tight & you won't have any  
Lend it, spend it & you'll have so many. They'll roll all over the floor, for ... (repeat)*

Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

## II. A Theological Foundation for a Generous Life

### A. Created to Be Generous; Tempted to Hoard

God created us with the willingness to give—to God and to others. This design is part of our makeup; we actually have the *need* to be generous. Yet there are two voices that fight against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep or hoard what we have.

I've watched this most recently in my young grandchildren. As infants, they were always ready to share their toy, share their blankie, share their binky. Then they reached the age of "mine", not **N**-i-n-e but **M**-i-n-e. You know:

If I like it, it's MINE

If it's in my hand, it's MINE

If I can take it from you, it's MINE

If a had it before, it's MINE

If it looks like mine, it's MINE

If I saw it first, it's MINE.

If you put it down, it's MINE.

The seed of self-gratification finds its voice, and then grows up in a culture that tells us our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions and pleasurable experiences. So we find ourselves thinking, not only "If I might ever need it or want it, I must get it", but also "If I give, there won't be enough left for me."

We are afraid to be generous because we are afraid of what might happen to us. Fear, along with a misplaced idea about the true source of our security, keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have.

### B. Scarcity or Abundance

When it comes down to it, do we subscribe to a theology of scarcity, or do we live a theology of abundance?

In a theology of scarcity, there is a finite amount of resources, a limited amount of sustenance, not enough for everyone. If someone gets some of those resources, then someone else has less. Everything is always a zero-sum game. This creates attitudes that justify accumulation and acquisition as a means of having enough, and strategies of competition with others to get a piece of the pie. It has also led to the belief that God rewards us for faith by blessing us with wealth and things, and that persons without wealth and things aren't faithful people or don't believe enough.

I hope there was more than one statement in that description that caused you to be uneasy: competition versus compassion, earning God's blessing... Yet how much of that description reflects our day-to-day actions?

A theology of abundance is based on the idea that God is a God who gives richly, and God's gifts are abundant, more than we could ever think of or imagine. God has provided all that is needed, and we can share in what we have in order to ensure that all have a share in God's blessing. In the theology of the abundance we are called to recognize our unique blessings from God and find ways to give back that call us into relationship with our brothers and sisters. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians [2 Cor 9:8], "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." When we know that God gives richly, we want to give richly to others as well. It's about trusting that, when we give, God will provide for us in more than sufficient ways. As Jesus taught us to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread."

### **C. Defeating the Voices**

Faith in Jesus Christ defeats the voices of fear and self-gratification. When we give our lives to Christ, invite him to be Lord, and allow the Holy Spirit to begin changing us from the inside out, we find that our fears begin to dissipate and our aim in life shifts from seeking personal pleasure to pleasing God and caring for others. Although we still may wrestle with the

voices from time to time, we are able to silence them more readily and effectively the more we grow in Christ. And the more we grow in Christ, realizing that our lives belong to him, the more generous we become. Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth.

### **III. Biblical Reasons to Give to God and Others**

As the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives and we grow in faith, we begin to think less about ourselves and more about others. We begin to see the needs of others and wonder, "If I don't do something, who will?" As this change takes place within us, we experience real joy. We discover that we find more joy in doing things for other people and for God than we ever did in doing things for ourselves. In the very act of losing our lives, we find life, just as Jesus said, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." [Mt 16:25]

These realizations bring us to a central theological foundation for generosity: Life is a gift, and everything belongs to God. We are stewards of the blessings of God, and our goal is to determine what God wants us to do with the resources we have at our disposal. Many of our resources will go to take care of our needs and God intends life to be enjoyed. Nevertheless, God expects us to do more than focus on ourselves. Scripture teaches us that we are to help the poor, give to those in need, return a portion of our livelihood to God.

#### **A. Biblical Guidelines for Giving**

From the early days of the Old Testament, God's people observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had to God. At first, the practice was to burn these offerings completely, saving no portion for themselves or others. Later, the people would bring their offering to priests and offer them to God for the work of the temple and the priesthood.

A gift offered to God was called the *first fruits* or the *tithe*, and it equaled one-tenth of one's flocks or crops or income. Abraham was the first to give a tithe or tenth, giving a tenth of the spoils of war to the priest-king. Then in the time of Moses, the tithe was codified in the law.

God claimed one-tenth of the best the people had. Before giving to the poor and taking care of themselves, they were to bring one tenth of their first fruits to God. Whether it was produce of the ground or offspring of flocks, the first tenth was holy to the Lord.

## **1. Giving a tithe.**

As Christians who live under the new covenant, we are not bound by the Law of Moses; we look to it as a guide. Yet most Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives, and one that is pleasing to God. We give our tithes to the church to accomplish the work of God's kingdom through the body of Christ, and the church is responsible for praying and discerning how God wants these resources to be used.

Consider these 10 apples as our income. God has given us these apples – we might have picked them, or tended the trees, or even planted the trees, but they first are an element of creation. Tithing tells us that the first of these apples belongs to God, and the remaining 9 are ours to enjoy. We can use them to care for our families, save for retirement, even give some away to others. 3-housing, 1-savings, 1-transportation, 1-food, 1-reduce debt, medical, household/clothing. But giving this apple to God first, before we consume the other 9 apples, is a way for us to express our praise, love, obedience, faithfulness, worship, and devotion to God. This apple will serve to supply the resources for God's purposes to be accomplished thru God's church.

But are 9 apples really enough anymore? We think, "How can I pay all the bills and have all I want with only 9 apples? So we decide that God won't mind if we just take a little bit of the first apple. There's the trip we really want to take, Christmas presents we need to buy, a medical emergency that takes us by surprise, eating out, a new coat or handbag or pair of shoes ... Soon all that is left is the core. So we give the core to God. Not our first fruits. Not our best gifts. Our leftovers.

You know, a strange thing happens when we give the first apple to God. We're not tempted to eat it, because it's not there! And with God's help, we somehow find a way to make the other nine apples meet our needs.

Though tithing can be a struggle, it is possible at virtually every income level. If you cannot tithe right away, take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can give 2 percent or 5 percent or 7 percent. God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more and more generous.

<Personal experience>

## **2. Giving beyond the tithe.**

Tithing is a floor, not a ceiling. God calls us to grow beyond the tithe. We should strive to set aside an additional percentage of our income as offerings for other things that are important to us, such as mission projects, schools, church building funds, and other nonprofit organizations.

## **IV. The Text**

A short while ago, we heard the story of Zacchaeus from the Gospel of Luke. Perhaps you recall the song version as readily as the Gospel story. It is a story of God's grace. Zacchaeus, a Jew who is employed by the Roman Empire to collect taxes on their behalf, and who makes his living by what he extorts on top of those taxes, is curious to see this Jesus fellow who has come to town. While wanting to see, he doesn't seem to want to be seen and he scampers up into the tree to get a look behind the leafy cover. Yet, as Jesus walks by, his eyes find Zacchaeus, and his grace is poured out. "Salvation has come to your house today." Generous, abundant, undeserved. Zacchaeus experiences that generosity and responds with his own – not just a fraction of his earnings, but multiple times. Receiving grace, he returns grace. Experiencing generosity, he returns generosity.

## **V. What Our Giving Means to God**

### **A. How Does Our Giving Affect God?**

From the earliest biblical times, the primary way people worshipped God was by building an altar and offering the fruit of one's labors upon it to God. They would burn the sacrifice of an animal or grain as a way of expressing their gratitude, devotion, and desire to honor God. The scent of the offering was said to be pleasing to God. It wasn't that God loved the smell of burnt meat and grain. Rather, God saw that people were giving a gift that expressed love, faith, and the desire to please and honor God; and this moved God's heart. When given in this spirit, our offerings bless the Lord.

## **VI. How Our Generosity Affects Us**

### **A. Through It Our Hearts Are Changed**

When we are generous—to God and to our families, friends, neighbors, and others who are in need—our hearts are filled with joy. They are enlarged by the very act of giving. When we give generously, we become more generous.

### **B. In It We Find the Blessings of God**

Many Christians have it wrong. They say that if you give, then God will give more back to you. But that is not how it works, or rather, not why it works that way. We do not give to God so that we can get something in return. Again, from 2 Corinthians, "*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*" The amazing thing is that when we give to God and to others, the blessings just seem to come back to us. "*[The One] who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your*

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*righteousness.*” When we show ourselves as faithful stewards and find ourselves entrusted with more of God’s resources, it is so that those resources may be faithfully shared.

No, there is no guarantee that if you tithe you will never lose your job or never have other bad things happen to you. Nevertheless, when we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives.

In the coming weeks, it will be time for us to each decide what we plan to give to the church in the coming year. There is included in your bulletin a Personal Goals Worksheet. I encourage you to take that home with you, consider it, pray over it, fill it out and keep it in your Bible. As you are considering your commitments, first consider your relationship with God. How will you nurture your relationship with God in the coming year through regular attendance at worship and regular times of Bible reading and prayer? How will you grow in your relationship with God by participating in Bible studies or small groups? What financial goals will you set for yourself – spending, debt, reduction, savings? How will you show God’s love through ministry and mission, and through your giving to the church in support of the church’s ministry?

The story of Jeff ...

Would you join me in praying ...

CONTENTMENT PRAYER

Lord, help me be grateful for what I have, to remember that I don’t need most of what I want, and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity.