

**GENEROSITY:
God's Extravagant Love**

**John 3:16-21
I John 4:7-12**

*Everything we are and have and give is a response to
God's amazing love.*

A sermon preached by
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If you have been reading the devotional booklet for the Taking the Next Step campaign, and I hope you have, you read on Tuesday about a scary experience Bishop Robert Schnase had on a whitewater river in Costa Rica. It was supposed to be a level 3, medium difficulty river, but because of high water it was more like “fools only” level 5 torrent. Having survived the rapids, they bought a t-shirt that said in Spanish, “Remar o Morir!” “Paddle or Die!”¹

I have had some wonderful experiences in rafts and canoes on some beautiful rivers—from the Snake and Colorado out west to the Nantahela in the Smoky Mountains, not to mention our own Buffalo River in Arkansas. I learned to canoe as a Boy Scout, and one of the most important principles for navigating white water is never to stop paddling. The canoe or kayak or raft has to be traveling just a little faster than the current, or you lose control and become a piece of junk at the mercy of the river. The only way to survive is to keep paddling for all you’re worth.

We live in a whitewater world. The currents of politics, the flood of information, the waves of hardship, struggle, and grief threaten to swamp us daily. In terms of our stewardship, we are assaulted daily by the forces of materialism. Advertising constantly tells us we need to spend, spend, spend on the things that will bring us satisfaction. (And then they don’t.) Financial institutions and credit card companies are happy to loan you the money to achieve the lifestyle you want. Everyone is happy for you to buy their product now and pay for it later, under terms. Stress over possessions and debt can destroy lives, marriages, and families.

One of the blessings of getting our spiritual house in order is that it takes us out of the whitewater of materialism into a pool of peace. Learning generosity toward God puts the center of our life in the right place. It calms our spirit. It takes away the stress of basing our lives on our financial status and the expectations of the world.

In today’s devotional, Bishop Schnase says,

Extravagant giving is a means of putting God first, a method for declaring to God and to ourselves the rightful order of priorities. When we practice it, we live with a more relaxed posture about money, less panicked and reactive. We take possession rather than being possessed. Money becomes a servant rather than our master. By provoking us to give, God is not trying to take something from us; God is trying to give something to us. ...Giving provides a spiritually healthy detachment from the most harmful influences of a materialist society, an emotional distance that is otherwise unattainable. Giving protects us from the pangs of greed.²

We've been talking about Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* for about a month. We have covered Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service. All these practices are a part of our life at First United Methodist Church; I hope they become foundational and integrated practices. Last week we began to look at Extravagant Generosity as the basis of our "Taking the Next Step" campaign. Bishop Schnase puts Extravagant Generosity in a nutshell like this:

Fruitful congregations practice Extravagant Generosity. They teach, preach, and practice proportional giving with a goal toward tithing. They encourage people to grow in giving as an essential practice of Christian discipleship, and as a faith community they practice generosity by their extraordinary support for missions, outreach ministries, and organizations that change people's lives. They thrive with the joy of abundance rather than starve with a fear of scarcity. They give joyously, generously, and consistently in ways that enrich people's souls and multiply the ministry impact of the church.³

Can I be honest here? I don't really like the word "extravagant" used with generosity. I know the bishop had to think of an adjective that would take us out of the box and shake us out of our complacency. But when I look at the definition of "extravagant," it means things like "lacking restraint in spending money or using resources," "costing too

much money,” and “exceeding what is reasonable or appropriate; absurd.”⁴ That is more like what we DON’T want to do. Maybe if he had said, “extraordinary generosity.” I think we are all about generosity that is faithful, committed, disciplined, and abundant. But those words are not very catchy.

What we are asking you to consider with the Taking the Next Step campaign is not actually extravagant at all. As you can see from the brochure in your bulletins this morning, it’s all about prayerfully committing to grow one step in your discipline of giving. If you have never given anything at all, simply start to give. If you have given sporadically in the past, plan what percentage of your income you want to give in the next year. Maybe it’s 1% or 2%; that’s a start if you have never done anything before. If you are used to giving a percentage of your income, pray about increasing that percentage until you reach the goal of 10%, or a tithe. Even a tithe is not extravagant; in the Bible it is the *minimum* expected of a faithful person. And if God has so blessed you, you might consider going beyond the tithe. Even that is doable. Every time Carey and I have been in a capital campaign, even before we got married, we were giving over a tithe because we were tithing before we made the capital campaign commitment. Yes, our giving makes a difference in our lifestyle, but the difference it makes is a good one. We don’t have all the possessions in the world, but what we possess is financial peace.

What motivates us to take these steps? What is the WHY behind our giving? Last week we talked about our gratitude for the providence of God. This week I want to talk about God’s love. God’s love is extravagant, but not in the sense of foolish or unreasonable. God’s love is extravagant because it lacks restraint. There is no end to it. God’s love is more than we deserve; it is over-abundant. In that sense, it is extravagant.

God’s love is extravagant because love is the essential nature of God. I John 4 says it, “*Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is*

love.”⁵ If God were anything other than love, God would not be God. This is who God is: God is love.

Schnase tells the story in the devotional booklet from the novel *Cold Mountain* about the drunken fiddler. He only knew six songs, because he only played enough to get money to drink. But one day the fiddler is summoned to the bedside of a severely burned little girl. She is dying, and her father thinks music might ease her way into heaven. He plays every song he knows, but the girl wants another song. When he says he knows no more songs, she asks him to make up one. He does the best he can, and soon the girl passes away.

But that experience radically changed the fiddler. He had never thought of himself as a musician before; he was just playing for drinks. But clearly there was something inside of him that was greater than that. He began to study and practice and improve his playing until he became something he never thought he could be: “His playing was as easy as a man drawing breath, yet with utter conviction in its centrality to a life worth claiming.”⁶

There is nothing as central to the reality of God as love, and there is nothing as central to the motivation of our giving as our response to God’s love.

Love is who God is, and love is what God does. The most famous and quotable verse in the Bible is John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” Often when we hear that verse, we focus on our action: we believe and so inherit eternal life. But don’t miss the prior action of God: “*God so loved the world he gave.*” This is the motivation and the model for our faith. God loves; God gives Jesus to the world; we believe in him; we come to know life that is eternal now and forever.

Then we love one another. I John 4 gives a similar witness: “*God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning*

sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”⁷

The WHY of our giving is based in the love of God. Love is who God is; love is what God does. Love is the response of our hearts that motivates us to give. Everything we are and have and give is a response to God’s love. God so loved God gave; in response we love, and so we give. It’s pretty simple, but not that easy to grasp.

Several years ago, Rev. Bill Easum told me a story I will never forget. Bill was pastor of a United Methodist Church in San Antonio at the time. He had a couple in his church named John and Jan. He had married them about ten years earlier. They had a good income and two beautiful little girls. Yet they came to their pastor on the brink of divorce.

Many couples have problems over money, but John and Jan’s problem was different. The issue in their marriage was tithing. Jan wanted to; John didn’t. She had insisted that they tithe ever since they got married, and it had driven such a wedge of resentment between them that they were considering divorce. Easum helped them patch things up, and they decided to stay together.

Less than a year after this happened, Jan developed a rare type of leukemia. She struggled with the disease for about six months, then she died. In addition to the grief everyone at the church felt over Jan’s death, they were also sad because they knew that was the last they would see of John and those two beautiful children. Everybody knew that John just came to church to humor Jan.

Bill Easum was surprised just a few weeks later to see John’s name on the list of people to give a stewardship witness during the church’s financial campaign. Of all people! Bill was so confused he called up the finance chair and asked about it. “I can’t believe this. John’s doing a witness for our finance campaign?”

The finance chair said, “Yeah, and the strange thing is, he volunteered.”

So the next Sunday, nobody knew what to expect as John stood behind the pulpit. But nobody will ever forget what he said that day. He said, “Jan and I used to have a lot of problems over tithing. She always wanted to. I never could see the sense in it. The church had enough money. We needed it for other things. I never really understood why Jan needed to tithe until she began to die. As the weeks went by and her death grew closer, she began to show in every aspect of her life the discipline that had been there in her giving all along. She took care of me. She took care of the kids. She put her life in order. And when she died, she was totally and completely at peace.”

Then John said, “I and the kids are always going to tithe, in memory of the way Jan lived, and in memory of the way Jan died. But more than that, we want to tithe so that we can have the discipline in our lives that brings the kind of peace she had.”⁸

Love is the WHY. Love is the motivation for any gift worth giving. Our God is a God of love. That’s why God gave us God’s Son. We love because God first loved us. We love one another in our church and community, so we give. That’s the WHY. It’s not about paying bills or meeting budgets. God’s love is extravagant, so our giving can be, if not extravagant, then faithful, committed, disciplined, and abundant. In this whitewater world we live in, that’s extraordinary!

¹ Robert Schnase, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 34.

² *Ibid.*, 46f.

³ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 133.

⁴ www.google.com dictionary.

⁵ I John 4:7-8.

⁶ Schnase, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity*, 31.

⁷ I John 4:9-11.

⁸ Bill Easum, Colonial Hills UMC, San Antonio, TX. Told at a church growth seminar.