

**Extravagant Generosity:  
THE FRUITS OF EXTRAVAGANCE**

**Luke 6:32-38  
Galatians 5:16-25**

*Generosity makes a difference in our lives,  
our church, and the world.*

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Joey Prusak is a young man who works at Dairy Queen. One day, as he was serving customers, he noticed that a blind man had dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the floor. A lady standing in line quietly bent down and put the twenty dollars into her own pocket. Joey Prusak approached the lady, asking her to give the twenty-dollar bill back to the blind man. She refused, quite aggressively, claiming it was her own. Then Joey did something very generous. He opened up his own wallet and handed the blind man a twenty-dollar bill of his own. The man took the money gratefully, and Joey went back to work.

Another customer in line observed the whole episode and sent an e-mail to the Dairy Queen management, informing them of Joey's act of generosity. The DQ management then posted about it on Facebook, and the event went viral. A couple of days later, Joey received a call from billionaire Warren Buffet, who owns a big chunk of Dairy Queen stock. He thanked Joey for showing such integrity and asked him to come to the next Dairy Queen investors' meeting. Buffet wanted Joey to be there to represent the character of Dairy Queen.

Joey's act of generosity inspired thousands of people to believe that they, too, could do something small to impact the world for good. They could make a difference. They could plant a small seed that might grow large in the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

In *Practicing Extravagant Generosity*, the devotional book we have been reading together as a church, Bishop Robert Schnase talks about going for a walk with his sons. They saw a maple tree dropping its seed. Maple seeds have a *samara* or wing that grows out to the side of the seed. This enables the seed to rotate on its way down, like a little helicopter. Thus the seed floats farther away from the parent tree than it would if it just fell straight down. So the fruit of the tree is spread out.

Generosity is like seeds with wings, Schnase says. Generosity spreads the mission and ministry of the church into a larger area, and makes the church more fruitful. We want the church to be fruitful,

because we want it to make a difference in lives, in the community, and in the world.

Schnase's book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, has provided the backdrop for our sermons since Labor Day. It's not all about generosity. There's also Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking Mission and Service. I keep saying those because I want you to remember them. Then there is Extravagant Generosity. My personal quibbles with the word "extravagant" notwithstanding, generosity is key to our life and vitality as a church.

We might think of fruitfulness as something that produces a positive outcome or the desired effect. Fruitfulness gets you where you want to go, from point A to point B. Fruitfulness makes a positive difference in your situation. Generosity, along with the other practices, produces fruitfulness. Generosity brings a positive outcome. Generosity makes a difference.

**Generosity makes a personal difference.** It makes a difference in our self, our life, our spirit. In the first week of devotionals, Schnase said, "People give because generosity helps them achieve God's purpose *in themselves*. By giving, we develop inner qualities of generosity. Generosity is not a spiritual attribute someone acquires apart from the practice of giving. It becomes discernible only through visible behavior."<sup>2</sup> Giving generates generosity. Generosity becomes fruitful when you practice giving behavior.

I think that is what Jesus is getting at in our Scripture from Luke. Jesus is teaching the crowds on a flat place somewhere in Galilee. "The Sermon on the Plain" is roughly parallel to Mathew's Sermon on the Mount. 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.*"<sup>3</sup> Generosity will generate blessings in your life.

Paul echoes this idea in the often-quoted text from Second Corinthians: "*And 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. He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God.”<sup>4</sup>*

But let's be careful here. Often these words have been twisted to mean, “The more you give to a particular church or preacher or evangelist, the wealthier you will become.” Some call that the Prosperity Gospel, and that's not what the Scripture means at all. What it means is that the practice of generosity will fulfill God's purpose for your life. God will supply your needs, and you will be more like the person God created you to be. Last week I mentioned Schnase's comment about tithing: “The practice of tithing is not merely about what God wants us to do, but about the kind of person God wants us to become.”<sup>5</sup>

I remember reading in another pastor's newsletter about a young couple in his church who decided to try tithing. They believed if God was calling them to do something, then God would give them success if they responded with their own effort. So first they sold their boat. Then they traded down to a smaller car. They had a garage sale and sold a bunch of unnecessary items. There was some sacrifice involved, but they were determined to see if this tithing thing would work. They began to give an estimated 10% of their income at the first of each month. At the end of each month, they discovered that they always had enough to pay all of their bills.

But the greatest thing about this experiment in Christian living was the blessing it became for this young couple. The husband told his pastor, “The amazing thing was that tithing turned out to be fun. We thought that sacrifice would be a grind! It turned out to be thrilling. We discovered a deep, lasting joy that we have decided never to be without again.”

That's the joy of generosity. In her book, *Gift From The Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote these words: "Purposeful giving is not as apt to deplete one's resources. It belongs to that natural order of giving that seems to renew itself even in the act of depletion. The more one gives, the more one has to give."<sup>6</sup> That's what Jesus said. That's the way generosity works. We give to God, trusting him to provide for our needs, and we find that our needs are met far more abundantly than we could even imagine.

**Generosity makes a personal difference in our lives, and it makes a difference in the church.** The main thing we have been emphasizing in this campaign is the spiritual basis of giving, that we have a need to give back to God more than the church needs to receive. And that's true. But it is also the truth that the mission and ministry of the church depend on the generosity of our supporters. If you give only to make sure the church meets its budget, you tend to give out of a sense of duty or obligation. But if you give because it expresses your love for God and your faith in God, giving becomes an experience of joy. AND it strengthens the ministry of the church.

We are so blessed at First United Methodist Church with a strong ministry. We could improve in every area, but we have excellent programs for children, youth, education, music, and mission in the world. We have wonderful facilities and a large group of people that call us their church home. We are blessed to be growing (not explosively, but incrementally), and even that is bucking the trend in today's world.

I had a conversation with a man at a meeting this week. He is a United Methodist lay person, a leader in our state, and lives in one of the fastest-growing counties in the country. Yet still his church is struggling. He was asking how things are at First Church Fort Smith, and I was telling him about some of the exciting things going on at our church. He wanted to know if we were growing in attendance (we are), if we had children and youth involved (we do), and he was frankly surprised—in a good way. He was happy for us.

I'm happy for us. I thank my God often that I get to pastor and lead a church like FUMC of Fort Smith. We are blessed in so many ways. But none of the ministry of this great church would be possible without the generosity of our members and friends. Upkeep of facilities, good staff, excellent programs all require financial support. We give because we love God, not because the budget needs funding. But because we give, we can enjoy a church that makes disciples and makes a difference in the lives of our children, youth, families and older people.

**Generosity makes a difference beyond the church in our community and the world.** The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Because of your generosity, we are transforming lives in Fort Smith, in Arkansas, and around the planet.

Today we started out Last Sunday Breakfast back. We feed 100 or more people every month, mostly folks from our neighborhood. The love we show and the food we give makes a difference. Same thing at the Red Shield Diner last Sunday. We are involved in multiple mission projects in our local community, each one making a difference. Our medical mission team goes to Guatemala every year. Ask a member of that team if they think they are making a difference in the lives of the people they treat.

The missional efforts supported by our generosity are making a difference on a large scale. Four years ago, one in four children in Arkansas was "food insecure"—experiencing hunger on a regular basis. That was about 200,000 children lacking adequate nutrition. The Arkansas Conference started a project called "200,000 Reasons" to get churches to address the issue of childhood hunger in their own communities. About 2/3 of the United Methodist churches in Arkansas participate. At FUMC, we have at least eight different ways we get food to hungry kids. In four years, the number of food insecure children in Arkansas has dropped significantly, from 200,000 to about 175,000. Still too many, but it's an improvement. It's not all because of United

Methodists, but it is *partly* because of our connectional church. We're making a difference.

Ten years ago the global United Methodist Church joined with some partners to help mitigate and eradicate malaria on the continent of Africa. Generous Methodists from all over the world gave money and bought bed nets to help. In ten years, the mortality rate from malaria has fallen by 60%. Almost 7 million lives have been saved. Ten years ago, a child was dying every 30 seconds from malaria. Today that statistic has increased to one every 2 minutes. Our generosity makes a difference, even on a global scale.

I want to move us toward our commitment time with a story that was shared by Bishop Schnase in the devotional on Friday. Two families had babies baptized in the church one Sunday, and as they were intermingling and taking pictures after the service, the grandfather of one of the babies offered to hold the baby from the other family while the mother got some things out of her diaper bag. In just a few moments, several people commented about the baby, and the grandfather found himself saying several times, "Oh, this one isn't mine, I'm just holding him for a minute."

The next day, the grandfather came by the church to talk to the pastor about changing his will to include the church in his bequest. The pastor was surprised and asked what brought the grandfather to this decision. He said, "Yesterday I realized something while I was holding that other baby. I kept telling people that he wasn't my child, but then it dawned on me that he was part of my family, part of my church family. I've been a member of this church for more than forty years, and in God's eyes I'm a grandfather to more than just my own. I've taken care of my own children in my will, but I realized I also need to provide for the children of the church. So I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children."<sup>7</sup>

That's not a pitch for planned giving, but it is a pitch for our connection. We are a church family, and one of our connections is our generosity. The babies we hold now belong to all of us, and we only

hold them for a moment. We have a brief window of opportunity with our children, our youth, our families, even our members who have been here many years—a brief window to plant a seed, to make a disciple, to make a difference in their lives, in our community, and in our world.

Bishop Schnase concludes, “Those who practice Extravagant Generosity have a God-given vision and faith to plant seeds for trees whose shade they will never see.”<sup>8</sup> God give us strength and faith today to plant these seeds and to grow some fruit for the Kingdom of God. Give our seeds wings!

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Costa, *Know Your Why*, (Thomas Nelson, 2016), *PreachingToday.com*.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Schnase, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 20f.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:38.

<sup>4</sup> II Corinthians 9:8, 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Schnase, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift From The Sea* (Pantheon: 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Schnase, 82f.

<sup>8</sup> Schnase 83.