

# **Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”**

## **V. The Practice of Extravagant Generosity**

Micah 6:6-8; 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

Feb 25, 2018

Our series taken from the book by Robert Schnase titled *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* nears its conclusion today. In his book, Schnase suggests that specific faith practices in congregations create and sustain a vitality that keeps those communities steadily growing in depth, in breadth, and in service to others. Thus far in the series, we have looked at “radical hospitality,” “passionate worship,” “intentional faith development,” and “risk-taking mission and service.”

The last of Schnase’s practices is extravagant generosity. Generosity is the giving of self and one’s resources freely and joyfully to others. In the media, we hear of singular acts of generosity: it might be a large bequest made to an educational institution or a one-time gift to a non-profit or church. Yet generosity is not a singular act: it is a trait of character that develops and matures over time. Generosity must be consistently practiced and is a product of a deep compassion for, and commitment to, others. Generosity is more than a whim to give because a human situation or catastrophe has suddenly touched our hearts. At its center, generosity is an expression of responsibility for a community around us. Generosity manifests itself in repeated acts of giving and self-giving over time.

What is extravagant generosity?

A \$50 million bequest is received by a religious or educational institution. We think of it as generosity because it was a gift. And we think of it as extravagant generosity because of its size. However, that is not the nature of extravagant generosity.

In the Middle East, a village was cut off from supplies of food and water because of a military conflict in the area. The village was a mixed community of Christians and Muslims. The leaders of the church gathered to consider how they would support their families in this crisis. They developed a plan for sharing all their resources among the members of the church for as long as they could.

Then a woman, an elder in the community, asked, "What about our Muslim neighbors? Are we responsible for them as well? What kind of witness to Christ's love do we make to take care of our own and not to share with our closest neighbors?" A heated discussion ensued. When they looked at their faith, and thought specifically about Jesus' words and example, their conflict subsided. They determined to include their Muslim neighbors and invited them to join in sharing as a community so all might have enough.

It was not \$50 million. It was life itself. That is extravagant generosity.

We initiate our stewardship campaign today. The focus of the campaign is funding the work of this congregation for the coming year. Salaries need to be paid, buildings need maintaining, and programs of nurture and worship, education and outreach need to be supported.

In the secular world, one of the primary ways to encourage giving is to use an appeal to something called “my fair share.” Are you familiar with the “my fair share” approach? Whether it is Public Radio or the United Way, I am asked as one of many in the community to join others in defraying the costs of these services. Some services I may utilize; other services are needed by those who cannot afford it. If I use the service, even if it is offered free, I am under some obligation, otherwise known as “my fair share.” And so people give some amount, and no one really knows whether it is “our fair share” or not. Often we feel compelled to give because of peer pressure or the push of our employer to attain some projected giving goal.

Occasionally the church uses this approach. Yet whatever the approach is, the results in the United States are that church members contribute 1-2% of their income, or about \$1,000 per family unit. For some, such an amount is beyond their ability to pay. To give that amount would be quite generous considering their financial resources. For others, \$1,000 a year is not a stretch at all.

The Bible speaks of a standard for giving ~ it is 10% of one's income, and it is called the tithe. The Bible gives no rationale for selecting this percentage of 10% ~ it merely states it. Every Sunday when the offering is taken, the liturgist will say something about receiving our tithes and offerings. The tithe is 10% of our income, and offerings are anything beyond the tithe.

For many of us, giving a tithe or 10% is a challenge. It might require a substantial change in our spending habits and financial priorities. It could require us to budget, to be disciplined. For couples and families, deep conversation and discussion might be required to explore our values and our budgets. It could demand making choices that are inconvenient or challenging.

Yet that discussion also might lead us to something substantive; it could help us accomplish something of value. Perhaps we would reach beyond ourselves, beyond our well-being, beyond our comfort level. If you could make an impact on whether a family went hungry or was fed in another part of this town or of our world, could you find \$5 a week to make a difference? Would that mean something to you?

I have heard and seen many approaches among people to expand their generosity. One family chose to purchase a scaled-down car from what they originally planned. They were able to give an additional \$50 a month to mission work, \$1,800 over three years.

Others have remained in their present home rather than upsizing in order to give more. Others have downsized, and taken the savings to generate funds to give more. Still others have worked diligently by maintaining their lifestyle at current levels and using income increases to expand their generosity.

Now tell me, why in the world would anyone do this? It is counter to our cultural narrative to make more, to have more, to consume more. As someone has said, "The person who has the most toys when he dies wins."

And yet so many who have bought into that philosophy remain empty and devoid of purpose no matter what they possess. I believe it is true that we only possess what we can give away; the rest possesses us. It is not what we have that makes a life but what we give.

The primary motivating force for extravagant generosity among people of faith is the extravagant generosity of our God. "God so loved the world that God gave...." God's giving becomes our model for giving. And our giving comes in thankful response to the goodness of God.

What do we have that hasn't been provided by the Lord? All things, most assuredly life itself ~ health, the beauty which surrounds us, community of family and friends, all that is most significant to us. Our present life

now to live with meaning and purpose, and impact for good the lives of others. The hope of our future beyond this life held in God's hands through Jesus Christ ~ all of these are gifts that attend us every moment.

The Apostle Paul in writing to the Corinthians speaks of God's abundance which all have received. The gifts that are offered accrue to the spiritual benefit of both the giver and the receiver. We as faithful Christians are called to grow, not in wealth or prestige or honor, but in the gifts of the Spirit, in justice, in righteousness, in the service of God.

I believe one of the worst motives for generosity is to give in order to get more "things" for ourselves. The worst kind of hucksterism that takes place in religious communities occurs in the speaking of these words: "God will bless you financially if you give to our ministry." A faith with the symbol of a cross at its center will never have the promotion of self and the accumulation of riches as the goal of its message.

The Old Testament book of Habbakkuk puts life's success and trust in God in stark contrast: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vine; the produce of the olive fail and the field yield no food; though the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stall ~ yet will I rejoice in the Lord! I will find joy in the God of my salvation! God the Lord is my strength!"

Commitment to God transcends the vicissitudes of life.

A man was attending the baptism of his granddaughter. Another child was being baptized at the same time. After the service, the families gathered at the front of the sanctuary for pictures with each family taking turns as they stood around the baptismal font. At some point, the grandfather was given the other family's child to hold for a moment while the mother got out a bottle for the child. Someone walked up at that moment and asked if the child belonged to him. "Oh, no," he replied, "this child belongs to the other family. I'm just holding him for a moment."

The next day, the pastor got a call from this grandfather saying he needed to visit the pastor. The pastor was concerned. Did something happen at the baptism that the grandfather did not like?

The grandfather arrived and sat down.

He told the pastor about the incident of holding the other family's child. "I've been thinking a lot since then. I said that the other child didn't belong to me. But that isn't true. Every child in this church belongs to my family.

"Previously I made arrangements in my will to support my own children and grandchildren. Now I want to

make arrangements in my will to support all God's children in this church. Can you help me do that?"

When a widow puts all she has into the offering plate, that is extravagant generosity. When a couple works toward increasing their gifts to the level of tithing by thoughtfully managing their budget, that is extravagant generosity. When a person's vision extends beyond themselves to embrace the needs of others, that is extravagant generosity.

This congregation has been blessed by people who have given beyond themselves, who have given extravagantly. And in turn, this congregation has directed significant resources to others with great needs. That is extravagant generosity.

The practice of giving intentionally and extravagantly creates an atmosphere of excitement and vitality within the congregation. When the church stretches beyond itself in the mission of love and care in the name of Jesus Christ, people get excited because they are making a positive impact for good. The excitement of giving gets ignited!

Can you imagine what more we could do, not merely what we could have as a congregation, but what we could do for the work of Jesus Christ, if we practiced extravagant generosity in this community?