

A Year of Living Intentionally: Extravagant Generosity

Matthew 20:1-16

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Managers, business owners and economists may find this morning's gospel lesson offensive, and those who object to an increase in minimum wage may find it outrageous. What could Jesus be thinking? A landowner pays a worker the same wage for one hour of work as paying a worker who has labored all day? The world just doesn't work that way; not 2,000 years ago and not today. Even the laborers in the story get upset.

Remember, that in the earliest traditions of the Hebrew people, landowners (the wealthy) were to look out for the needs of the poor. At harvest, the workers were to leave enough crops in the field that the poor could glean the excess (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22). Every seven years their fields were to be left fallow to allow the landless poor to grow and gather food for themselves - a term from which we get our English word "sabbatical" (Leviticus 25:1-55).

In Jesus' story, only found in Matthew, the landowner intentionally looks for extra workers throughout the day so that the idle unemployed would get a chance to work as well. This harkens back to those social safe guards often forgotten in the Hebrew tradition. It would be as if today's fast-food industry voluntarily insisted on paying their workers a living wage. It would be shocking. The world just doesn't work that way.

Commentators suggest that Jesus' conclusion, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last," refers to the reversal of fortune anticipated at the End of Time, where those who suffered the injustices of the world shall be rewarded and those rich and powerful who inflicted the injustice shall get their due (Matthew 12:45, 19:30, 27:14, Mark 9:35 [in reference to servanthood], 10:30-32, Luke 13:25-31). As foretold by the ancient prophets and fulfilled in Jesus, God promises a future where the balance between the rich and the poor will be restored.

But our story isn't simply about fair labor practices. To the grumbling workers who were getting the same wage as the ones who worked only an hour, the landowner says "...am I not allowed to be generous?"

The writer of Matthew may have included this parable to remind those who were coming to faith in Jesus late in life that they would still be included in the promises of God, even if they weren't there at the beginning. Jesus is talking about the extravagant generosity of God.

"Extravagant Generosity" is one of the five spiritual practices (Robert Schnase's book The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Abingdon 2008) that lead toward Christian discipleship. Can you name the five practices? [Discipleship Medallion]

Bold Service and Social Justice-We Share
Passionate Worship-We Love
Deepening Faith-We Grow
Extravagant Generosity-We Give
Radical Hospitality-We Share

We are convinced that anyone, anywhere on their spiritual journey, who commits to live out these five practices, will be blessed as they grow in discipleship to Jesus Christ. By "discipleship to Jesus Christ" we are not talking about an intellectual conformity to doctrine or some new standard of piety. We are talking about "Touching heaven and changing earth with head, heart and hands." We are convinced that wherever we are on our spiritual journey, and if we practice Bold Service and Social Justice, Passionate Worship, Deepening Faith, Extravagant Generosity and Radical Hospitality, we will grow and prosper as people and as a community.

This month we are asking what if we...individually and corporately.....were to dedicate the next year committed to these five practices of fruitful living...intentionally? During our "Changing Earth Together" weekend last month, we experienced Bold Service and Social Justice in amazing ways. Last week, we explored Radical Hospitality as we shared Holy Communion together. Today we are going to look at the spiritual practice of Extravagant Generosity.

What is the first thing that comes to mind when we hear that phrase? "Oh, here comes a pitch for more money for the church?" We are so conditioned to hear appeals for fund raising in church life that even the mention of the word "generosity" elicits a programmed response.

I understand why. We are a church with history and real passion for supporting bold service in our community and around the world. LAUMC partners with scores of non-profit agencies and social concerns that are really making a positive difference. As prosperous and compassionate people, we want to change the world for the better. We have no shortage of causes to do so, all deserving of our time and attention as a church.

But dropping a twenty dollar bill in the plate as it passes by on a Sunday morning, without thought or intention, is not "generosity."

Dr. Lovett H. Weems, Director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership in Washington DC, profoundly reminds us that "The Christian's need to give as a fruit of discipleship is far more important than the church's need for money." We forget that as we get caught up with the stress and distraction of money in our lives and oftentimes, will bring those assumptions about money to our church life as well.

(Moving to the Altar) Consider how we do the Offering each Sunday in worship - it is so routine that we don't really pay attention to what we are doing and saying. Like Dennis the Menace says to his father one morning as the ushers pass the plates, "Dad, wouldn't it be better just to buy season tickets?"

Making an offering to God in gratitude for the blessings in our lives is as ancient a form of worship as you can find. It was the first thing Noah did when the flood subsided and he could let all the animals out of the Ark (Genesis 8:20). It was the first thing Abram did when he and Sarah arrived in the Land of Canaan following the covenant with God to create a nation of blessing for the world (Genesis 12:8). If we truly believe that God is the source of all our gifts....as we sing each Sunday....then to return a portion of that wealth to the work of God through the church is a true act of thanksgiving.

The pastor invites us to return "God's tithes and our offerings." Ever notice the distinction? A "tithe" is a dedicated gift of "first fruits," traditionally 10% of one's wealth (Leviticus 27:30-34, Deuteronomy 14:22-29). For us Protestants, a "tithe" can be a gift of any portion of our wealth that is given with intention and purpose. A "tithe" is not what we have leftover at the end of the month or a donation given at the last minute without much thought. I urge everyone to consider tithing not as a way to raise money for the church but as a spiritual practice of discipleship. As you sit down and work out your budget for the week, month or year, make a conscious decision about what portion of the wealth God has bestowed and dedicate it to God's work in the world. That's "God's tithe." We don't give money to the church; we give money through the church to God's mission in the world.

I'd like to ask the ushers and acolytes to come forward at this time as we take our offering this morning. Let's do it out of our usual routine and focus on what we are really doing in the sacred act of worship.

Please note the crucial role lay people play in our worship services and thank all the volunteers. This holy sanctum space is not restricted to the ordained, as it is in other churches, and neither is it restricted by age or understanding. Thank God for our young acolytes who symbolically bring in the light of Christ from the world to begin our worship as they light the candles and then symbolically lead us out into the world for service as they take the light of Christ back out into the world.

Technically, this is not an "altar," although that is what we all call it. Altars were used for animal sacrifices during ancient worship. Theologically we should understand this as "the table of The Lord," reminding us of the Last Supper on the night that Jesus was betrayed. It is the Christian belief that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God supplied the ultimate sacrifice in reconciliation with humanity and so no other sacrifice is required (Genesis 22:1-18, John 1:29-36, I John 2:2).

The receptacles for the offerings are merely traditional. We use brass plates, but baskets, velvet pouches or hats can be used as needed.

Traditionally, during the Offering we listen to meditative music and we are blessed to have such talented musicians like Paul Rosas to lead us during that time. This is a time when we can contemplate the meaning of the sermon we have just heard, the purpose of our offering this morning, or the prayer card we put in the plate offering our deepest hurts and hopes to a loving God.

When the collection is completed, we sing a "doxology," a traditional song of glory to God (doxa=glory). Remain seated this morning and really listen to the song we sing as God's tithe and our offerings are dedicated to the work of God.....

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise God, the source of all our gifts!
Praise Jesus Christ, whose power uplifts!
Praise the Spirit, Holy Spirit! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
(United Methodist Hymnal, # 94)

All that we have comes from God. God is the source of our health, intelligence, strength and spirit and if we truly believe that, then giving of our time, talent and wealth is a spiritual practice. It is not an obligation or duty but rather a practice of discipleship, "Touching heaven and changing earth, with head, heart and hands." It is an opportunity to grow closer to God and to others.

If you feel resentment or anger when you hear a financial appeal at church, or feel guilty or ashamed that you can't give any money at the time or enough of what you'd like to give....if all you are doing is tossing a \$20 into the plate without a thought....it really would be better to wait to give when you see it as the spiritual opportunity that it really is.

One of the challenges in church stewardship cultivation today is connecting the donors with the life changing work we do each day. "Put a face on it," suggests one expert. Today's generosity will be inspired by real opportunities to make real peoples' lives better. Consider one of our

Outreach Connection partners this morning, Salina UMC ministry with the homeless.... [video]

Note that the receptacles for our monthly Outreach Connection giving are found at the exits of the sanctuary. As the acolytes lead us out into the world by the light of Christ, so we go out into the world to give of ourselves.

Extravagant generosity isn't so much about the numbers as it is about the intention with which one gives. We worship a God of extraordinary generosity who will love and save all.

When we come to know deep in our hearts that all we have comes from this God, then financial appeals from the Girl Scouts selling cookies, from the brochure that comes in the mail for Habitat for Humanity, or as the plate is passed around during our worship services all become opportunities to give. As giving is a spiritual practice of discipleship, whether we have any money to give at all, we are thankful for the opportunity. Remember Dr. Weems' admonition; "The Christian's need to give as a fruit of discipleship is far more important than the church's need for money."

When we can say with clarity and confidence, "thank you for this opportunity to give," whether we can share a dollar or a dime, that is when we have experienced the spirit of "Extravagant Generosity".

Amen.