

THE JOY OF GENEROSITY NOVEMBER 15 2009
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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We began this series of sermons thinking about the joy of simplicity and gave out yellow apples to remind us to live simply so others can simply live.

Last week we thought about the joy of gratitude and gave out light red apples to remind us to live with deep gratitude to God for all of the gifts God has showered on us.

Today we are thinking about the joy of generosity and will give out green apples to remind us that there is deep and lasting joy in giving generously to bless other people.

The scriptures speak frequently about giving our time, talent and treasure to God and how we are blessed in the process of giving and living generously. Here are some Scriptures which refer to giving.

In Luke 6:38 Jesus puts it simply in telling us: GIVE AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU. ...FOR THE MEASURE YOU GIVE WILL BE THE MEASURE YOU GET BACK.

In Luke 12:48 Jesus speaks to those who have been abundantly blessed with resources: FROM EVERYONE TO WHOM MUCH HAS BEEN GIVEN, MUCH WILL BE REQUIRED.

In 2 Corinthians 9:7 Paul puts it this way: EACH OF YOU MUST GIVE AS YOU HAVE MADE UP YOUR MIND, FOR GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER.

Let us pray:

When I was a little boy growing up in Hereford, Texas I had a newspaper route. Every day after school I would go to a street corner near our house and pick up a bundle of newspapers which had been dropped off there and walk around our neighborhood to deliver newspapers to my subscribers.

Then every Saturday morning, I would go back to those same houses and they would pay me for delivering their newspapers to them that week. Then I would go home and go into my room and count my money and put it in a jar that I hid in my closet. I loved to count my money and watch it grow every week.

And I was very good at saving my money. I didn't spend it easily on anything and I certainly didn't give anything away to the church or anyone else. I liked to save it, hoard it and watch it grow.

My sister Sheila wasn't like that. Whatever money she got was soon spent on clothes, jewelry or something else she wanted. My mother always praised me for being a good saver and told Sheila she should be more like me, and I was proud of my ability to save and hoard my money.

Now being able to earn and save money and live frugally is a good thing. However, the downside of my growing up was that I became very tight and stingy with the money that I had saved.

It wasn't until I grew up and got married to Minnietta that I discovered that there is a greater joy in giving than in hoarding.

Minnietta had a job all through junior and senior high school and she gave ten percent of her income to God through the church every week. She grew up not only knowing how to give but also how to give the money she earned away generously.

I'll have to confess that when we got married, how we spent the meager amount of income we had was an issue between us. We both had part time church jobs while we were in seminary and Minnietta wanted to tithe our modest income. I was willing to give a little donation to the church but I thought giving 10% was way more than we could afford.

I later learned that money was one of the three big issues between many newly married couples. Newly married couples frequently have conflict over issues related to money, issues dealing with in-laws, and issues around sex.

The biggest issue between Minnietta and me was over how much of our money we should give away.

For me, giving was painful and for Minnietta giving was a source of great joy. She just found great joy in being generous not only to God but to many other causes. Eventually she got her tightwad husband to loosen up and give more generously and she helped me to also experience the deep joy and satisfaction that comes from living a generous life.

Now, each year when we do our income taxes, we add up what we have given away during the past year and discover that we have given between 18% and 20% of our total income away, the largest amount to God's work through St. Luke's but to many other worthy missions and ministries as well. And I have discovered what Minnietta always knew; there is a deep sense of joy, satisfaction and fulfillment that comes into our hearts when we give generously.

Furthermore, we feel that God has blessed us so richly in so many ways that we feel blessed to be able to give some of what God has first given away to care for the needs of others.

We have also discovered that what Jesus said in Luke 6:38 is also true in our own lives. Jesus said: GIVE AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU. When we open up and give generously to God and others, we will be blessed in return. I have a friend who says "you can't out give God." God has blessed us abundantly and the more we give back to God, the more joy and fulfillment we experience. When we give generously to God, we are always blessed in some way in return.

The symbol for giving is our open hands and the symbol for receiving is also our open hands. When we open our hands to give we are also opening our hands to be in a position to receive the gifts God wants to give us.

When we live with closed hands and cold hearts we are closing off the possibility of receiving gifts and blessings from our loving and generous God. We open our hands to give to God and we open our hands to receive from God.

I'd like for you to imagine that God is right in front of you. Whatever symbolizes God for you, imagine that God is right in front of you where you sit right now. Now, put your hands in your lap with the palms up. Imagine that you are opening your hands to give generously to God.

Imagine that God receives your gift with gratitude and then imagine that God surprises you by putting some blessing in your hands.

GIVE AND IT WILL BE GIVEN BACK TO YOU.

In this text, Jesus goes on to use the analogy that when we give to God, God gives back to us generously like a person filling a sack full to overflowing with grain. In Jesus day, when you bought a sack of grain you wanted the person filling your sack to pack it completely full. You would want him to give you "A GOOD FULL MEASURE, PRESSED DOWN, SHAKEN TOGETHER, RUNNING OVER.

Jesus says that when we give generously to God, God will put a GOOD FULL MEASURE, PRESSED DOWN, SHAKEN TOGETHER AND RUNNING OVER" right into our lap. God's blessings will be put right here in our lap.

Jesus then concludes by saying: FOR THE MEASURE YOU GIVE WILL BE THE MEASURE YOU GET BACK. In other words, the more generous we are to God, the more generous God can be to us.

I didn't make this up. Jesus said it. When we open up and give we are blessed abundantly in return.

Now, we have to give with the right motive. We don't give to God so we can get something back from God. We give to God out of gratitude for all God has given us, but the way life works is that when we give generously from the right motive, we are blessed in return.

Last week, USA Today had a story about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.

In 1765, John Wesley preached in the huge and famous St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland. Wesley had become famous around the British Isles for his passionate preaching and his deep concern for the poor. St. Patrick's Cathedral was packed with the rich, the famous and the powerful leaders of Dublin.

Wesley talked about the poor people on the streets of Dublin and the orphans who wandered the streets looking for a crust of bread to eat and he chastised the wealthy in Dublin for allowing this happen. He challenged them to reach into the storehouses of their wealth and give generously to care for the poor and needy all around them.

Now in that congregation there was a young man who had just started a new business in brewing beer. Now you need to understand in Great Britain most adults drink beer; it is like drinking coffee or tea in this country. When we lived for a year in Cambridge, England we would go to a church meeting and afterwards the pastor would invite us to the pub for a beer to continue discussing church business.

This young man listened carefully to Wesley's plea to the wealthy to care for the poor. He was so inspired by that sermon that he had a vision that if his company was successful he would use his wealth to serve the downtrodden and the poor.

That young businessman became a devoted Methodist and a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Many of the working poor were employed in his company so he became most famous and unique for the way his company cared for all their employees. His company provided free medical care for all its employees and their families, provided a pension when employees retired and paid for their funeral expenses when they died. It was unheard of in those days that an employer would care that much for his employees.

The company carried on the founders values and during World War 1 when many men went off to war, they were promised their job would be waiting for them when they returned and their families received half of their wages until they returned from the war.

The result was that his employees were extremely loyal to their company and worked hard to help the company become successful. He gave generously to them and they gave generously back to him.

When his company became successful, he started a hospital to care for the poor in Dublin and founded Methodist Sunday schools all over the country. He supported missions to the poor all over Great Britain and when the potato famine hit Ireland, he provided food for the starving and convinced other wealthy people to do the same.

When conflicts arose between Protestants and Catholics he became the leading Protestant voice in standing up for the rights of Roman Catholics and working for reconciliation in Ireland.

That young man who founded a company which cared for its employees and for the poor was named Arthur Guinness and his company is still very successful producing Guinness beer and seeking to carry on the values of compassion and generosity of its founder.

You see, Arthur Guinness discovered that when he devoted himself to God and gave generously to God and to caring for his employees and for the poor his company became one of the most successful enterprises ever to come out of Ireland.

He discovered that doing good to people is good for business as well as good for people.

Jesus put it this way: GIVE GENEROUSLY TO OTHERS AND IT WILL BE GIVEN BACK TO YOU...THE MEASURE YOU GIVE WILL BE THE MEASURE YOU RECEIVE.

I thank God for the business leaders in our time who follow that example and also care for their employees and give generously to care for the needs of others. May their numbers increase.

Recently, Minnietta and I saw the new 3-D cartoon movie based on the book A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens starring Jim Carey as Ebenezer Scrooge.

You all know the story. Ebenezer Scrooge is a hard driving, miserly, penny pinching business owner in 18th century England who has no concern for anyone but himself and who spends most of his time counting his money. He refuses to give to any charitable causes, pays his employees a pittance, and only reluctantly lets them off to celebrate Christmas day with their families.

However, one Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by three ghosts. The ghost of Christmas past allows him to relive his past and see how he became so miserly. The ghost of Christmas present allows him to see the affect of his hardheartedness on his employee Bob Cratchet and his family.

However, it is not until the ghost of Christmas future comes that he is really transformed. When he is allowed to see into the future and how he is remembered by his employees and the community as a cruel and selfish rich man that he is transformed. After he is allowed to look into the future, Scrooge changed his life; he went out on Christmas Day and gave generously to charity, took food to Bob

Cratchet's family, and cared for the poor. The movie ends with Scrooge carrying Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchet's handicapped son on his shoulders through the streets of the town wishing everyone a Merry Christmas.

Ebenezer Scrooge is really the story of the transformation of a selfish man into a loving and compassionate man.

As I watched that movie, I wondered what would happen if all of us could see into the future. If we could imagine our lives, 10 or 20 or 30 years in the future, what would we see? How would we look back on our lives and how would we be remembered by the people who know us now?

Would we be remembered as kind, compassionate, and generous people? Or would we be remembered as self-centered, self-absorbed, and unwilling to be generous with our resources? What would our legacy be?

Jesus shows us how to leave a lasting and life giving legacy through living lives of devotion to God and generosity to people.

Warren Buffett is one of the most successful and wealthy investors in history. In 2008 he was ranked by Forbes magazine as the richest person in the world with a net worth of \$62 billion. He has been a genius in choosing and investing in companies which became profitable and many investors around the world seek his advice.

However, what impresses me most about Warren Buffett is his philanthropy. He has pledged to give 85% of his fortune to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support their work in making the world hunger free, AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis free and providing clean water and education to the poor all over the world.

What impresses me about Warren Buffett is that he still lives in the house he bought in Omaha, Nebraska in 1958 for \$31,500. He still drives an older model car and spends his free time playing bridge with friends in Omaha and with Bill Gates whenever he can.

Warren Buffett has three children and he does not want to give a significant proportion of his wealth to his children. He said, "I want to give my kids just enough so that they would feel like they could do anything, but not so much that they would feel like doing nothing." He said he wanted to model generosity for his children and his children have also established their own foundations to give money away to charitable causes.

Now, Warren Buffett said what he enjoys most is giving to charity. He has given \$2 million to the Glide United Methodist Church in San Francisco for their work among the homeless and the poor in San Francisco as well as to many other charitable organizations around the world. He says that by the time he dies he wants to give it all away so that other people might have a better life because Warren Buffett lived in this world for a time.

Warren Buffett realizes that all the blessings in his life are not for him and his family alone but are meant to be shared to make the world a better place for everyone.

Last week a successful business man in our congregation came up to me and said that he noticed that this week I would be preaching on the joy of generosity.

He said that he has discovered the joy of generosity personally in his own life and that he would like to enable all of us to experience the joy of giving generously ourselves. Consequently, he gave us some funds to distribute this morning to encourage generosity.

We are giving some of those funds out here, some at the Garden at Beef and Boards, some at the Garden at Oak Hill and some at the Later service tonight.

We have some envelopes with a \$20 bill in them at a table in the narthex. We want each of you to think about a person who you know has some kind of need or a ministry which is doing good in our community or world. After you think about that person or ministry, get one of the envelopes with \$20 in it and add your own \$20 or more to it and then give it to the person or ministry that came to your mind.

The intention of this generous gift is to encourage all of us to experience the joy of giving generously. Now, we realize that there may be more people wanting to get one of these envelopes to share with someone else than we have available so if we run out after this service, just take \$20 of your own and give it to someone in need or to some good cause you support and you will experience the good feeling of generous giving.

Now, I would like for you to do this as a test. Take the \$20, add your own \$20 or more to it and then give it to support someone in need. And then be aware of any surprising blessings that you receive in the next few weeks.

Test Jesus out. Is it true that when we give, something good will be given back to us? Is it true that a full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be put into our laps?

You see, it is not so much about where we give but that we give. I am not so much concerned that we give it to God's work through the church but that we give to someone or some cause which makes this world a better place.

It is the giving itself that is the blessing.

In his book entitled, *ENOUGH*, Dr. Adam Hamilton tells this story about generosity.

Jeff Hansen is a fifteen year old student at the Kansas School for the Blind. He is visually impaired because of a malignant tumor on his optic nerve and with chemotherapy treatment and glasses he can now see the big E at the top of the eye chart.

Because he had a tumor, Jeff wanted to help the Children's Tumor Foundation so he started baking treats and selling them and painting paintings and selling them and giving all the proceeds to the Children's Tumor Foundation. So far he has given \$15,000 to this foundation through his work.

When Jeff was receiving chemotherapy for his tumor he was granted a wish by the Make a Wish Foundation which grants wishes to children facing cancer.

Jeff's wish was to meet Elton John, the famous singer. So when Elton John came to Kansas City the Make a Wish Foundation arranged for Jeff to meet his idol backstage before the concert. Elton John was

gracious and generous in giving time to Jeff. Jeff told Elton his story and how he raised money through baking and selling treats and painting note cards and selling them for the Children's Tumor Foundation.

He also told Elton John how proud he was of Elton John for establishing an AIDS Foundation to help people suffering with AIDS around the world. Then this 12 year-old nearly blind boy named Jeff reached in his pocket and gave the multi-millionaire entertainer Elton John a check for \$1,000 to support his work among people with AIDS.

I suspect that Elton John was shocked. Most people come to him asking for money but here was a 12 year old nearly blind boy giving him money for his foundation. Elton John was so impressed that he asked a photographer to take a picture of Jeff giving him the \$1,000 of his hard earned money.

A week later, Jeff received a note from the Children's Tumor Foundation that Elton John had just sent them a very generous gift in honor of the gift Jeff had given him.

There is more. A few weeks later Elton John was doing a concert in Dubai to raise funds for AIDS patients. Elton John invited Jeff and his parents to an all expense paid trip to Dubai for the AIDS concert as a way of thanking Jeff for his gift to help people with AIDS.

Jeff could have felt sorry for himself for his loss of eyesight. But he didn't feel sorry for himself; he focused on how he could raise money to help others. He gave a sacrificial gift to Elton John for AIDS work and was blessed with a gift to the Tumor Foundation and a family trip to Dubai for an Elton John concert.

Jeff discovered that what Jesus said was true: GIVE AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU, FULL MEASURE, PRESSED DOWN, SHAKEN TOGETHER AND RUNNING OVER WILL BE PUT IN YOUR LAP.

Give generously and you will be blessed.

I always wonder what blessings we are missing out on because we have failed to give as generously as we could.

Give and it will be given to you - the measure you give will be the measure you receive.

Let us pray.