

## Defined by Generosity

Matthew 25: 14 – 30

God created us to be generous. Generosity is a part of our spiritual DNA. To say it is more blessed to give than to receive is making a statement about *our* need to give to others so that we might be complete. This does not mean that giving is self-serving, but rather that in giving, we are made whole. In the book of Genesis, we read that humanity was created in the image of God. When we give, we are more completely living out the image of God that is within us. Yet even with this spiritual DNA, there are divergent voices calling for our attention – voices of fear, self-preservation, and self-gratification.

The voice of fear makes us doubt the very essence of who God created us to be. This voice says, “If you are generous, you won’t be secure.” Right now, there is real anxiety with unemployment still climbing upwards, economic recovery looking shaky at best, and uncertainty about whether the current political battles will help or hurt us. Fear surround us: fear of the stranger, the immigrant, the co-worker, the merchant – even fear of the future. And so we find ourselves thinking, “If I am generous, I’m risking my future.”

Self-preservation is one response to fear. This voice says, “Protect what you have, hoard your finances, your energy, your time, and even those things that bring you into relationship with others.” Self-preservation builds a wall between us and those who stand with us in our times of uncertainty, who pray for us and understand our struggles as well as celebrate our joys. So we find ourselves thinking, “If I am generous, I’ll be hurt.”

A third voice is that of self-gratification – do what is good for you first, no matter what. This voice tells us, “Generosity will dilute your abundance.” We’ve looked at the way in which this voice has invaded our lives in previous weeks, particularly with our over-dependence on credit and living beyond our means. And so we find ourselves thinking – “If I am generous, there won’t be enough left for me.

But I believe that the power of God is more powerful than the voices of fear, self-preservation, and self-gratification. I believe that the generosity of God that we have seen in the gift of Jesus Christ is more than enough to defeat these voices. I believe this for two reasons.

First, I am confident in God’s power to face down the voices because I see it working in the lives of people who live with generosity even when things aren’t always going well. These are everyday saints who have not allowed these voices of defeat to silence their faith and trust in the giver of all good things. I know people who have been unemployed for quite a long time, and yet they have used the time when they are in the midst of an extended job search to share their time and talents to further God’s work. I have seen it here; I have seen it in former parishes I have served; and I have seen it within my own extended family. I am confident in God’s power to face down these voices when I meet people who have struggled with illness either personally or in their family, and yet they continue to express trust in the love of God that will never abandon them. I am confident in God’s power to face down these voices when I speak with people who describe life during the Great Depression, where families who had nothing would still share a meal with someone drifting through town – sharing whatever they had because this is

what God called them to do. There are still some feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, or even anger. But these are not the overwhelming them. For these persons, they are living into the image of God that dwells in them, trusting that God has been generous with the world and their generosity of love, of resources, of compassion, of hope will only lead to a more abundant life.

But more important is the Biblical witness, exemplified by the parable of Jesus recorded in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, verse 14 – 30. This parable tells of a master who is leaving on a journey and entrusts his estate to three servants. It is a story of two who took a risk with the talents entrusted to them and one who hid that which was entrusted to him in the ground. We sometimes forget that this parable has a fourth character – the master who left on the journey. He demonstrated risky generosity entrusting his fortune to these three servants.

A single talent was worth about 15 years of wages for a worker. One of the servants was put in charge of 75 times his annual salary, a second 30, and the third 15. This is risky business. Two of the servants embodied this same kind of risky generosity in their use of the talents. Their willingness to be bold and their willingness to be molded by the example of their master was what brought them reward. But then there was the one who for, whatever reason, took the timid, safe way out – and we know the outcome. He lost what he had and was tossed out into the “outer darkness.”

Jesus is telling us that safety and security are not going to bring us joy or abundance, because this is not the way of God, and we are created in God’s image. Yet the first and most important gift that we are called to give is the most radical - giving our lives to Christ. When we give ourselves to Christ, we will find our fears dissipate and our anxieties melt away because we trust that God is with us to face any of the challenges we might encounter. The more we surrender our lives into the hands of Christ, the more generous we become because we are growing more into the likeness of the one who gave his life for the world.

So why give? We find from the Bible several reasons to give to God and others:

1. Acts 20: 35 - In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ – We find more blessing when we give than when we receive.
2. Matthew 16: 25 – “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” This is the heart of the gospel – when we give we find life that we will never know unless we take this kind of risk.
3. Psalm 24: 1 – “The earth is the LORD’S and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” - We sometimes forget that when we are giving to God, we are only returning to God a portion of what God has already given us; even that which we think that we have earned is only possible because God created us to be the person we are – we give because it is first and foremost God’s.

The Bible also gives us clear guidance for our giving. The Biblical standard is the tithe, 10 percent. This is the standard of both the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps this is not possible in your economic situation. Perhaps 2, 5, or 7 percent is what you are able to give. Remember, God understands your situation. God knows your heart, and if your heart is right with God, God

will help you to know what is appropriate for your particular circumstances. But it requires prayerful consideration, not quick budgetary calculations. It is something that also can change as our circumstances change. In our own family circumstances, we have been able to grow our giving through cash donations plus through absorbing business expenses for our two churches that we pay from our family budget rather than submit for reimbursement. Through the years, we have been able to see our giving increase through these two means to more than 20% of our income, which includes the rental value of the parsonage. Somehow, we make ends meet, even when unreimbursed medical expenses have been somewhere in the 16 – 20% of our income level. What we have found is increased joy and an increased peace of mind. God will provide

But that is how giving affects us. How does our giving affect God?

In the earliest Biblical accounts, the primary form of worship of God was by building an altar and offering the first fruits of one's labors on that altar. Remember that the offering of an animal or grain was the same as an offering of cash today – this was their currency, and **the offerings of the people were described as being pleasing to God.** Why? Because **God saw in their giving the kind of love that reflected his love for them; God saw in their giving a desire to honor God. God saw in their giving their obedience to the commandments of God.**

In the New Testament, Jesus says, “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.” (Luke 6:38) – God is waiting to give back to us as we give. The result is **a changed heart,** enlarged by the very act of giving. In our generosity, **we find the blessing of God,** miraculously receiving in even greater measure. In our generosity, we are **modeling the generosity of God** – we are living into the image of God that will transform others and change our world.

Many of us wonder what we will leave as an inheritance. We want our children and grandchildren to inherit our values, to cherish what is important to us. We want to be remembered in a positive light. In my experience, one of the greatest inheritances that a family cherishes at the end of a loved one's life is the gift of generosity. When a person has been generous, their inheritance is amazingly rich, even if there isn't a lot of money. For the spirit of generosity has defined that person; their legacy is an living example of who God created us all to be. When we are defined by generosity, others will see in us the spark of God's love who gave the world his only Son, that whoever would believe and follow after him would experience the same gift of life that He himself experienced in his miraculous resurrection. What a great legacy – isn't it?

Prayer: You have been so generous with us, O God. Help me to be generous so that I might more closely let your light shine through me. You have given us all that we are and all that we have. Help us to be generous in using these gifts to bring you honor and glory, that we might do your will in all that we do. For we pray in the name of Jesus – the giver and the gift. Amen.