

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, pt. 5
Extravagant Giving

Luke 6: 37 - 38

**Somewhere along the line in my 40+ years of being a follower of Jesus Christ, I've come to a very basic conclusion: there simply *can't* be a deep level of commitment to following Christ (i.e., any real discipleship) not only without some sort of *giving* in general, but specifically without practicing *Extravagant* Generosity. I say that not because I have learned over those years how better to coax more funds from a congregation. But rather, because discipleship in its purest form is the process of being molded, shaped, into the image of Jesus Christ. This is the One in whom, as the Gospel writer John stated, "*the fullness of God dwelt.*" We see throughout Scripture that the nature of God itself is inseparable from a Love that exists through sharing... in giving. As the image of God in Christ is formed more and more clearly within us, we then, will 'do the same works' as he did. In other words, we will give because that's what *God does*.

**Sadly, there are a lot of Christians, who, to quote a philosopher of the 70's, *Meatloaf* by name(!) sing the tune, "I would do anything for love...but I won't do *that*." So, we're OK with most of Christ's claims on our lives, but when it comes to our wallets... our checkbooks... our discretionary income... well, hold on right there!

Because, perhaps, of a fear of not having enough, because of insecurity over the economy, or our personal job security, perhaps because of a lack of foundational trust in God's promises to provide for his children (we haven't really ever tested that out), or an over-exalted opinion of *our* part in whatever goods we have achieved in this life (this is *mine!*), or because of too many bad examples of economic abuse in our experience, or – well, *whatever* the reason – many Christians hang on to their possessions as if their life was in *them*, or as if we could keep them, or take them with us. We may give a minimum – enough to be proper, but truth be told, it is a struggle, and it makes us uncomfortable. We have all sorts of reasons why this is 'good', or OK.

**But we then miss the joy that comes from the gradual freeing of our souls from the bondage of material things that, I believe, *only* comes with a systematic, proportional plan of giving, augmented by spontaneous acts of generosity as the Spirit leads us. Joyful, extravagant, giving sets us free, and it brings us closer to God, through our imitation of one of the most basic characteristics of God .

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I know many Pastors who literally *hate* to preach on money, giving, tithing, etc. I understand this pretty well, because I once was one of ‘them’. I knew all the right reasons to be wary about talking about money and giving: people think that all the church wants is money, there is the implied self-interest when preaching on giving since your own salary is a significant part of that giving, etc, etc., etc. And that’s aside from the utter privacy that we Americans feel about money – in our culture we like to flaunt possessions, (just look at the brand names on Phones, clothes, cars, etc) but it is highly bad form to ask someone “what did that cost you?” Or, “how much are you giving away?”

But the thing I’ve come to realize is that, aside from all the good that can be done with church finances, which is very significant – and let me just say this: does anyone really expect us to do the significant ministry and outreach that is obviously important to all of us without it costing us anything? Can we keep up this amazing facility open for free? Of course not, so, even if there was no other benefit, I’d be talking about the importance of our giving just because of that.

But, in fact, there *is* more! We’ve talked about the ministry aspect quite a bit last Spring, so I’m not going to go there right now. For today, I want to try to drive this point home: giving is just as important to our individual Spiritual growth as our Bible Studies, our small groups, our worship, and all the other things we’ve been looking at over the past four weeks.

**Let’s say you go to a doctor because of certain symptoms you’re experiencing that won’t seem to go away... you describe this feeling of lethargy, headaches, dizziness, and some other things. So the doctor measures your blood pressure, and some other tests. Then you ‘consult’... and this person, who is trained in caring for the human body says to you, this person that you trust enough to be there in the first place says something like, – “You need to make some serious lifestyle changes. You need to exercise more, and you especially need to start eating a more healthy diet. And, friend, you need to start *now*.” So, it is spelled out for you...if you want to be healthy, do *this!*

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Do you then say, “No way, doc! Just give me a pill! I like my Big Macs! I have to have Ben and Jerry’s! And No Cheese steaks? Come on!” Here’s my question: will that Physician then say, “Oh, all right then, we’ll do it your way?” Not if they take their discipline seriously they won’t!

So, here’s my point – so many times we preachers will make a passing reference to the number of times that Jesus speaks about money and giving in comparison to all other topics (something like 6x’s more!), or point out that Jesus talked a lot more about the use of our money in this life than he talked about *anything* in the next life – we talk about these things in order to give a rationale for *our* bringing it up at all, and surely much less frequently than Jesus did!

** But, isn’t that missing the point? When Jesus is leading people to a deeper walk with their Creator, when he is telling people ‘what they must do to inherit eternal life’, and he talks about giving, about generosity, more than *anything* else, should we at the very least get a sense of his *urgency*? Isn’t Jesus telling us that this is *very important*? That, perhaps, we neglect it at our own peril? I think so... and, as a result, as a kind of ‘physicians assistant’ to Dr. Jesus, I am *honored* to be able to share with you a spiritual prescription for health: we *need* to give. In fact, I think I would be derelict in my duty as your Pastor to not be as clear about this as possible.

So, again, here’s my simple point today: there is a level of knowing God, a height or a depth to our spirituality, that we will never achieve without a systematic, proportional, even *extravagant generosity*. We will not be complete human beings without this as part of our lives.

We’ve been looking in this series at some quotes from the UM Bishop, Richard Schanse’s book “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”, and he has this to add –

*** People who give generously to the church do so because they genuinely desire to make a positive difference for the purpose of Christ and because they want to align their lives with higher purposes. They give in response to the Spirit’s urging and feel a soul-sustaining satisfaction in the sense of meaning and connection that come with generosity. They give because they love God, love the church, and desire to grow in love of neighbor...*

But then he continues:

***Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Extravagant Generosity. These churches teach, preach, and practice proportional giving with a goal toward tithing. They encourage their church members to grow in the grace of giving as an essential practice of Christian discipleship,*

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and as a congregation they practice generosity by their extraordinary support for missions, connectional ministries, and organizations that change peoples' lives. They thrive with the joy of abundance rather than starve with a fear of scarcity. They give joyously, generously, and consistently in ways that enrich the souls of members and strengthen the ministries of the church.¹

They thrive with the joy of abundance rather than starve with a fear of scarcity.

What a great statement! And this is our church, isn't it? I'm trying to avoid numbers, and budgets here, but let me give you one statistic that kind of takes the pulse of FUMC. Aside from supporting our regular budget last year, in the midst of the worst economy since the Great Depression, AND paying our mortgage, AND a significant increase in our Faith Promise missions giving... about a year ago I issued a call to hurting people among us to 'let the church be the church', and tell us if you have personal financial needs that we might be able to help with.

The Pastor's Discretionary fund was going to be used for that, as well as other emergencies that we come across in the life and work of this church. So, check this out: in the past year – in addition to all the other things I just mentioned, we wrote checks for over \$18,600 from our Pastor's Discretionary fund in one year. I hope you celebrate that, as I do!

That is thriving with the joy of abundance rather than starving with a fear of scarcity! Amen?

While working as a journalist for the *Chicago Tribune*, Lee Strobel was given an assignment to report on the struggles of an impoverished, inner-city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Strobel was a devout atheist at the time, and he was kind of surprised by the family's attitude in spite of their circumstances:

The Delgado family – 60-year-old Perfecta and her granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny – had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny, two-room apartment on the West Side.

¹ Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, (p. 108)

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Strobel continues: “

As I walked in, I couldn't believe how empty it was. There was no furniture, no rugs, nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That's it. They were virtually devoid of possessions.

In fact, 11-year-old Lydia and 13-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half-mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way.

But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.

Strobel completed his article, then moved on to other assignments. But when Christmas Eve rolled around, he found his thoughts drifting back to the Delgados and their unflinching belief in God's faithfulness. Again, in his words:

"I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation. Here was a family that had nothing but faith, and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially, but lacked faith—and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment."

So, in the middle of a slow news day, Strobel decided to pay another visit to the Delgados. When he arrived, he was amazed at what he saw. Readers of his article had responded to the family's need in overwhelming fashion, filling the small apartment with donations. Once inside, Strobel encountered new furniture, appliances, and rugs; a large Christmas tree and stacks of wrapped presents; bags of food; and a large selection of warm winter clothing. Readers had even donated a generous amount of cash.

But it wasn't the gifts that shocked Lee Strobel, an atheist in the middle of Christmas generosity. It was the family's response to those gifts:

As surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting: Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she replied in halting English: "Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do."²

² Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christmas* (Zondervan, 2005)

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What Jesus wants us to do...

God's timing is amazing... you know that I've been reading through the Bible straight through (now on the second time). So I just 'happened' to be in the book of Acts this week. I'm thinking about this concept that giving opens us up to deeper experiences with God, and I read a passage then, in Acts 10 – one that I have certainly read many times before – and for the first time these words jumped off the page...

This is the beginning of the account of God leading Peter to share the Gospel with Gentiles, a huge development for which most of us should be very thankful! It happened through interaction with a Gentile named Cornelius. Here's what we read in Acts 10

*** ¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"*

⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.

Do you see it? In verse two: *He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly*

Then in verse 4 - *The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*

Other translations put it like this, "God has noticed your prayers and your gifts"!

It's not that we 'buy our way to God' but there is here a definite connection between Cornelius' generosity and his openness to God! I.e., it was due to his seeking God through prayer *and giving* that God responded to him, and the result was to bring him (and ultimately many others as well!) into a deeper place with God than he could have ever imagined!

I never saw that before!

** Jesus says a similar thing in our Scripture reading for today: Luke 6: 38

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³⁸ *Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*"

The sequence is – *we* give, and then, *God* gives more. That, (what God gives) by the way, is in the form of spiritual blessings, Kingdom fruit, maturity, depth in our relationship with God – things like that - not more money! It is a sad thing that so many preachers interpret this in terms of money, as if God is some sort of investment portfolio manager. This is way better than *that!*

I spent Monday – Thursday last week in Richmond VA attending a Congregation Development School on behalf of our Annual Conference's Church Development Team. On Monday, we drove down there, as the class started first thing Tuesday morning. So, after 6 hours in the back of a van reading a book, I felt the need to get some exercise. It was a beautiful day, so I figured a run was in order.

** The problem was our Hotel sat at an intersection of an eight-lane road with a four-lane road. A quick check of a map revealed that the local 'residential areas' were across that eight lane road and I could find a route from there. But, in trying to cross that road, I discovered that Richmond might be the most pedestrian hostile city ever! There were traffic lights for every two lanes of the big road, and one for each lane of the cross street... I stood there, perplexed... ran to the island in the middle of the road... waited, then tried to cross – just as the 'left turn' signal went green. I was in the second lane at the time, heard the cars rev up and turned back. I knew I couldn't make it all the way across.

The problem was, some guy turning left decided he was going to go, whether I was there or not. And even though I was standing right in front of his car, he came right at me, I finally had to jump back and put my hands out. He gave me a dirty look. Finally getting across, I did my run, and then had to cross the same street – but I was really nervous!

What didn't occur to me immediately was that there were no pedestrian crossing indicators anywhere on that big street. There were no sidewalks on the 4 lane road I ended up running on – and most places no shoulder, either, no place to get out of the road. Drivers merging on to that

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road, making a RH turn (I was facing the traffic) never even turned their head to see if anyone was walking/ running on their side of the road, so I had to wait for them to turn, or practically knock on their window to ask them to ‘please don’t hit me’. At least that area of Richmond, VA had no concept of pedestrians...

OK, there’s a point to this: as I was thinking about this message as I was running, I saw a kind of metaphor in all of that to the relationship of giving to spiritual growth. When giving is not a part of our spiritual language, we can end up like the drivers that I saw down in Richmond.

Blindly moving along, with no idea that there are other ‘things’ going on – people, fresh air, exercise... obviously, I’m exaggerating, but you get it, don’t you? They get a kind of tunnel vision, and miss a lot. Even the home owners on a short stretch of road where there was a sidewalk, many of them put their recycle bins right in the middle of the walk, so I had to go into the street to get by.

** When we add giving to the mix of our plans for intentional spiritual development, we find a whole new dimension of ‘connection’ with God appears that is simply *not to be seen* otherwise. There is a part of our ‘inner self’ – we who are created in the image of God – part of us that resonates in giving because this is who we *are meant to be*. But until we actually *do it*, until we actually experience that, we will be unaware of so much that God is doing all around us.

Unaware of how God is working in the world, unaware of what it feels like to be *part* of that plan, as God uses us, as we participate. And that’s a huge loss...

So Paul writes to the Corinthian church:

***“But since you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you - see that you also excel in this grace of giving.*

Excel! A wonderful, beneficial command for the whole of First United Methodist Church, but just as much for each of us who take seriously the invitation of our Lord to “Follow Me”. Excel in the Grace of Giving!

Amen.