

Extravagant Generosity©

Proverbs 3:1-10; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

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I love the story that Robert Schnase tells in the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* book about the long time church member, who was also a proud grandfather, who stood at the baptismal font with his family for the baptism of his baby granddaughter.

There was also another infant that was baptized that same morning and after the service the two families were back up front by the font so pictures could be taken. The mother of the other family ... a new family that had just joined the church ... had to get something from her bag, so the man who was the grandfather of the other baby, held her infant for her.

While he was holding that other baby, church members came up to greet everyone and several commented on the grandfather with the baby. He kept saying "Oh, this one isn't mine; I'm just holding him for a minute."

But the next day, the grandfather called the pastor and wanted to come in to talk. He told the pastor, "I want to change my will to include the church, and I want to talk to you about that."

The pastor, stunned, asked what it was that brought the man to this decision. The older man, with tears in his eyes, said, "Yesterday, when I was holding the baby of the family who just joined the church, I realized something. I kept saying to people that that baby wasn't my child, but it began to dawn on me that I was wrong.

That baby is part of my family – my church family – and I have a responsibility for that little one, just as I do for my own grandchild. I've been a member of this church for more than 40 years," he said, "and in God's eyes I'm a grandfather to more than just my own. I've taken care of my own children in my will, but I have realized I also need to provide for the children of my church.

I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children."

Schnase says "Those who practice Extravagant Generosity have a God-given vision and faith to plant seeds for trees whose shade they will never see."¹

Today, we are looking at the last of the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Extravagant Generosity flows out of our love for God, whose generosity is beyond measure. We know that we could never be as extravagant in our giving as God has been with us in giving us his Son, Jesus.

¹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, p. 108, Abingdon Press, 2007

As the Scripture says in John 3:16 “for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life”

God’s love for us is so great that he was willing to give his own Son – his own life – so that we might be saved from sin, forgiven and renewed, and given life forever with God.

Our joyful response is one of gratitude and love. Our response is to be extravagant in our own giving because we want to be like the one who made us and has blessed us with so much.

Paul says, “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity ...”

Schnase writes, “Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations thrive because of the extraordinary sharing, willing sacrifice, and joyous giving of their members out of love for God and neighbor. Such churches teach and practice giving that focuses on the abundance of God’s grace and that emphasizes the Christians need to give rather than on the church’s need for money.

In the spirit and manner of Christ, congregations that practice extravagant generosity explicitly talk about the place of money in the Christians walk of faith. They view giving as a gift from God and are driven to be generous by a high sense of mission and a keen desire to please God by making a positive difference in the world.”²

Giving is one of the most important disciplines for a Christian to practice. I think that is so because, when it comes to money, it is sometimes difficult to let go and trust God. I think giving is about trust, in a way. Jesus said, “where your treasure is, there also is your heart.”

Our hard earned money can be in competition with God! It is very difficult for some of us to put God above our money. I believe that is why the tithe is an important way of giving. The Old Testament talks a lot about giving a tenth of whatever you have – a tenth of your first fruits or grain from the harvest, a tenth of your earnings.

It is a discipline alright! Especially when you are young and really trying to be faithful in your Christian growth. But when you look at a tenth of your paycheck and write that check out to the church the first few times, you usually gulp really big and wonder if you are going to make it. But eventually, as you do it with trust and thanksgiving, somehow it does become a great joy to do!

² Et al, p. 112

The thing with tithing is that it causes us to look at all the other areas of our living. Are we living beyond our means or with lots more than we need? Could we be more generous with others if we weren't as extravagant with ourselves?

I doubt that any of us here would really think we are living "high on the hog," so to speak. Most of us struggle to make ends meet, especially with the economy as it's been, and some living in retirement. But, it is always a good practice for Christians to take time to examine how we live and to see if we are being good stewards of what God has given us.

Paul says we should give as we have made up our minds, and cheerfully, for God loves a cheerful giver. The New Testament is full of accounts of people being extravagant in their giving – more than being disciplined with the tithe, they were expressing the joy of giving generously, which in some cases, may have exceeded a ten percent tithe.

When we look around us, from the stained glass windows, to the pulpit and table and baptismal font, the piano, the pews you are sitting in, the hymnals you sing from, everything is here because of the generous giving of others who have gone before us.

This past Thursday was All Saints Day ... the day we remember those Christians who lived faithful lives, who prayed, taught, gave, provided so much for us to have today in the church – who paved the way, sometimes even through persecution, so that we might still have the faith today.

Years ago, a group of faithful Christians built this building and over the years contributed labor and money so that it is still a place of worship for us.

Today, we are laboring and giving to do repairs and to update and, hopefully provide a sanctuary and place of worship and prayer for our children and grandchildren for years to come. Of course, "our children" are, as that grandfather realized, the children in our church family.

Someday, those who are here, long after we are gone, will be remembering your generous acts of giving. They will give thanks for the saints who have gone before them.

But giving isn't just for inside these walls. It reaches out to a world full of need. Schnase says that vital, fruitful congregations are quick to respond to the needs of those who are hurting, who are victims of disasters – such as those effected by Hurricane Sandy.

Because of God's great, generous, extravagant love for us, we naturally and generously have a desire to give to others. We have a theology of plenty – of pouring out gifts – rather than one of having tight fists and thinking in terms of scarcity.

We trust that the more we give, the more we will have, the more we will be blessed – because it is God’s way and that means it is our way too!

“Extravagant Generosity describes practices of sharing and giving that exceed all expectations and extend to unexpected measures. It describes lavish sharing, sacrifice, and giving in service to God and neighbor.”³

Next Sunday is an important day in the life of Holly Presbyterian Church. It is the day that we come with our pledge cards filled out with what we believe God is calling us to give for the coming year.

I think that is important. It isn’t just about a donation.

It is a prayerful decision about what God is leading us to do as a spiritual discipline. Are you giving a percentage of your income? Are you giving 3 percent or 6? Are you tithing 10 percent? If not, I invite you to ask yourself why? Are you unable to tithe? Is it about trust? Or fear?

Tithing is a spiritual discipline that builds trust in God and strengthens our faith in leaps and bounds! I have no idea who tithes and who doesn’t in this church family, but I encourage you, if you are not tithing, to pray about it and consider it as a way of growing even more in your faith and trust in God. The more a congregation tithes, the stronger it is spiritually!

If you are giving a percentage and can’t tithe 10% yet, I encourage you to consider making a plan for how, over the next few years, you might step up and get to that point. Most of all, pray about it and see if you feel God is leading you in that direction. It’s all about your growing in your closeness to a generous, loving heavenly Father who is extravagant with his children.

Let’s go back to our beginning story for just a minute. Have you ever thought about giving to the church in your will, in order to provide for the future of your church family? That is another area that helps give strength to a congregation – it builds a firm foundation and gives assurance that the church will be here to provide for our future generations.

It’s hard to talk about money, isn’t it? I love to hear stories from people who have struggled in their journey of tithing. The problem is, it’s hard to get them to talk because they don’t want to seem like they are bragging. But the truth is, most everyone who tithes, has struggled with it. But I also know that it is worth the struggle because our faith grows in leaps and bounds as we let go and trust in God more and more. Much of our spiritual growth happens while we are struggling! That’s why I feel it is important, as your pastor, to talk about it today.

³ Et al, p. 112

Yes, the church needs to plan a budget; yes, we need money to provide the ministries we are called to do. But, as your pastor, my greatest concern is that you continue to grow deep in your faith and your spiritual life with God. And I do believe, with all my heart, that giving – and tithing – are very important spiritual disciplines for every growing Christian!

As Paul says in our text today, “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints, but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.”

Whatever you decide that God is leading you to give, whether it be a small portion, or a tenth, or more, or whether it be the tiniest seed that is the beginning of your life of giving, do it with joy and grateful hearts for the many blessings God has poured out on us.

God has given us life, God has provided us with a church family and a place to worship and learn and grow. God has given us our own families and our jobs and our money and everything we have. And best of all, God has given us grace and life, forgiveness and joy in his Son, Jesus Christ.

“Thanks be to God for that indescribable gift!”

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