

The Art of Love©

Deuteronomy 6:3-6; John 13:34-35 October 15, 2017 Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

This morning we continue the focus on Extravagant Generosity and we look at how our relationships have made a difference in our lives and in our being generous.

So, as we begin, I have question for you to consider and hopefully share with all of us ...

Who has made a difference in your spiritual life? It might be a parent or grandparent, a Sunday School teacher or a friend. Was it someone here in this congregation? Who has made a difference in your spiritual life? Please share if you can ...

My grandfather, George Wilkinson, was one of those people for me. Grandad was an elder in the Presbyterian Church and was very committed to being generous in many ways. He was a chiropractor who was passionate about helping people be well. He never charged a huge amount because he wanted his patients to be able to come to him as much as they needed.

My mother told about going with him in the middle of a cold winter night, driving out into the country to where a baby was screaming with an ear ache. I don't know what grandad did as a chiropractor, but my mom said he made a believer out of her because he did something gentle but effective to the baby and his ear quit hurting and he fell asleep. It was nothing for him to get up in the night and travel a distance to take care of someone.

And when Grandad retired, he continued his practice but charged just \$4 per visit. He had patients coming to him until, in his late 80's, he and my grandmother had to move to a nursing home because he could no longer take care of my grandmother who had dementia, who could no longer walk and was blind.

All his life, grandad lived a modest life. He had a small, comfortable home and ate reasonable, healthy, small meals. He saved money, he tithed to the church, he gave money to help many people in need.

Grandad was a role model for me as a Christian man. He took seriously the command to love one another, and he showed it in his lifestyle and his generosity toward others. I know he had a deep love for God and gratitude for what Jesus did for us on the cross. I know, because he told me about it often. He would sit with me on the back steps and tell me stories from the bible, making them come alive for me. Always ending with how God loves me.

He taught me songs like "How Great Thou Art," "Lord, I Want to be a Christian," "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder."

He lived in a time when there was segregation in our town but there wasn't much to separate his neighborhood from the black community. There was an alley far in the back of his property, and across the alley was the home of an elderly black man – a good friend of my grandads.

Instead of just walking through the yard, though, grandad would hold my hand (I was 5 at the time, I think) and we would walk around the block to the front of the man's house. And all the time we were walking, grandad would tell me "Don't ever let anyone make you think you are better than someone else, just because of the color of skin. God loves everyone else just like he loves you. We are all equal in God's eyes."

That lesson stuck in my mind all my life and I think influenced my decision to do social work, and then to go into ministry.

Relationships that flow from hearts that have experienced God's love are relationships that seem to spread from one person to the next. It reminds me of that song *Pass It On* written by Austin Walker Boyd, Jr in 1978.

The lyrics say: It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in the glowing. That's how it is with God's love – once you've experienced it. You'll spread his love to everyone. You'll want to pass it on."

We've seen just this week how quickly a spark of fire can grow and spread out to far distances. The wildfires we've watched on the news in California have caused great devastation.

But just like that spark that caused those wildfires to spread and wreak havoc, our kindness and generosity that is sparked by God's love can also spread quickly and reach a long distance, causing as much good as those wildfires have caused damage.

We know from experience too, that hate can do the same thing. The Holocaust that spread from hatred through out Europe is an example of that.

Mother Teresa said: "The world is full of good people. If you can't find one, be one."

We've heard the reading from Deuteronomy last week and again today. It is known as the great *Shema*, which in Hebrew means *to listen*. It begins in Hebrew as: *Shema, Y'srael, Adonai el ohenu*. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God – the Lord is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and might."

The *Shema* is a proclamation saying that loving God is the top priority above all else – it is the foundational teaching of our faith. If you were to go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, you would see Orthodox Jews rocking back and forth as they recite the *Shema*.

As Christians, the *Shema* is important to us as well. We look at it in the context of the teaching of Jesus, found in John 13, where he says to love one another as he, Jesus, has loved us. It is clear that one of the ways we express our love for God is by loving one another.

Robert Schnase tells the story about a part-time custodian for a downtown church who saw a homeless man in the alley by the church when he was taking out the trash. He put down the trash and pulled out his wallet, giving the man a few dollars and some kind words.

The pastor happened to be leaving at the time and saw all this. He was surprised, as well as humbled, by the unsolicited generosity of the custodian. It was quite a contrast, compared to the hours the staff had spent trying to figure out policies and procedures for relating to, and helping the homeless population in their city.

When the pastor asked the custodian why he gave the man money and if he wasn't concerned that he might use it for drugs or alcohol, the custodian said, "I just do whatever I am able to do. I give a little money and say 'God bless you,' because I figure they are some mother's son, or father's child. So, I give them a little something. They have to answer to God regarding what they do with the money. I have to answer to God about what I do with mine."¹

Loving that comes from knowing God's love for us and loving God with all of ourselves is an art. And doing art takes practice. The more we do it, the more gifted we are at it. The more we practice, the more it becomes natural for us – automatic.

1 John 3:17-19 says this (reading from **The Message** translation): "If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear. My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality."

The art of loving comes from the experience of God's love for us, God's grace, God's generous gift to us in Jesus, his Son. So many times that experience of God's love has come through the generosity and caring of another person who has shared with us. As we said last week – Jesus with skin on."

Billy Graham tells a story of a church that was destroyed in Strasburg, Germany during the war. There is statue of Christ, however, by the church, that still stood intact, except the hands were blown off. When they were rebuilding, the decision was made to leave the statue as it was. A sculptor inscribed these words: *Jesus has no hands but ours.*²

There are so many places where we can be the hands of Jesus; where we can be Jesus with skin on, showing the love of God to others, passing on love and kindness in our loving generosity. It's not hard at all to see where and how we can be generous. But it becomes a passion for us as we practice the art of love that flows from God's heart to ours and out to the world.

I encourage you to think about your relationships. Think about the people who have shared love and generosity with you; who have been spiritual influences in your life.

And then consider how you are passing that spark of love on to others, making a difference, being a part of God's transforming love for those you come in contact with.

How are you cultivating the art of love in your life and in your relationships?

¹ Robert Schnase, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity: Daily Readings on the Grace of Giving*, p. 38. Abington Press, ©2011

² <https://billygraham.org/devotion/the-hands-of-jesus/>

I finish with these words from John Wesley, the founder of the United Methodist denomination, who said:

*“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
At all the times you can,
As long as ever you can.”*

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