

**Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
Extravagant Generosity
Mark 6:30-44 2Corinthians 9:6-15**

This winter we've been reflecting together on the 5 practices of fruitful congregations: radical hospitality/welcome, wholehearted worship, intentional faith development, risk taking and adventure in mission and service, and, this morning, our final practice: extravagant generosity.

The section I'm about to read from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is part of a longer point he is making to encourage these Corinthians to be trusting and generous because of what Christ has done for them. I'll be reading from chapter 9, but just before this section, he leads up to it with these words (from 8:9): "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (in every sense of the word, not just materially).

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion (no guilt tripping or arm twisting), for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written,
'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;

his righteousness endures forever.’

¹⁰He 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. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry (in other words, by trying this out—by taking a risk!) you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

This is the word of the Lord.

What a beautiful passage, packed with promises and principles and practices for fruitful lives and congregational ministries, along the lines of generosity—generosity of all kinds, not with money exclusively.

Right off the bat, I think it’s noteworthy that Paul begins his encouragement with the line that “the one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly.” Because it raises the question, “Why would someone sow sparingly?” Jesus asks this question in his own way when he talks about matters of generosity and encourages his followers to become generous.

Briefly, I can see some reasons why people would sow sparingly, so to speak, which are addressed frequently in Scripture:

1. Fear. It could be the fear that I won't have enough, so I need to keep what I have. Or it could be fear that what I do have might go away, so I need to hang onto it. And while we are encouraged all over the Bible to live beyond fear, and knowing that Jesus frequently said, "Fear not," it also needs to be said that the fears of not having enough or of losing what we already have are very real and legitimate fears for many people right now. With budget cuts and funding cuts happening as we speak, and people being fired from their jobs without reason or warning, and other assorted crises that people may experience as the dominos fall as a result of these cuts... to say to people "Fear not" can sound glib, and could be insulting.

There are ways to move beyond fear, though, even if financial assets diminish, and it is possible to become generous in non-monetary ways of giving and serving (we'll talk about these in a moment). We are told to have faith, even faith as small as a mustard seed, which is a way of saying that we must not let fear have dominion over us. We must choose to trust God, and live into hope.

2. A second reason why someone might sow sparingly is because of plain old selfishness. This is the guy in Jesus' parable who prospers and accumulates more and more goods and produce, and in his abundance he has the bright idea to build bigger barns to store all his crops and stuff. Because, in his

mind, he was a self-made man. Jesus had some choice words for him, and I'll leave it to you to find that parable and read what he says. The bigger barn builder guy is another one of Jesus' larger than life characters, made to sound ridiculous in order to make a point. The point being, we can have an attitude of "What's mine is yours and I'll share it;" or "What's mine is mine and I'll keep it." Of course there are some who have the attitude of "What's yours is mine and I'll take it." That goes beyond selfishness; it's anti-generosity.

3. A third explanation for why a person might sow sparingly is what we call a scarcity mindset. A scarcity mindset says, "There isn't enough to go around; resources are scarce, so I need to hold onto my share of the scarce resources."

The scarcity mindset is what the disciples have when they tell Jesus to send people away to get their own food, and Jesus says to them, "*You* give them something to eat." And they reply with "What, really? With these meager resources?"

In gospel writer John's version of the feeding of the 5,000, the disciple Andrew notices a kid with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, but then asks Jesus, "What are those among so many people?" In other words, resources are scarce. The needs are big, resources are small, so... what can we do.

The implication is, let us hold onto the little we have so that at least *we* can survive. This scarcity mindset is what Paul is addressing with the early churches, and particularly the Corinthian church to whom he writes the passage we heard this morning. Paul emphasizes that God is not a God of scarcity but a God of abundance.

This leads us, then to *gateways to generosity*. Let's 'accentuate the positive' as the old song goes, and consider some gateways to generosity—not just with money, but in all ways, as Paul says.

The first gateway to generosity is gratitude. Did you hear how Paul mentioned gratitude and thanksgiving in our reading? And then ended his encouragement by *expressing* gratitude, saying, “Thanks be to God!”

It's a tried and true principle that grateful people are generous people. Gratitude is such a simple practice, and so easy to do. And... so easy to forget. I am consistently surprised at myself, and frequently frustrated with myself, how quickly I forget to make gratitude a regular practice. When I remember to do it, a morning practice is best for me, but I recognize that some days I need an hour-by-hour practice, to help me keep my mind on the abundance that surrounds me. I love Paul's big and beautiful words here: bounty, enrichment, abundance, surpassing grace.

Psalm 100 says “*Enter God’s gates with thanksgiving; his courts with praise.*”

And perhaps David, who wrote this Psalm, means literal gates and courts, as people came to the temple for worship and pass through the gates and into the courts. But “gates” and “courts” here really mean “God’s presence.” Enter *God’s presence* with thanksgiving. Enter *God’s presence* with praise. And we can do that anywhere, at any time.

Indigenous people talk about the “gate” of the morning, as they face east and welcome the sunrise, and the opening of a new day, by expressing gratitude to our Creator for the gifts that each day holds. I remember driving to Stanwood early one morning a while back to meet a friend, which took me through the Tulalip area, and as I drove past one of the homes, an older native woman was out in the front yard of her home, facing east, and with arms extended and with open palms, and she was waving her arms in an upward motion and over her head, as if she was pulling some good smelling something toward her. That is an indigenous practice, to say, “Welcome, new day. I welcome all that Creator will bring this day.” And then, out of their morning gratitude, they live generously and *reciprocally* with the earth and other people (I’ll talk about living reciprocally in a moment).

I won't belabor this; it's just a simple friendly reminder (to myself, which you have just overheard me say to myself) to practice gratitude. For the sake of our own hearts and minds, which helps us overcome fear, and, to help us remember what we have, all around us, as gifts from God.

Which leads to the next gateway to generosity:

Remembering that *God* has been, and is, generous with us. In Paul's words, "*God* is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."

Notice, he doesn't talk about money, but *every kind of* blessing, and having enough of *everything*. And by "enough of everything" this isn't just about personal possessions, but also personal experiences, relationships, and other day to day enrichments all around us, everywhere, that can be a gateway to generosity.

For example, we live in Shoreline and enjoy going to Richmond Beach occasionally. There is a pathway at the top of the hill overlooking Puget Sound, the Olympic Mountains, and all sorts of other cool sights. And I can stand there and acknowledge, "I have enough of everything." God gave us this. Not just me, but *us*. And I realize, then, that I am a part of this magnificent creation. Then, Heidi and I may walk to Hamlin Park, a few blocks from our house, and walk

through the 50+ acres of woods there, among trees, birds and other critters, and people walking their dogs. It's not an expansive experience of creation like at Richmond Beach, but an up-close experience with "the tree people" as our indigenous friends put it. And we can say, "Thanks be to *God* for this indescribable gift."

And, of course, there are the *spiritual* blessings that come from God, which Paul and Jesus often address: God's surpassing grace (as Paul puts it), God's presence and nearness, God's love and goodness.

The more we recognize that God is the giver of good gifts, the more we realize those gifts are to be shared. With leads to...

...a final gateway to generosity, which is realizing that we were created to live in a reciprocal relationship with creation, and with our communities. Living reciprocally simply means that we gratefully receive, and then we gratefully give back. We receive, we give back. This is reflected in the 2Cor. reading: you can feel the movement of it: we receive, we give; we receive we give.

This is built into indigenous worldviews and cultures around the world: you take only what you need from the earth, or from shopping or investments or whatever, and then you give back to earth and to community some kind of offering, or gift, or something that the earth or the community needs. It helps

everyone, and everything, thrive. And thriving is what God desires for everyone, and everything.

This principle of living reciprocally is built into the Old Testament law of the Hebrew people through the practice of tithing and the other regular offerings, and Jesus encouraged it in his many teachings, perhaps most succinctly stated when he says, “Freely you have received, freely give.” This is not just a command, but can be seen as a statement of the rhythm of life, and how the world works.

Because, then, everyone thrives. The earth thrives, the poor are provided for, and God’s love is made manifest through tangible acts of generosity.

The world needs people, especially God’s people, especially right now, to be givers and not just receivers—each of us in our day-to-day lives, and us collectively as a congregation. When Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world” he meant that God’s blessings are to flow through us. A friend of mine puts it this way, “We—individuals and congregations—are called to be channels of God’s blessings not reservoirs. We are channels, not reservoirs, of God’s blessings. Although we need full reservoirs—badly! Reservoirs are good! But you get the point. Maybe we could modify the saying this way: we are channels of God’s blessings, not storage units of God’s blessings. Live reciprocally.

A couple of comments about all of this as we prepare for communion.

Generosity isn't just with money or tangible goods. There are many ways to be generous: we can be generous with our time, as we give of ourselves in some way. We can be generous with skills and energy and expertise, usually coupled with the gift of time. We can be generous with our words, by being an encourager, a noticer of the good in another person. This form of generosity can take place in person, on the phone, with an email, or a text message. Years ago I knew a woman, who, as part of her morning gratitude practice, wrote an old fashioned hand-written letter every day to someone, as a means of sharing encouragement and blessing. She said it was as good for her, as she hoped it would be for the recipients.

We can also be generous with space. As people open their homes or property or other real estate for people to gather. However, this type of generosity applies wonderfully to churches, which typically have an abundance of space—that is, property and facilities.

Along those lines, I'm grateful to see a shift that's happening across the country in many, many churches. It's the shift from churches thinking, "This is our property, this is our building, this is our stuff" (kept as if it were in a storage unit) to churches thinking, "We are part of a neighborhood; we belong to the

neighborhood, and the neighborhood belongs to us. So, how can we live reciprocally with our neighbors. And with this incredible gift from God, this bounty, this rich resource of property and facilities, be *partners* with the people in our neighborhood, giving generously of this gift.”

As a result of this shift in thinking some churches have completely remodeled their facility to create neighborhood gathering space; some have transformed their entire outer landscape to provide community garden space for refugees and immigrants, as the neighborhood changes around them. There are countless stories like this.

And I want to commend us for making this shift. One of the ways we are generous here at Maplewood, and hope to be more so, is with our facility and grounds. Last week I mentioned that it’s in our congregational DNA to be adventuresome and take risk; we have a history of doing that. In the same way, it’s also in our DNA to be generous with the use of our facility and grounds.

Did you know... that we have 25 different groups and organizations from the area around us that meet here on a regular basis? A third or so of them are recovery groups (AA, NA, Alanon); a few of them are music groups that meet for rehearsals and recitals; we have civic organizations like Edmond Lions Club and Lynnwood Kiwanis; there are hobby groups like the Puget Sound Camera Club,

and a line dancing group (come by on Monday afternoons to hear the country music and see the boot scootin'), and there is an art group; we have an organization called Northwest's Child that is here every day, who, with the school systems in King and Snohomish County serve kids with disabilities. There is an Ethiopian and Eritrean church that worships here on Sunday evenings and Friday nights and meets at other times. There's more!

That's a lot. That's wonderful. And... I think... we can do even more. These groups and organizations I mentioned are all groups that have come to us with a need for space and we said, "Sure." However, what if we were more proactive and *invited* more groups and services in. For example, to help people with financial planning, estate planning, and their taxes. Or scouting groups and other organizations that benefit kids in our area. What if we had neighborhood book groups, and provided neighborhood meeting space for discussions about matters that affect this immediate neighborhood, or, if people just wanted to gather and do fun stuff (within reason, of course; we'd need to define "fun stuff"). This sanctuary is a perfect space—because we can move chairs—to have active groups like martial arts classes, or yoga. I'd come to a yoga class here. I need it. And maybe martial arts too. Pastors ought to know martial arts. Might come in handy; you never know...

And this is just the indoor space. We have an acre or more of outdoor space that can be used to serve the neighborhood, which we are already doing in part through the community garden.

This is all to say, we are already generous with our facility and grounds, but we can be even more generous with the abundance that God has provided.

One last note: I love Paul's encouragement here that each person gets to decide, in freedom, what they want to give. And we, collectively through our leadership structures, decide how we want to be generous. As Paul says, not under compulsion, without guilt-tripping or arm-twisting, which creates grumpy givers ("reluctant"). Because God loves a *cheerful* giver. A person, and a church, that gladly, joyfully, gives, in freedom, as a response to God's abundance.

The Message: "God loves it when the giver delights in the giving."

So, let's have fun with this!

God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending