

MONDAY

From Stewardship to Generosity

“Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”

— *Luke 6:38, The Message*

A few years ago, I had the privilege of speaking at a training seminar at a large United Methodist church. My host was on staff at the church, and he described how he had recently changed his title after reflecting upon the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Formerly the Executive Director of Stewardship, he was now the Executive Director of *Generosity*. He, the other staff, and the congregational leaders decided “generosity” comes closer than “stewardship” to describing his purpose and role.

This made me think. What’s the difference between “stewardship” and “generosity”? What comes to mind when you hear those words? For what distinctive purposes are they best suited? How do people respond to those terms?

We are stewards of the earth. We are stewards of those things entrusted to us, inherited by us, and earned by us. We are stewards of our wealth and possessions and physical bodies. Stewards are people in ancient times who were trustees, who had responsibilities, who cared for things owned by someone else. Today you don’t hear much about stewards and stewardship outside the church; it’s a language derived from our biblical roots and our church heritage. It risks becoming insider language, not easily accessible or immediately understandable by those new to the church. There is something slightly weighty, dutiful, and legal sounding about the word. I grew up hearing about stewardship, stewardship campaigns, and committees on stewardship. The language focused our attention on supporting the church financially.

Generosity is an aspect of character. It is an attractive quality which I aspire to and desire to see cultivated in my children. The opposite of generosity is selfishness, self-centeredness, greed, and self-absorption. No stories from Scripture tell of people living the God-related spiritual life while fostering a greedy attitude. Generosity extends beyond merely the use of money, although it most definitely includes that. There are generous spirits; generous souls; people who are generous with their time, with their teaching, with their love. Generosity finds many biblical sources, and is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). It sounds more organic, more generative, less legalistic, less formal than stewardship. I have to explain to my teenage sons what stewardship means. They know generosity when they see it.

I admire and respect people who are generous, and I want to become like them. Generosity is not a spiritual attribute someone acquires apart from the actual practice of giving. It becomes discernable through action. We never describe people as generous who keep everything for themselves and only serve themselves.

Generosity focuses on the spiritual qualities of the giver, derived from the generosity of God, rather than on the church’s need for money. One of these terms is not superior to the other. Perhaps there are shades of differences in how they are perceived by young and old, those new to the faith from those long-established in our churches. Using both wisely helps us reach people at different places on the journey of faith.

- What has been your experience with the term “stewardship”? With “generosity”? What’s the difference between them?
- Which most helpfully inspires your giving as you seek to grow in the image of God and in service to Christ?

TUESDAY

Building Nests

“And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

— *Luke 12:20*

One March morning, I saw a large Red-Tailed Hawk fly overhead carrying a long heavy stick. I smiled at this indisputable sign of spring. Non-migratory birds of my area were beginning to build nests. Earlier I had seen an American Crow carrying straw for the same purpose, and the day before I had watched House Sparrows tucking threads of grass into the hole in a convenience store awning.

During the months to come, birds of all kinds would pour extraordinary effort, time, and ingenuity to the construction of nests, the protection of eggs, and the feeding of their vulnerable young ones. After the little ones hatch, I’m always amazed at the unceasing care offered by the parents. Every ounce of the adults’ energy is devoted, not to their own comfort and feeding, but to the survival of their young.

The notion of building nests is often used as a metaphor to describe people successfully providing for their own comforts. If someone arrives at a career position of some ease and security, friends say, “You’ve built yourself quite a nest for yourself here!” When we are comfortable, secure, and feel at home in our workplace or living area, we talk about the space being “our own little nest.” The word *nest* often connotes shelter, coziness, homelike, comfortable.

In actual fact, the nests which birds build are not for the birds who build them, but for their young, for the next generation, for the future of the species. The hours of carrying straw, sticks, and mud; the days of defensive watchfulness; and the weeks of endless feeding are all for the benefit of the new ones, the young, the future.

Now consider “nests” we build in our churches. The buildings, programs, ministries, job descriptions, and services we build—are they for our own comfort and coziness? Or are they to further the faith and provide for future generations? Does our giving serve us and our needs or serve God by serving the mission of the church to reach new people? Vibrant, fruitful congregations focus as much energy, prayer, and planning on those who are outside the congregation as they do on those who are already active in the congregation. When they initiate new Bible studies, outreach ministries, or worship services, they give less emphasis to “what do I want, prefer, or find convenient” and place more weight on “what will feed the souls, nourish the spirits, and sustain the steps” of those outside the church or new to the faith. Those new to the faith are as vulnerable as hatchlings, and require a steady and dedicated effort of feeding. And the budding faith of young people requires our committed attention; extra care; overtime in planning, teaching, encouraging, generosity, mentoring, and support. For those who practice Extravagant Generosity, the nests we build are not for ourselves—they are for the next generation, those new to the faith, the future of the body of Christ.

- What motivates you to support the ministries of your congregation?
- How does your focus on generosity and level of giving support the mission of reaching other people with the grace of God you have received?

WEDNESDAY

Seeds With Wings

“A sower went out to sow his seed . . .”

— *Luke 8:5*

As I was hiking with my sons one morning, we noticed a number of large trees dispersing their seeds in a most fascinating way. The seeds were pea-sized with a single leaf-like extension about the size and shape of a large dragonfly wing. Under the weight of the seedpod, the single angled wing would cause the seed to fall with the perfect twirling, rotating motion of a helicopter. The effect was like the “paper helicopters” some of us used to make in elementary school. The seeds whirled around us, slowly descending from the tall trees, and often getting caught up in the breeze to be carried far from the parent tree. It was a delightful sight.

Jesus tells about a sower who goes out to sow, scattering seeds left and right, near and far. Some of the seeds fall on rocky paths, some are scooped up by hungry birds, and some are choked by weeds. But some find fertile soil, take root, and a harvest comes forth beyond what any of us can imagine. He tells the parable to remind us of the way our faithful efforts make a difference in the lives of others around us.

Watching the “seeds with wings,” as my son called them, added a new dimension to Jesus’ parable of the seeds and soils. So much of our impact, even when we live immensely fruitful lives, affects those closest to us. We are like trees whose seeds fall directly to the ground beneath their own branches and under their own shade. We naturally have the greatest impact upon those closest at hand, our families, spouses, children, and grandchildren. We bear much fruit this way, but in a narrow and limited field. The branches of trees that drop their seeds directly beneath them protect their seedlings, filter sunlight for their good, and provide fallen leaves to nurture them. Among the most important seeds we sow are the grace and love of God we offer within our own families and among our own kindred. This is our calling.

Each of us has another and larger calling as well, and that is to give our seeds wings so that the good we do and the difference we make extend beyond our sight and beyond our time.

Each of us has been formed by the influences of countless people—friends, coworkers, mentors, teachers, coaches, neighbors, pastors, youth sponsors, scout leaders, colleagues, confidants—who have contributed far beyond their own small circles. Through their generosity, time, effort, and love, they have changed us, and changed the world, by intentionally providing a legacy that extends far and wide.

I’m often amazed at the immeasurable difference people make with their lives far away from their homes and long after their deaths. In Honduras, I’ll see a clinic started by a Sunday school class from a church in Oklahoma many years ago. In an African village, I’ll see kids nestled under mosquito nets funded by youth from a church in Germany. In an American church, I see prayer cloths handmade by Christians in Korea. In nursing homes, I see birthday cards made by five-year olds, and in church nurseries I find blankets knitted by the elderly homebound.

There is no end to what God can accomplish anywhere in the world when our “seeds have wings”; when we are willing to let our prayers, intentions, plans, efforts, and work be lifted by the Spirit to places far away; when our generosity moves beyond ourselves.

- Think of two or three of the most influential people in forming your own soul and character other than your relatives. What made them effective? What can you learn from their generosity and the legacy they have left for others?

- Where in the world beyond your own church and home are there signs of your congregation's ministry? Of your own?

THURSDAY

Partnering with God

“They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

— **1 Timothy 6:18-19**

Paul and Carolyn have been leaders in their congregation for years, and their generosity has grown steadily as they have matured in faith. They also have enjoyed personal financial success. When their church felt called to reach more people and younger generations by building a new sanctuary, Paul and Carolyn were challenged to give a major gift. They prayed about it for weeks, before deciding to give the largest gift they had ever given in their lives. “I felt like I was asked to partner with God for a great purpose,” Paul said. “Our gift became one of the great delights of our lives. We loved knowing that we could make a difference. We were deeply moved by the experience.” Carolyn adds, “If God gives you the capacity and the passion to do something, why in God’s name wouldn’t you do it?”

People give because generosity helps them achieve God’s purposes in *themselves*. By giving, we develop the inner qualities of generosity. Generosity is not a spiritual attribute someone acquires apart from the practice of giving. It becomes discernable only through visible behavior. We cannot become generous and cling to everything we have without letting go. The opposite of generosity is greediness, selfishness. These are not the qualities that lead to life, and so by our giving we cultivate a different nature inside ourselves.

God uses our practice of giving to reconfigure our interior life. By giving, we craft a different inner desire as the driving element of life. Our motivations change.

Giving moderates the powerful and sometimes destructively insatiable drive for acquisition. In the daily interior struggle fostered by a consumerist, materialist society that pressures us to pursue many things that do not lead to real happiness, the practice of giving aims us at what ultimately satisfies. Giving sanctifies and deepens the struggle, and constantly resets the internal compass in the right direction. Generosity becomes a tool God uses to draw us closer to God and to align us more closely with God’s desire for us.

- Have you ever given over and beyond your normal tithe or pattern of giving? If so, what was the experience like?
- Do you find that the more you give, the more likely you are to give? Why or why not?

FRIDAY

Muscle Memory

*“Therefore, show . . . the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you,
so that the churches can see it.”*

— 2 Corinthians 8:24, NIV

Sarah grew up in a family that practiced tithing, and as a child she put ten cents in the offering plate from each dollar she received. She remembers receiving her first paycheck of \$56 from her first job as a teenager, and her sense of achievement and delight when she gave \$5.60 to the church. Now in her forties, Sarah has a high-paying job as a senior executive, and tithing continues to feel natural, a regular pattern of her life. She does it with ease and grace. “I love giving,” she says, “and I cannot imagine living my life or loving God without giving back. Giving is one of the great joys of my life. Tithing was learned and practiced so early that I developed the muscle memory for giving. Like practicing my tennis serve for so many years that I don’t have to think about each step, my giving is part of who I am.” For someone beginning to tithe, Sarah’s level of discipleship may appear unachievable. But with practice, anyone can develop spiritual “muscle memory.”

As those who consistently practice the tithe know, proportional giving (giving a set percentage of income) and tithing force people to look at their earning, saving, and spending through God’s eyes. It reminds them that their ultimate worth is derived from the assurance that they are children of God, created by God, and infinitely loved by God. God’s eternal love revealed in Christ is the source of self-worth; true happiness and meaning are found in growing in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.

Giving generously reprioritizes lives and helps people distinguish what is lasting, eternal, and of infinite value from what is temporary, illusory, and untrustworthy. The discipline of generous giving places people on the balcony, helping them look out at the consumerist society with new perspective, better able to see its traps, deceptions, and myths. The practice of generosity is a means by which God builds people up, strengthens their spirits, and equips them to serve God’s purposes.

- Read 2 Corinthians 8. Paul concludes by saying that our giving is a proof of our love for God. Can we possibly desire God to shape our souls without giving?
- If you practice proportional giving or tithing, does this practice affect your other spending habits?
- If you do not practice proportional giving or tithing, what are the obstacles to a greater generosity toward God?

SATURDAY

Pocket Change

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

— **Galatians 5:22-23**

A woman from a small congregation told me about how she led discussions about the book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* in her home with a dozen folks. On the first night, she placed a large Tupperware bowl on a table. As the group finished the discussion, she asked everyone to empty his or her pockets, purses, and wallets of change . . . not bills, just coins. Everyone played along, trying to guess what she was up to. She repeated this mysterious request each week as they studied the book together. Each week, more and more money filled the bowl.

On the last night as they talked about Extravagant Generosity, she revealed her plan. She intended to donate the money to the Nothing But Nets campaign, the extraordinary effort to save lives in Africa by providing medicated mosquito nets to prevent people from getting malaria (www.NothingButNets.net/). They had accumulated over \$300 in change—enough to buy thirty nets! This painless and enjoyable exercise while studying the book will save children’s lives on the other side of the world. Even pocket change changes lives. Change the life of a child and you change the world.

Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit, a worthy spiritual aspiration. To practice Extravagant Generosity requires self-control, patience, kindness, faith, and love of God and neighbor. These build us up; equip us for life and for ministry; and foster perspectives and attitudes that are sustaining, enriching, and meaningful. Giving changes the giver, the recipient, and the congregation.

This small congregation is learning discipleship, deepening their own faith through study together, practicing simple generosity, and changing the lives of people they will never know while they are also allowing God to change them and their church.

- How does your church change lives in your community? On the other side of the world?
- What will you do to change someone’s life this week?

SUNDAY

The Grace of Giving

“But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”

— 2 Corinthians 8:7, NIV

Churches that practice Extravagant Generosity don't talk in general terms about stewardship; they speak confidently and faithfully about money, giving, generosity, and the difference giving makes for the purposes of Christ and in the life of the giver. They emphasize the Christian's need to give more than the church's need for money. They teach, preach, and practice proportional giving with the goal of tithing. They use God's name accurately by appealing to the highest of life-giving purposes for giving rather than employing fear, guilt, pressure, and shame as motivation.

Churches that cultivate giving speak of joy, devotion, honoring God, and the steady growth of spirit that leads to greater generosity. They don't apologize, whine, groan, act embarrassed, or feel awkward as they encourage people to offer their best to God. People delight in giving. Pledge campaigns are not about money, dollars, and budgets but about mission, spiritual growth, and relationship to God. Stewardship efforts deepen prayer life, build community, unite people with purpose, and clarify mission. People feel strengthened and grateful to serve God through giving.

Churches that practice Extravagant Generosity encourage people to grow in their giving, to give more now than in the past and more in the future than they do today. They share honest stories of lives changed by practicing generosity; they invite people to bear witness to how giving affects their spiritual lives. They publicly thank God for the generosity of the people, and they express personal appreciation time and time again to those who give. They cultivate the hearts of their people in the way of Christ.

Extravagantly generous congregations emphasize mission, purpose, and life-changing results rather than shortages, budgets, and institutional loyalty. They provide a compelling vision that invites people to give joyously, thereby finding purpose, meaning, and satisfaction in changing lives. They know that God moves people to give in order to find purpose and to accomplish things for Christ. They connect money with mission. They give offerings of whatever they can, whenever they can—they excel in the grace of giving, as Paul says (2 Corinthians 8:7).

- How do you feel about how your congregation teaches about money?
- What conversations that relate faith and money are most helpful to you?