

## *Shiloh United Methodist Church*

Deuteronomy 6:4-6;  
John 13:34-35

Rev. Tyler Amundson

November 12, 2017

### *Extravagant Generosity: Relationships Are Matters of the Heart*

Series Video:

<https://www.facebook.com/shilohbillings.church/videos/1771670642855073/>

I want to try a little experiment with us. You may have done one of these before, but just play along if you have heard this one.

Without googling or ‘phoning a friend’ can you

- \* Name the five wealthiest people in the world?
- \* Name the last five Heisman trophy winners (presuming, of course that you know what the Heisman trophy is!)?
- \* Name the last five winners of the Miss America Pageant?
- \* Name ten people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize?
- \* Name the last half-dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and actress?
- \* Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners?

My guess is that you came up with a few – and very likely they were the recent ones. The point, of course, is that none of us remember all the headliners of yesterday. And these are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. The awards tarnish. The achievements are forgotten. The accolades and certificates in the end are buried with their owners.

Now try this quiz.

- \* Name a few teachers who aided your journey through school.
- \* Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.
- \* Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile.

\* Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special.

\* Think of five people you enjoy spending time with.

My guess is you were able to name almost all of the latter questions. Why can we name these people, but not name all of the big things that get reported in the news. The truth is, it is because relationships are a part of heart felt living. Our hearts are this place where we say our emotions, passion and ministry flow from, and we remember with our hearts too. We remember with our hearts not like memories of the brain, but we learn what matters to full living and it is good and right relationships.

Our first scripture comes from Deuteronomy, known to be the book in the Hebrew bible that describes the covenant between God and the people of God.

Deuteronomy 6:4-6 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>4</sup> Israel, listen! Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord!

<sup>5</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds.

This message to the people of Israel was to remind them that right relationship with God, will assist them in have right relationship with others and the things in their lives.

This last week at our church we had an educational event called Demystifying Dementia here at Shiloh UMC. We were offered an insightful presentation by Highgate Senior Living, our neighbors across the street. We had people from our church and the community in attendance, and one of the most helpful facts many of us learned is that forgetting things is a natural part of aging. Which is good, because at 32 I know I forget things. This was however, a heavy relief to some of my friends who were working with parents or loved ones and were

concerned about them starting dementia.

After the presentation, we were invited to the education wing where the team had set up an experience where we would put on special glasses, headphones, gloves, and special inserts in our shoes. The goal of all of this was for us to experience the neuropathy in our feet, reduced mobility of our hands, the change in vision, and also the increase challenge with sensory overload that comes from dementia. I left the experience with tears in my eyes, because I only had the experience for 4 minutes, but some of our loved ones and neighbors have this experience everyday and all the time.

During the presentation, Wendy Wheeler, the director of Highgate mentioned to us the amount of patience a caregiver must have to engage effectively with someone facing dementia each day. I myself found it striking the ways in which we would have to work with someone who is suffering dementia, to support them in their spiritual walk in the church.

A few years ago there was a video circulating, you can still find it online.<sup>1</sup> In it Gladys who has severe Alzheimer's, and cannot normally communicate verbally, is being cared for by Naomi, a Jewish woman. Naomi through gentle and caring words discovers that singing the words of "Jesus Loves Me" to Gladys connects and a part of her brain allowing her to respond genuinely for a moment. We know music can reconnect the brain of those facing dementia, and Alzheimer's, but the beauty in this moment is the way you can see Gladys connect in a very human and heartfelt way again. My love of this clip is that Naomi has to know the songs of Gladys' life to be able to communicate well, songs not of her own tradition.

Relationships, caring for each other in a true way, one that comes from our love of God, is a powerful part of living a generous life.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCRDzRd8kgQ>

Joseph Briddock saved a quilt his family has had for a long time. He remembers receiving the quilt as a gift and being overwhelmed by its softness and completeness. It was something that would bring him comfort in a scary time. The scary time he encountered was the bombings in London during World War II. As a young boy he remembers clinging to this blanket when the sound of air raid sirens and bombs were around him. For him this blanket was and is a true treasure during a dark time in his life, and he is thankful for the very gift it continue to be in his life.

Material things can be important in our lives. They can bring us calm, and give us hope. However, our relationships with those things can become skewed if they stand between us and two other relationships. Our second scripture today comes from the gospel of John.

John 13:34-35 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>34</sup> “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. <sup>35</sup> This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”

Our scriptures point to us that God has ordered good relationships for us. First, we are to seek our love for God and God’s love of us. Second, we are to seek to love our neighbor as our self. Then other relationships can play a role for us when rightly ordered.

John Wesley knew of this right order when he preached in the 1700s in a sermon titled “The Danger of Riches.”<sup>2</sup> This is the same danger that the author Charles Dickens was warning us against in his famous novel “The Christmas Carol,” and through his famous character, Ebenezer Scrooge. The people of our past, in book and sermon remind us to be wary of losing good relationship with God, others, and what happens when material things come before the prior two.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-87-The-Danger-of-Riches>

Now I am going to say right now that talking about money in church, ranks up there on my favorite things, like talking about religion and politics at the Thanksgiving table. It isn't a hard topic because I don't believe in stepping into these challenges from the pulpit. In fact, I believe seeking healthy relationships is one of the most important teachings of the Christian faith.

The challenge is because of the stigma talking about money portrays, public speakers that stand in front of people talking about money generally want as much of your money as they can get. Televangelist preachers and TV sales people have set an interesting bar for publically talking about how to get away from your money. Surely the next thing you will buy will fix all of our problems.

Money is one of the most difficult topics to discuss in our culture, and in our relationships too. If you go looking for statistics on how much money affects marital relationships, you will be astounded by the numbers. One article listed money as the cause of nearly 57% of divorces. Another cited that it causes major stress in 1/3 of marriages in America.

This last stat was most interesting. "One in 5 Americans in a relationship say they have spent \$500 or more and not told their partner, and 6 percent maintain secret accounts or credit cards..."<sup>3</sup> Money and publically talking about money leads us to hide away our habits and become defensive about our behaviors.

Let's set aside just marital relationships. I have also seen money come between relationships of friends, relatives, and yes even church communities.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/02/04/money-is-the-leading-cause-of-stress-in-relationships.html>

The real question after hearing all of this is, “Why should we talk about money in church?”

The truth is and, I will say it every season of generosity we celebrate together, the church has to be a place to talk about healthy relationships with our money and our wealth. There are very few places in our world to find right relationship with wealth. Money causes as much pain and division for people. As Christians, we are called to provide a place for people to learn practices to help them find freedom in their lives around finances.

In two Sundays, we ask you to turn in your financial pledge to the church, this is part of the physical mechanisms of how churches work in our day in age. The hope is that instead of it appearing just like another person asking for money. That your pledge to the church and your giving to other parts of community becomes a part of a spiritual practice that is found in the Bible. A practice of giving with thanks the first fruits of our labor. I do believe that a good life can be found by living out this practice in our own lives, and that we will find blessing if we live this practice out.

This practice of giving of your first fruits, or of the first of your earning is what is known as the tithe. I have heard variances on the percentage your tithe should be, but in my study 10% continues to be the most accurate. The practice asks that you give 10% away, and not just any 10%, the first 10% you earn.

There is a course I teach in the churches I serve, alongside the local leadership. In the course, we work with people to deepen their discipleship and re-engage their faith. They work on the personal and social sides of their faith. Each course involves one entire class on financial wealth and right relationships with wealth.

Whenever we teach the week on finances, someone comes in and acts like it is confession. “I don’t give ten percent, forgive me.” And then says, “Do I really have to give ten percent to God?”

This is what I worry about when I share this message of money in church. People leaving here thinking or piling on more guilt because you think I am saying if you don’t give 10% we think less of you. On the contrary, as a church we need to strive to not let money be the influence of how we treat people.

In those classes I remind the person asking that the goal of the tithe of 10% is a lofty one, and that it takes time to get there. Crystal and I with a family of 4 are still working on reaching 10% of our gross income. However, after participating in studies like this and praying we knew it was something worth working towards. We began by sowing seeds of reaching this practice by starting with 10% of our net income. We were both fresh out of school with kids and student debt, but we knew it was a health practice. That 10% would be given away to the church, organizations and my favorite practice our monthly gratitude money.

Each month Crystal and I get a certain amount to share in the community. The only rule on that money is that it has to be spent on someone besides ourselves or our family. We can use it to support an organization, offer direct need to a friend, sponsor someone on a trip or retreat we think will help change their life, and I can only begin the list of ways we have used this resource. It isn’t a lot of money. When we started, it was \$30 a piece, or 6 Starbucks Coffees.

This is just one practice that began to sow seeds of generosity in our hearts and help us start growing toward a full tithe. We also spent time on a budget and found where we need to save and cover the cost of childcare. The point is we have at least an annual sit down conversation about money and also how to cultivate thankfulness for what we can share in the coming year.

I don't ever want to leave you thinking that sharing your money will instantly bring blessings to your lives, and I actually think this is an awful teaching of popularized faith today. The so called "prosperity gospel" teaches that if you give away money you will receive God's blessing to heal, make you wealthy or a number of other promises. This is just not true.

However, I do want to say that by working toward a practice of tithing, you will begin to see how this regular practice cultivates in your heart an eye for using your first fruits to sustain people beyond you. In turn I do believe God works with us to continue to see how our giving can help cultivate thankfulness in our own lives and the world.

The hard part of the practice of first fruits giving, of tithing and cultivating generosity is not knowing exactly how it will be used. This is where faith comes in.

The man associated with planting and growing many of the churches and Methodist ministries at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brother Van used to sing this verse from his beloved *Harvest Time*.

Another may reap what in springtime I've planted,  
another rejoice in the fruit of my pain,  
Not knowing my tears when in summer I fainted,  
while toiling sad hearted in sunshine and rain.

We need to be smart about where we sow our seeds of generosity, but we may never get to eat the fruit of our labors. If there is one message consistent throughout the scripture it is this message. Cain and Abel start this tradition by offering the first of their flocks and fields to God by literally burning their first fruits until they were ash and returned to the earth. It was a giving back. Then later the people of Israel let the first fruits going to support widows, orphans, and the poor.

This week I am going to invite you to take home from your bulletin, this example budget. My encouragement is that if you don't already do a budget, that you sit down and do one in your family, as a way of bringing right relationship to your wealth. If I didn't engage in this practice every year and through every life change, I would not encourage this so much. It has been a spiritual practice for me and my family, that has helped us keep the relationships in our lives strong, God, Others, and then resources.

The quilt that belonged to Joseph Briddock, the one who helped him feel safe during the bombings of London in World War II came out of a CARE package his family received when he was very young. CARE stands for "Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe." These were packages sent during World War II to Britain and other places. Most of the time they had basic goods like canned food, soap, and other necessities.

However, some Methodist Women from New York snuck a quilt inside of their package. Got to love the United Methodist Women for their willingness to break the rules and make a difference. This quilt made all the difference to a young boy during the bombings in London and it is an incredible testament of the kind of giving Wesley and Jesus' hoped we would do. It is giving that warms the heart, changes lives and help to transform the world into a better place. Giving the way Jesus' calls us to transports people out of sometimes hellish realities and gives them hope.<sup>4</sup>

We should applaud those women that sent that quilt. This quilt should give us hope that we have and continue to make a difference in this world through the smallest acts. Small acts of generosity that God turns into the biggest blankets of love. Living lives of generosity is being audacious like Jesus, and saying, "Give in the order of right relationships. Love God, Love Others, and everything else is just a

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34515388>

footnote.”

So, this week may you know that you are loved by God, may you know that loving others is the next richest part of your life, and may we all find right relationship with money. May we see all of this happen, so that we may feel God’s presence on our journey and experience God’s love each day of our lives.

Amen