

Shiloh United Methodist Church

John 3:16a;
2 Corinthians 8:24

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Extravagant Generosity: Declarations of the Heart

God, who shares all the things we need to live,
Thanks for your amazing sun that provides us with energy and life
Thanks for the elements rich in the soil that nourish the plants to life
Thanks for the bounty we have in our lives
and for being with us when it seems we do not have enough
As we journey together through your word and reflect on it's meaning,
Remind us of the love you have for us, that your love is enough,
Help us remember that thanksgiving rises when we realize the Good Life
is never about more things, but about more memories, more connection,
and more love in our lives.
May my reflections be true to your love and Spirit this day.
Amen.

There was a young girl who was sitting in church when the offering plate came by. In one hand, she held a quarter and in the other she held a nickel. Her parents watched her as the plate came to her. You saw how it works in worship earlier today, the plate is supposed to move quickly, so that it can move from the front to the back before the special music is up. The girl took some extra time when the plate got to her and just set the plate in her lap. Finally, she put in the **nickel** and picked up the plate and passed it on.¹

We are at the end of what we know as our season of generosity at Shiloh. This is a season where we ask one another to spend time learning about practices of gratitude, thankfulness and to recognize our

¹ Adopted from the book by Kent Millard, *The Gratitude Path*, Abingdon Press, © 2015, p. 69.

blessings. We do this by asking people to seek spiritual practices that help them to live out their faithfulness not just in their prayers and worship, but by sharing their blessings to make the world a better place. This understanding of sharing one's wealth is deeply rooted in the Christian community, but it can be a challenging topic.

This tends to be a hard season for preaching because the primary topic requires us to talk about money in church each week. However, I actually don't think this is the most challenging part of this season anymore. Instead I think it becomes more challenging to talk about how practices of thankfulness and gratitude can **actually** bring change in our lives.

I think sometimes the simple practices of thankfulness can come off as too simplistic or not sincere enough to transform the world. Yet if financial wealth can tear apart people's lives, then why couldn't generosity knit us together. I shared these stats about money and marital relationships in my sermon earlier in this series.

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.²

And I cannot stress this enough, because this is just stress in marital relationships where we are expected and at times must talk about money. Money in church relationships, in community relationships, and in other family relationships can stress and fracture the ties that bind us together. Last week, I shared with everyone that gratitude and practices of gratitude can actually shape our minds, that it is fascinating when present day psychology lines up with the practices of Jesus to remind us that God still works in the world. Not only that, but we learned last

² <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/02/04/money-is-the-leading-cause-of-stress-in-relationships.html>

week that generosity begins with small acts, not big ones, that help us to understand how God's grace works through even the tiniest gestures of gratitude to change the world.

In the devotional book that companions our series Robert Schnase shares this story.

A long-time member and proud grandfather stood at the baptismal font with his family for the baptism of his baby granddaughter. Another infant and their family were also there that day, as both children were baptized at the service.

After the service the two families intermingled in the sanctuary as they completed the ritual of getting pictures taken. First, the immediate family, then the extended families lined up for pictures. As this was all happening the mother of the other baby was trying to get something out of her bag, it just so happened the proud grandfather was standing right there and she asked if he would hold the baby.

As he stood there holding the child, several congregation members shared how adorable the child was. The grandfather shared each time, "Oh, this baby is not mine."

The following Monday morning the proud grandfather arrived at the church office. He said, "I want to change my will to include the church, and I want to talk to you about how to do that."

The pastor was shocked. He couldn't help asking about what brought this sudden decision. The grandfather said, "Yesterday I realized something while I was holding that other baby. I kept telling people that he wasn't my child, but then it dawned on me that he was part of my family, part of

my church family. I've been a member of this church for more than forty years, and in God's eyes I'm a grandfather to more than just my own. I've taken care of my own children with my will, but I realized I also need to provide for the children of the church. So I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children."³

Practices of generosity and gratitude are heartfelt declarations that God may do more with our gifts than we can possibly do on our own.

One of our scriptures for today comes from 2 Corinthians. A passage Paul writes as he sends one of his best leaders to a new church. In the passage he reminds his leader to practice gratitude in all actions, so that the people will find inspiration to be generous too.

2 Corinthians 8:24 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁴ So show them the proof of your love and the reason we are so proud of you, in such a way that the churches can see it.

I want to share a video with you of Kim Bridges Eacock who is a member of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, has a PhD and is a licensed financial planner. She has a few words to share with us about how planning financially to spend money on things that bring gratitude can make a difference not just now, but for our future and children.

Video can be found at: <https://vimeo.com/187577370>

Choosing how we use our resources, finding ways for good experiences, and seeking new practices that open us to gratitude are steps that help us

³ Schnase, R. C. (2011). *Practicing extravagant generosity: daily readings on the grace of giving*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon. Pg. 83

grow in our faith, in our skills as disciples of Jesus, and open us to what God is doing around us. It is when we are open to what God is doing around us that our most gracious actions will emerge and God can really work through us, so that each little moment can be one of grace, graciousness and the love of God.

One of my favorite stories that embodies this kind Spirit filled living is by Kent Nerburn, and his book *Make Me An Instrument of Your Peace* and I want to share it with you now.

Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living. One time I arrived in the middle of the night for a pick up at a building that was dark except for a single light in a ground floor window.

Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, then drive away. But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself. So I walked to the door and knocked.

"Just a minute," answered a frail, elderly voice.

I could hear something being dragged across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80's stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase.

The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware.

"Would you carry my bag out to the car?" she said. I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness.

"It's nothing," I told her. "I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated."

"Oh, you're such a good boy," she said. When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, "Could you drive through downtown?"

"It's not the shortest way," I answered quickly.

"Oh, I don't mind," she said. "I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a hospice."

I looked in the rear-view mirror. Her eyes were glistening.

"I don't have any family left," she continued. "The doctor says I don't have very long."

I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. "What route would you like me to take?" I asked.

For the next two hours, we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

Sometimes she'd ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let's go now."

We drove in silence to the address she had given me.

It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her. I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked, reaching into her purse.

"Nothing," I said.

"You have to make a living," she answered.

"There are other passengers."

Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly.

"You gave an old woman a little moment of joy," she said.
"Thank you."

I squeezed her hand, then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life.

I didn't pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had

refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away?

On a quick review, I don't think that I have done anything more important in my life. We're conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware – beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one.⁴

These kind of stories are the practices we teach in church, and work to live because we can see God at work in these stories. We can see gratitude practices, acts of generosity come alive in each step of these stories.

Our other scripture today is one many know well. However, I want us to focus on the first line because we often read past it. It is John 3:16, and today as you here just the first part of the passage I want us to remember the love that inspires us to generosity.

John 3:16a Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁶ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son

This week as you contemplate your generosity, today as you turn in your pledge cards to the church, in the future mornings as you rise from your bed to encounter your day remember one thing. God already made the ultimate act of generosity, he revealed a deep love that envelopes each of us and was embodied by Jesus for us to learn from.

So like the little girl in church that stopped the offering plate, take your time to pray over your generosity and find where your heart is calling you. Like the proud grandfather know that you are charged with loving all God's children in generous proportions. And as a lowly cab driver,

⁴ This copy of the story can be read here:

<https://www.personalgrowthcourses.net/stories/nerburn.cabride>

you are called to provide generous acts in the most unexpected moments of life.

May we this week find stories of gratitude that inspire us to be generous again and again. May you find in God a generous friend, and a loving creator. May you know that you are created as a child of God to be generous with the love granted you, and may you know the ultimate truth that generosity is what invites us into God's story for our own lives, a story where we get to declare with our hearts the joy of God's love.

Amen