

Shiloh United Methodist Church

The Generous Church: When We Get It Right

Luke 16:10-13

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We have spent the last month studying generosity as a church. We have spent time in the scripture stories of Jesus that call us to live generous lives for God's kingdom. We have learned that generosity can bring peace to ourselves and in turn support God's dreams when we can hardly fathom them. Today we are going to talk about what happens when we get it right as a church and people of God around generosity, what happens when we get it right.

This is a good time for you all to learn why I am a United Methodist pastor and not some other kind of pastor. Despite all our shortcomings, our mistakes, our strange way of doing things, I think United Methodists get following Jesus right a good share of the time. Not always a majority of the time, but as a church we work hard to understand the call of Jesus and to apply these holy teachings to our personal lives and our community lives. I am also biased because it's the church I have been blessed to be a part of my whole life.

That being said, I want to tell you a story about this man. This is Andre Cassule. Andre is a United Methodist Pastor in East Angola. I had the honor of spending an afternoon with him when he came to visit Montana. You see our churches in this area have had a long relationship of helping cover the salaries of Andre and his colleagues in Angola. Angola has been a nation ripe with conflict ever since the Portuguese colonial government left in 1975. Civil war supported by cold war USA and Russian

governments raged on and off for many years, eventually ending. Western Angola is fairly wealthy due to an oil boom, East Angola is rural and by and large poor subsistence based economies.

Now I'll introduce one other character here. Rev. Jeremy Scott was the pastor of Evangelical UMC here in Billings, in the earlier part of this decade and currently pastors the United Methodist Church of Johnstown, Colorado. Jeremy had the opportunity to visit Andre in his home community and learn about his ministry. He shares this story of Andre:

Andre is one of the few pastors in his area to have a college education. He had the opportunity to attend the United Methodist – Africa University in Zimbabwe. Most of the young people in his country can't afford college. There are no government backed loans like we have. It isn't easy to go to college in America, but it is near impossible without a lot of wealth in Angola. So, the church has decided to find a way to invest in their young people in what is a multigenerational plan.



Remember I said they were subsistence farmers. Jeremy goes on: *This means that most of the time they grow what they can eat. In an effort to help them earn money Andre has been helping teach people how to grow 2/3 food they can eat, 1/3 food they can sell and rabbits and chickens they can sell too. Some cash crops that can bring the community some revenue. This money is then being saved up to send the next generation of children, not to college, but to trade school. Hoping to train the next generation to be painters, carpenters, plumbers and maybe even electricians.*

The hope is that the next generation of trade workers will then have enough money from their careers to send their children to school. This is a multi-decade, multi-generational plan supported by the church. We have even sent a United Methodist missionary

who knows agriculture to go amongst the villages in East Angola helping them learn what crops to grow and how to grow them sustainably.

Our scripture today is the call on Christians to have our wealth not serve ourselves, but the kingdom of God. This is how Christians get it right with wealth and generosity, this is what Jesus says:

Luke 16:10-13 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁰ “Whoever is faithful with little is also faithful with much, and the one who is dishonest with little is also dishonest with much. ¹¹ If you haven’t been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² If you haven’t been faithful with someone else’s property, who will give you your own? ¹³ No household servant can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

I believe the first thing that happens when Christians get it right with generosity is we bless God and serve God. We find ourselves in line with God’s way and will even more when we open our hearts to generosity and use our resources to serve God.

I want to take us back to the parable I shared last week from John 6 and promised to share again this week. If you turn to John 6 in your Bible you will find the story of the feeding of the 5,000, and remember 5,000 is just men so for women and children let’s say 15,000.

Let me just remind us of the story first. Jesus is going along and a huge crowd is following him to listen to his teachings. It gets late and Jesus invites his disciples to find a way to feed the

crowd. To which Phillip says, "That would take a half a years wages." Then Andrew finds a little boy with 5 loaves and 2 fish and brings the boy to Jesus. Jesus then blesses the 5 loaves and two fish and asks the disciples to hand them out. Everyone gathered had enough to eat and they collected twelve baskets of leftovers.

I want to take a minute to do what our Jewish brothers and sisters do with scripture, it is called midrash. It is my own retelling of this story from John 6. It does not negate anything you understand about this story, and though I don't rely on the miracle of Jesus multiplying bread and fish, please know that I don't discount it happening.

Imagine for a minute Jesus walking along with crowds of people following him in the countryside. They come to a nice place and realize, "Oh, it's about dinner time." Jesus turns to his disciples who are tired, worn out, and as we all do when we get tired and exhausted, they begin to think, "Can we just get a break?" Jesus knows when they go to share the Good News of God's love in the world they will need to be prepared for moments like this. For there always seems to be hungry crowds needing to hear of God's love. Jesus takes this moment to teach the disciples the depth of generosity and love found in God.

"Andrew and Phillip, come over here," Jesus beckons to them. "Please go and figure out dinner for this crowd of thousands."

Phillip is a realist and grew up in a family who had money to do what they needed, they had some hired help. He knows how to manage money, and he knows how to estimate the cost of doing things. Phillip looks at the crowd and thinks to himself, "I have seen some pretty incredible feats, but I don't think Jesus realizes how low cost of an operation this is."

He turns to Jesus, “This will take half a year’s wages to get food up here for everyone, if you can front me the cash I’ll go to Jimmy John’s and order some fishes and loaves fast.”

Meanwhile, Andrew (This is Simon Peter’s brother), he is a fisherman by trade, and a pragmatist in his heart, sees Phillip fumbling with reality and figures Jesus really wants them to step up. They are disciples of Jesus and rabbis in his day don’t ask for things they don’t expect those learning from them to figure out. Now, Andrew grew up in a tough reality and had given up school early on. He doesn’t know how to estimate money and cost, but he knows what it takes to get nets together and catch fish, he can get things done. Then the pragmatist looks at the size of the crowd, and even Andrew decides, “This can’t be done.” He decides to make my point to Jesus by making Jesus laugh. He seems a boy coming back from the first century equivalent of a fast food joint with 5 large fries and 2 fish sandwiches. “Kid come here I need your food.”

Andrew pushes the kid towards Jesus with a smile waiting for some holy humor, “Jesus, probably can’t feed all these people, but maybe this boy with 5 orders and 2 fish could?” Jesus doesn’t laugh.

Instead Jesus gently asks for the boys dinner, blesses the food and asks the food to get distributed. As one loaf comes to an end, another in the crowd pulls another loaf out of their bag. People weren’t hiding the food, but Jesus knew that if he was generous with the food they found, then people would consider sharing from what they had too. As the fish run out, someone come back with a little more. Until everyone had enough. Not only that Jesus send Andrew and Phillip wandering and they fill up 12 baskets with leftovers. Andrew and Phillip came back inspired that while they couldn’t always perform miracles the way Jesus did, they knew they could encourage the miracle of

generosity by pragmatism and realism turning into faithful blessing and sharing.

I think there was a second reason Jesus taught his followers to be generous: he wanted you and me to bless others. Rather than gather our resources to ourselves, he wanted us to be a launch pad for other people. What do I mean by that? Take a look at this video. (Show “Sermon Video 4: Blob.”) This took place at a camp called Summer’s Best Two Weeks. This inflated raft-looking thing is the “blob.” One person sits on the end of the blob, and it’s not that much fun until a second person jumps off the top. When the second person lands in the blob, the first person is catapulted forward. Everyone is enjoying launching and being launched.

Now here is Tony. Tony understands the concept, but he is not wild about heights. He is hesitant to jump. He is like a lot of people with generosity. He gets the concept but doesn’t want to take the risk. Look at the other people. They are jumping and launching others. Soon they are getting launched themselves. Everyone is having a good time. But Tony is not sure about this. Then finally, reluctantly, Tony takes the risk. He launches someone else. Then he is able to get to a place where he is launched into the air. Look at his face. That expression is much better than when he was hesitating.

When you are generous with your church, you bless people. You launch others. That is what our church attempts to do.

Think about the way our church works to launch others: We work diligently through our Freestore to help people have household goods, and a meal every other Saturday, we provide youth and children’s ministry to help young people launch into their faith, we provide Messy Church to seek a way to launch families into new faith together, we do Aging Well to help launch people into living well in the second half of their life. We do sandiwiches, we do Bible Study, we do support of

Habitat, we give mittens away, we grow food for people, we are generous and when we get it right God does amazing things.

This launching is what our community of faith was planted here for, we were founded on the generosity of others hoping to spread God's love to this part of town. Hope our sister church in the heights was planted the same way.

I have seen the same look on some of our faces, that these kids have seen when they launch one another or are being launched. This joy is what generosity is all about....it is about generations of people feeling launched by the generosity of others.

About a month ago Sandi Rogina sent me this picture, and I think it says it all. A tiny seed of generosity with God's life can do some pretty amazing things.

This week I am going to ask you to do one simple thing, look for the joy of generosity. Watch for the smile when someone receives a gift of some kind. They happened in the story from John 6, they are happening in Angola, and they happen here at Shiloh.

Shalom and Amen my generous friends.