

**November 8, 2015**  
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This morning we return to our exploration of Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. Specifically, we will focus on the practice of Extravagant Generosity. Several Sundays ago we began the exploration of Extravagant Generosity by asking the question “What Does the Bible Say?” When examined various Old Testament and New Testament passages and several biblical themes began to emerge:

- The significance of tithing and of first fruits.
- The giving of money and other possession to God is expected to come from generous hearts rather than out of duty and obligation.
- How people use their material resources either honors or dishonors their relationship to God.
- Generosity aligns one life with God’s purposes.
- The pursuit of wealth does not foster a life rich in God.
- Giving serves justice and is a fruit of Christ’s transformation grace.
- The early Christian church practiced generosity as a fundamental part of their life together.

Today we will focus on the question: “What Is Extravagant Generosity?”

Robert Schnase offers the following response to that question:

*The practice of generosity describes the Christian’s unselfish willingness to give in order to make a positive difference for the purposes of Christ. Extravagant Generosity describes the practices of sharing and giving that exceed all expectations and extend to unexpected measures. It describes lavish sharing, sacrifice, and giving in service to God and neighbor. (EG, p. 17)*

In our Gospel reading for today, we see an example of what might be called extravagant giving. The story begins with a warning about the scribes. Scribes had a position of honor in the Jewish religious and cultural systems. A scribe in religious sense was one who was responsible for copying manuscripts and documents, especially the scriptures. A scribe in a cultural sense was one who was a bookkeeper, especially keep an account of what was owed to someone. Their work made them wealthy and they didn’t shy away for displaying their wealth and position of privilege. Yet Jesus warns his followers about them because their wealth was at the expense of others, in this case widows. “They will receive” says Jesus, “the greater condemnation” Rather than using their wealth and privilege for the benefit of others, they used it for their own benefit.

In contrast to the scribes, Jesus then tells us about a poor widow, probably one of those who were victims of the scribes greed. She brings two small copper coins and places them in the treasury box. Nobody would have blamed her for holding on to those coins because of her poverty. But Jesus says that she gave more than the wealthy contributors around her. She gave out of her poverty while they gave out of their abundance. Thought she gave less in terms of the economic value of her gift, she gave more because it all that she had.

Jesus is not telling us that we should give 100% of our income to the church. It isn't about the amount. It is however, about where our heart is in giving. The widow gave her whole heart, mind and soul while the others gave less.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul describes a group of churches that practice extravagant generosity. He writes:

*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” (2 Corinthians 8:1-4)*

This kind of generosity, begging for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of saints even in the midst of affliction, poverty and beyond their means typically seems foreign to us. It runs counter to everything that we are taught in American society. We tend to look at the world around us and fear that their might not be enough to go around, so it is our fear of scarcity that motivates us to make our financial decisions, and most certainly our decisions about giving. What Paul describes is a community that looks at the world around them and sees that there is plenty to go around. It is out of a sense of abundance, even in the midst of difficult times, that they are motivated to joyfully give beyond their means.

Schnase argues that *“Americans live in an extraordinarily materialist and consumerist society. We are immersed in a culture that feeds...the appetite for more and bigger, and fosters the myth that self-worth is found in material wealth and that happiness is found in possessing. (17)*

I would argue that it is this appetite that has led in part to the financial crisis that many find themselves in over the last eight years or so. Schnase writes that “Millions of couples struggle under oppressive levels of debt that strain marriages, destroy happiness, and intensify conflict and anxiety”. (17)

A study of people with different incomes asked “How much more income would it take for you to be happy?” Across the board people said that about 20 percent more income would ease their burdens, help them buy all they needed, and bring security. (18)

If out of our fear of scarcity, we are in a constant pursuit of more, we will never ultimately be happy. If we believe that satisfaction, self-definition, and meaning derive principally from possessions, we will never feel content. Schnase writes:

*“A philosophy based principally upon materialism, acquisition, and possessions is not sufficient to live by, or to die by. And at some point, followers of Jesus must decide whether they will listen to the wisdom of the world or to the wisdom of God.” (18)*

Through the lens of Extravagant Generosity, we understand the following theological principles:

- What Christians *earn* belongs to God and we should earn it honestly and in ways that serve purposes consistent with being followers of Jesus Christ.
- What Christians *spend* belongs to God, and we should use it wisely, no foolishly, on things that enhance life and do not diminish it.
- What Christians *save* belongs to God, and we should invest in ways that strengthen society
- What Christians *give* belongs to God, and we need to give generously, extravagantly, and conscientiously in ways that strengthen the body of Christ.

Consider for a moment how we have been the recipients of the generosity of others. The sanctuary in which we worship, the pews upon which we sit, the hymnals from which we sing, the classrooms in which our children gather for Sunday school, the fellowship hall and Café Grace, all of these things are the result of Extravagant Generosity.

We are the recipients of grace and generosity of others. We are the heirs, the beneficiaries of those who came before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience the truth of Christ for ourselves. And we owe the same to generations to come.

In conclusion, I offer those words of the author of Extravagant Generosity:

*Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit, a worthy spiritual aspiration. Generosity is the opposite of selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-absorption. To practice Extravagant Generosity requires self-control, patience, kindness, faith, and the love of God and neighbor. These built us up; equip us for life and for ministry; and foster perspectives and attitudes that are sustaining, enriching and meaningful. Giving changes both the giver and the church. (17)*

Thanks be to God. Amen.