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Sermon Series:
**“Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
V. The Practice of Extravagant Generosity”**

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

February 9, 2014

Micah 6:6-8; 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

Our series taken from the book by Robert Schnase titled *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* continues. In his book, Schnase suggests that specific elements of faith practices in congregations create and sustain a vitality that keeps them steadily growing in depth, in breadth, and in service to others. Thus far in the series, we have looked at “radical hospitality,” “passionate worship,” “intentional faith development,” and “risk-taking mission and service.”

The last of Schnase’s practices is *extravagant generosity*. Generosity is the giving of self and one’s resources freely and joyfully to others. Sometimes generosity may manifest itself in a singular act. Often we see this in bequests to religious and educational institutions that further a particular cause for the good of the community.

Yet more than a singular act, generosity is a character trait, something that is consistent, that comes out of a deep understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life and interaction. It is an understanding of our privilege and responsibility, and generosity is practiced in repeated acts of giving and self-giving.

In his book, Schnase focuses on the giving of financial resources and time.

In the autumn we have our stewardship campaign, as do most congregations. The focus of such campaigns is typically on funding the work of the church for the coming year. There are salaries to pay, buildings to maintain, and programs of nurture and worship and outreach to support.

In the secular world, one of the primary ways to encourage giving is to use an appeal to what is called “my fair share.” Are you familiar with the “my fair share” approach? Whether it is public radio or the United Way, I am asked as one of many in the community to join others in defraying the costs of these services. Some services I may utilize, other services are needed by those who cannot pay; either way, I am asked to do “my fair share.” That seems appropriate and logical.

And so people give some amount, and no one really knows whether it is my fair share or not. Often we feel compelled to give because the organization we work for places pressure to attain some goal.

Churches often use this same approach, including the pressure on its members to contribute. The results in the church at large are that members contribute about 1-2% of their income, which equals about \$1,000 per family unit per year.

For some, such an amount is beyond their “fair share” and is quite generous considering their financial circumstances. Yet for many, perhaps for most, this is not a stretch at all.

Did you know that the Bible offers a standard for giving? It is 10% of one’s income, and it is called the tithe. When we take our offering this morning, the liturgist will say something about receiving our tithes and offerings as an expression of our worship. The tithe is 10% of our income, and offerings are anything beyond our normal giving of the tithe.

Some of us are aware of the tithe or 10% as the standard, yet we have never reached that level of giving. It is a challenge. For most of us, it would require

significant discipline in our financial budgeting to reach that level of giving. Others of us have dismissed it as unattainable by anyone other than the wealthiest.

Others of us may not know of the standard of tithing and be shocked by it. Sometimes it is difficult just reaching the level of “my fair share” at 1%.

My observation in my own life is that my lifestyle will always absorb whatever increases my income may provide. No matter what level of my income, I need more and will use more. Our desires and wants are bottomless. For most of us, I dare say, our grasp always exceeds our means. At least that is true for me.

Americans are up to their eyeballs in debt with credit cards maxed out. That is one reason why the financial downturn of 2008 and the slow, anemic recovery have had such a devastating effect on our country. When times were good, it seems that even the most prosperous among us were living one or two paychecks from financial ruin. Many became accustomed to living in that fashion, and when the financial house of cards tumbled, our way of life went with it. And we are still in the recovery mode.

That reality of our present economic situation makes my reference to the tithe, to 10% of income, a fantasy, doesn't it? I don't think so.

For the vast majority of us, the goal of reaching the tithe would require us to rethink our entire budgeting and spending habits and priorities. It would require discipline. For couples and families, it would require conversation and discussion about our goals and the realities of what is most important. It would require us making choices that are inconvenient.

Perhaps most importantly, it would mean working toward something substantive, to reach for something beyond ourselves, beyond our well-being or convenience or our benefit. We can learn to be extravagantly generous.

My wife and I attended a marriage enrichment event some 20 years ago now. There were upwards of 100 people in attendance.

Since financial issues can be a major source of conflict among couples, the leader of the event asked this simple question: “How many of you have a written budget that you follow during the year?” Do you know that out of those 100 people, only one couple raised their hands.

How can people make informed choices if they don’t even know where and how their money is being spent? If you want to see where your priorities lie, just look at your checkbook or your online spending statements. That can be eye opening.

One principle for budgeting that I have heard is 10% for God’s work, 10% for savings, and the remainder for the other expenditures of living. John Wesley was a tither from an early age. Over the years, his income increased significantly while his expenses remain about the same. What Wesley did was to maintain his lifestyle so that he could give his increasing income away to others: to the church, to the needy, to mission work.

I have heard and seen many approaches among people to expand their generosity. One family chose to purchase a scaled-down car from what they wanted so they could give an additional \$50 a month to mission work. Over the course of 3 years, they were able to give \$1,800 to mission.

Others have remained in their present home rather than upsizing in order to give more. Others have downsized, and taken the savings to generate funds to give. Still others have worked diligently by maintaining their lifestyle at the same level and using income increases to give more.

Now tell me, why in the world would anyone do this? Isn’t it counter to all our cultural narrative to make more, to spend more, to have more? The person who has the most toys when he dies wins.

And yet so many who have bought into that philosophy remain empty and devoid of purpose no matter what they possess. We only possess what we can give away; the rest possesses us. It is not what we have that makes a life but what we give.

The primary motivating force for extravagant generosity for people of faith is the extravagant generosity of our God. “God so loved the world that God gave....”

God’s giving becomes our model for giving. And our giving comes in thankful response to the goodness of God.

What do we have that hasn’t been provided by the Lord? All things, certainly, but most assuredly life itself—health, the beauty which surrounds us, community of family and friends, all that is most significant to us. Our present life now to live with meaning and purpose, and the hope that God holds us in the future beyond this life through Jesus Christ—these are the gifts which attend us every moment.

I believe one of the worst motives for generosity is to give in order to get more “things” for ourselves. It is the worst kind of hucksterism which often takes place in religious communities. “God will bless you financially if you give to me, if you give to my ministry, if you give to our institution.” I think it is akin to playing the lottery: spend a little now in order to reap big financial benefits later.

The Apostle Paul in writing to the Corinthians speaks of God’s abundance which all has received. The gifts which are offered accrue to the *spiritual* benefit of not only the giver but to those beyond the giver to whom the gifts are directed. We as faithful Christians are called to grow, not in wealth or prestige or honor, but in the gifts of the Spirit, in justice, in righteousness, in the service of God.

A faith that has the symbol of a cross at its center cannot be possessed by the accumulation of riches. The Old Testament makes a similar claim. In the book of Habakkuk, there is this wonderful line: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vine; the produce of the olive fail and the field yield no food; though the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stall—yet will I rejoice in the Lord!

I will find joy in the God of my salvation! God the Lord is my strength!” Commitment to God transcends the vicissitudes of life.

What constitutes extravagant generosity?

In the Middle East, a village was cut off from supplies of food and water. The village was a mixed community of Christians and Muslims. The leaders of the church gathered together to figure out how they would support their families in this crisis. They developed a plan for sharing all their resources among the members of the church for as long as they could. Then one older woman asked, “What about our Muslim neighbors? Don’t we have responsibilities toward them?” A heated discussion broke out about taking care of their own members and caring for their neighbors. When they looked at their faith, and thought clearly about Jesus’ words and example, they unified. They would make no distinctions between themselves and their Muslim neighbors in sharing what they had.

That is extravagant generosity.

A man was attending the baptism of his granddaughter. Another child was being baptized at the same time. After the service, the families gathered at the front of the sanctuary for pictures with each family taking turns as they stood around the baptismal font. At some point, the grandfather was given the other family’s child to hold for a moment while the mother got out a bottle for the child. Someone walked up at that moment and asked if the child belonged to him. “Oh, no,” he replied, “this child belongs to the other family. I’m just holding him for a moment.”

The next day, the pastor got a call from this grandfather saying he needed to visit the pastor. The pastor was concerned.

Did something happen at the baptism that the grandfather did not like? The grandfather arrived and sat down.

He told the pastor about the incident of holding the other family’s child. “I’ve been thinking a lot since then. I said that the other child didn’t belong to me. But that isn’t true. Every child in this church belongs to my family.

“I have made arrangements in my will to support my family of origin. Now I want to make arrangements in my will to support all the children of this church. Can you help me do that?”

That is extravagant generosity.

When a widow puts all she has into the offering plate, that is extravagant generosity. When a couple works toward increasing their gifts to the level of tithing by thoughtfully managing their budget and purchases, that is extravagant generosity.

This congregation has been blessed by people who have given beyond themselves, who have given extravagantly. And in turn, this congregation has directed significant resources to others with great needs. That is extravagant generosity.

I think it is only fair that you know what one of the spiritual leaders of your congregation does in regard to the biblical standard of tithing. Since my youth, I have tithed. At times it was a challenge, yet in many ways, it was not such a challenge because tithing was always my practice.

When I got married, Mary and I committed to continue the practice of tithing. It was not because we were rich or had great resources—a young pastor and school teacher don’t generate much income! We have continued that practice all through our marriage and family life.

I think it is important that you know this. I say it not to make myself an object of admiration or an example. I do it for this sole purpose: you should know that in asking you to tithe, *I am not asking you to do something which I don’t practice myself*. And just because I do it, doesn’t mean it will be something you must do. However, I want you to consider it seriously, to pray about it, to move toward that goal if you are not there already.

Schnase suggests that the practice of giving intentionally and extravagantly creates an atmosphere of excitement and vitality within the church as it stretches way beyond itself in the mission of love and care in the name of Jesus Christ.

Can you imagine what more we could do, not merely what we could have as a congregation, but *what we could do for the work of Jesus Christ* if we practiced extravagant generosity in this community?

Primary resource and reference:

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2007