

Series: Generosity
Today: Grateful Hearts or Fearful Hearts
Text: Acts 4:32-5:11

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, November 4, 2007
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

A few weeks ago our Administrative Assistant, Marsha Crowe, handed me a letter. She said, *“I didn’t want you to open this alone.”* Any of you who know Marsha also know she is a woman of deep sensitivity who looks after the welfare of all of us here at First Presbyterian Church; members and staff alike.

It was the same letter which 22 other families had received; an invitation to the loved ones of deceased members of our church to be part of our All Saints celebration at the end of this service. As I read it, I began to weep. You see, my mother is one of those we will remember today. She died a year ago this coming Tuesday. She was 87 years old, and she was more than ready to leave this life for the arms of Jesus. So while my grief is not as acute as it was a year ago. Nevertheless, there are still times in the year when I miss her, and surely today is one of them.

I thought of Mom a few weeks ago when my colleague, Lou Butcher, was kind enough to use his column in the Sunday News to appreciate our ministry here at First Presbyterian and my ministry in the community. She would have been in her glory for there was nothing that gave her a greater sense of satisfaction than when either of her children were happy, did well in life, and received praise for their accomplishments.

Mom was a generous woman. She always had time to listen to others. She used her money to buy people things that they could not afford to buy themselves. She was the one who would take food to people in the neighborhood who were sick or grieving.

She would stay up all night with my sister and me when we were facing deadlines at school. She had a heart that was as big as she was, and it is that heart that we still miss to this day.

However, Mom had another side to her. It was a fearful side. It was a side that worried too much about what others thought of her; a side which kept her from attending the ceremony where my daughter made a life commitment to her partner because it was a same sex commitment, and she was afraid of what people might think; a side which felt like she was all alone in the world and had to do everything herself; and a side which never allowed her to sense how deeply she was loved and valued.

If the truth be told, my mother was not much different than most of us, and I am surely my mother's son. There is the side of us which can be incredibly generous, and there is a fearful side as well. Most of life is a balancing act between which side will dominate our response to the world in which we live and which side will be silenced.

Pastors love to tell the story about the bride who was so nervous on the day before her wedding to ask for advice as to how she could get through the ceremony. The minister assured her that everything would be fine: "When you enter the church tomorrow and the processional begins, you will be walking down the same aisle you've walked many times before. Concentrate on that aisle. When you get halfway down the aisle, you'll see the altar, where you and your family have worshiped for many years. Concentrate on that altar. Then, when you're almost to the altar, you will see your groom, the one you love. Concentrate on him."

The bride was relieved, and left to prepare for her big moment. The next day, she walked down the aisle with her chin up and eyes bright—a beautiful, confident bride. But

those along the center were a bit surprised to hear her muttering over and over: "Aisle, altar, him. Aisle, altar, him."

Grateful Hearts

This morning our text is a dramatic comparison between grateful hearts and fearful hearts. Grateful hearts are hearts that have learned how to share from their abundance in order to meet the needs of all.

Acts 4 ends with a description of the first century church as a community of people who cared for each other in a way that was a palpable expression of God's love for all people. If anyone had a need, the need was brought to the community and the community decided how that need should be met. There was a sense of responsibility for each other which awoke in them a real desire to share.

We who live in Lancaster County get a glimpse of this kind of a community through our Amish brothers and sisters. If there is a fire on an Amish property, the community comes together to rebuild what has been lost. People don't worry about insurance policies or hiring contractors. Everyone pitches in. Women prepare the food, and the men work to rebuild the structure which has been lost. It is a social event as much as it is a charitable act, but people never see it as charity. It is doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Advances in technology allowed us to communicate instantly at speeds and distances we never thought possible, but they can also contribute to a sense of isolation. We communicate on line, shop on line, and some people go to church via television and the internet. It is easy to withdraw further and further into our homes with only

electronic contact with one another and no sense of who we can depend on in a world which moves so fast.

Bruce Larson points out that in our history the Europeans who came to settle North America found it vast and unexplored. "Self-reliant" was the watchword, and the scout, the mountain man or pioneer, with his axe and rifle over his shoulder, became the national hero.

In the early days the government gave away quarter sections of land to anyone who would homestead, in order to encourage settlement. People flocked west from crowded cities and villages to have their own land at last. Before they could farm the land they had chosen, their first job was to build a sod hut to live in, and most families built them right smack-dab in the middle of their quarter section. The reason was obvious. People who had never owned land before had a new sense of pride and ownership. They wanted to feel that everything they saw belonged to them.

But that custom changed quickly. This chosen isolation did strange things to people. Occasionally, photographers went out to record life on the frontier and returned with photographs of weird men, wild-eyed women, and haunted-looking children. It was not long before most of these families learned to move their houses to one corner of their property to live in proximity with three other families who also lived on the corners of their property. Four families living together, sharing life and death, joy and sorrow, abundance and want, had a good chance of making it. (Source: Bruce Larson, [There's a Lot More to Health than Not Being Sick](#))

Grateful hearts are hearts that believe that all that they have been given is a gift from God to be used wisely to care for their family and share with the community to be

sure that no one goes without. Grateful hearts have learned how to share from their abundance in order to meet the needs of all.

Fearful Hearts

Fearful hearts are hearts which in some way believe that what God has given will not be enough. Fearful hearts operate out of an attitude of scarcity rather than abundance.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira may seem like a strange story to include about the early church. It is one of those stories which demonstrate the authenticity of the biblical record. If Luke, the author, wanted to show the power of the Gospel alone, he would have stopped at the end of chapter four and the power of grateful hearts.

However, because this story is included, we can speculate that Luke wants to let us know that not everyone believed in the practice of each according to their ability to each according to their need. This is a story about two people who withhold a portion of the sale of their land. Why? We don't really know.

Perhaps they were fearful that the social experiment of the church would fall apart and they would be left with nothing. Perhaps they were fearful that the social experiment would succeed, but they would not have all they wanted. Even though God had demonstrated that a lifestyle of generosity meant that everyone was taken care of, Ananias and Sapphira believed a lie that they wouldn't be cared for, and they told a lie to cover up what they had withheld. They were spiritually dead, with no sense of conscience, and it wasn't long before they were physically dead, as well.

Decisions like the one Ananias and Sapphira made don't happen all at once. They come as a result of a series of decisions which caused them to doubt that God would be faithful to them if they would be faithful to him.

Jim Collins, best-selling business author of *Good to Great*, writes about the crisis of business ethics in the wake of the bankruptcies at Enron and WorldCom. He describes how some business people went wrong:

Some business executives were a part of the malleable masses. These were people who, in the presence of an opportunity to behave differently, got drawn into it, one step after another. If you told them 10 years ahead of time, "Hey, let's cook the books and all get rich," they would never go along with it. But that's rarely how most people get drawn into activities that they later regret. When you are at step A, it feels inconceivable to jump all the way to step Z, if step Z involves something that is a total breach of your values. But if you go from step A to step B, then step B to step C, then step C to step D then someday, you wake up and discover that you are at step Y, and the move to step Z comes about much easier. (Source: Jim Collins, "Is the Economy Just Built to Flip?" Fast Company (October 2002), p. 88, 90)

It is in the same way that fearful hearts become fearful one step at a time when they refuse to trust that God, the giver of all that we have, will be faithful no matter what the circumstance of our lives.

Conclusion

So let me close with a question: Which heart are you? Are you a grateful heart who is willing to trust God with your future? Does your giving reflect your generous heart, or does it reflect your fearful heart? Are you hanging on to more than you need because you are fearful you won't have enough, or have you found the antidote of generosity which can keep you from being greedy? I pray that you will lay it before God and ask Him to lead you to a heart that is grateful.