

Series: Generosity**Today: Why Talk About Generosity?****Text: Matthew 6:19-24**

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, September 23, 2007

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Last Spring, when we gathered together as a staff to think about themes for the program year, we knew that this Fall we wanted to focus on one of the historic practices of the Christian church in our ongoing quest to build a Congregation of Intentional Practice. If you are new to our congregation in the last three years, you may not be familiar with some of the intentional practices which are part of the Christian heritage, but it is our belief that understanding them and interpreting them for the 21st century will help us become a more faithful church as we live out our vision: *Discovering the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the City*.

We began by giving an overview of the practices in the Fall of 2005, and then during different seasons of the church year we have focused on different practices - one at a time. We have talked about the practice of healing, and we have developed a healing ministry. We have talked about the practice of forgiveness, and people have taken risks in asking for and offering forgiveness from people they were estranged. We have talked about the practice of keeping Sabbath, and many of us are still wrestling with what it means to stop in the midst of an overscheduled world and listen for the voice of God.

This Fall we are focusing on the practice of generosity. We want to try and discover what it means to take seriously that everything we have is a gift from God, and the way we use our time, talent, and our treasure is meant to be a response to God's generosity of giving to us more than we could ask or imagine.

However, in making the decision to preach a sermon series on generosity, like all of the other practices we have examined, I realize that we will be dealing with strong feelings. We are going to be talking about lifestyles, and most of us have fallen into lifestyles which are pretty comfortable. It is easy to take offense when lifestyles are challenged.

I am reminded of a preacher who paid a visit to a farmer and asked, "If you had 200 dollars, would you give 20 dollars to the Lord?" "Sure would," said the farmer. Trying to make his point, the pastor continued: "If you had ten cows, would you give one cow to the Lord?" "Yeah, I would." "If you had ten pigs, would you give one of them to the Lord?" The farmer replied, "That's not fair. You know I have ten pigs."

It is easy to talk about being generous in response to the generous love of God in Jesus Christ. Easy, that is, until we have to apply the practice to our own lives. When we talk about generosity we are talking about more than just our money, though Jesus was not averse to talking about money. In fact, money was one of his favorite topics. Forty-two per cent of the parables (sixteen of the thirty-eight) were concerned with how to handle money and possessions. In the New Testament Gospels, an amazing one out of ten verses (288 in all) deals directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions.

This morning I would like to talk with you about why it is important to talk about generosity, and approach it not from the aspect of money alone, but in terms of a lifestyle. Our focus is from what we know as the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of

Matthew. For Jesus, generosity is a matter of the heart. It has to do with: Our Values; Our Attitudes, and Our Choices.

OUR VALUES

Our text begins with a warning: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy them, and where thieves dig through and steal. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

William Barclay observes that *“in the ordinary, everyday management of life it is simple wisdom to get oneself only those things which will last. Whether you are buying clothes, or a car, or carpet for the floor, or furniture, it is common sense to avoid shoddy goods and to buy things which have solidity, and permanence and craftsmanship wrought into them. That is exactly what Jesus is saying here...concentrate on things that will last.”* (Daily Study Bible, p. 239)

Jesus knew that things don't last. You can't take them with you when you die. They are not eternal. Even well made things will eventually be passed on to family members or sold at auction. So he warns us about placing our values in things.

Have you ever done the exercise where you pretend that your house is on fire and you have only five minutes to save the things that are most important to you? What would you want to be sure is out of your home? Let's assume that your family is safe, and you have only five minutes to save whatever you believe is important to you!

Technology has taken the edge off this exercise for some. Most of us would head for our computers because that is the place where we keep important information and things like pictures and other personal items. However, let's assume you get your

computer out to safety and you have three more minutes. Where would you go? What is the most valuable asset in your house that you would want to save?

The dining room set in our home is probably the most valuable set of furniture that we have, and we didn't buy it. It was given to us by a friend on the death of his mother. It was her dining room set, and she was a millionaire several times over. It was custom-made. It is far more valuable than anything we could have afforded, and it has lasted us for 35 of our 38 years of marriage. However, if there were a fire in our home, it would not be the dining room set that we would want to save. It would be picture albums of our family when our children were growing up, letters from Cherie's father to her mother when they were courting, the plaster of paris handprints of our children, the watch which belonged to my grandfather. What would be on your list?

Jesus said, "*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*" I assume that the opposite is true, as well, "*Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.*" We become what we value. If we value our relationship with family, it shows in the quality of the time we spend with them and the communication which is part of our life together.

In The Message translation by Eugene Peterson, he translates it: "*The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.*" Turn that one around, too: "*The place where you most want to be, and end up being, is where your treasure will be.*" Where do you want to be the most, and where do you end up being the most? Is it in quality time with those you love? Where does your relationship with God fit into the priorities of your day and your week? Or do you spend most of your time worrying about your financial security, or how others view you, or where you are in

terms of your career? Where are you investing your time, your energy and your money at this stage in your life?

The other night at our Session meeting we were presented with a financial future which is truly frightening for us as a church. Unless the members of this congregation demonstrate their commitment to Christ with a substantial increase in our annual giving, we will be forced to drastically reduce our program and our mission in 2008. The deficit numbers are very large this year because we have received no generous bequests from the estates of those who have died. This is what we have used in the past to support our budget, and without those bequests, the support of our ministry is totally dependent on those of us who are living.

As we heard this information, the mood of our meeting changed to that of doom and gloom. It was like a black cloud had entered the room. Then I looked to my left and saw one of our elders who had baptized all three of her children here, married two of them here, buried her first husband from here and last summer she began a new life with her current husband. It all took place right here. What dollar value do we place on that? What dollar value do we place on the raising of our children in the church? What dollar value do you place on a building which reminds you that you are not alone in the world and that you haven't been deserted by God?

You won't be hearing a lot about deficit budgets in this sermon series, because that is not what Jesus is talking about when he talks about generosity. If our hearts are with Jesus Christ, it will show in how we choose to respond to this year's appeal. As I told the Session, we have all the money we need in this church. The problem is that it is still in our bank accounts. In the end it is all about what we value. In the words of Jesus,

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” And the reverse is also true:

“Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.”

OUR ATTITUDES

So the first reason we talk about generosity is because it helps us to examine our values. It also helps us to examine our attitudes. Jesus said, *“If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be filled with darkness.”*

The concept which Jesus is teaching here is simplicity. We have heard the expression that our eyes are the window to our souls. The state of the window through which light comes determines how much light will get into our souls. If the window is clear, clean and undistorted, then light will come flooding in. If the window is colored or frosted, distorted or dirty, the light will be hindered.

We have all been around people whose life experience has caused them to become dark personalities, and we have all been around those who seem to light a room wherever they go. There are the people who see a silver lining in every cloud, and the people who can only anticipate a thunderstorm. There are people who embrace the diversity of our culture and there are those who speak the venom of bigotry.

We have a choice about the kind of attitudes we bring to life. An attitude of generosity helps us to be positive rather than negative; hopeful rather than despairing. If we believe we are the blessed of the world so that we might become a blessing to others, we approach the world differently than when we think life owes us something.

Generosity affects our attitudes.

Someone gave me a copy of a book called A New Kind of Normal (Thomas Nelson, 2007) by Carol Kent. This is a woman who obviously has light filling her life through an attitude of generosity. She writes:

- When despair tries to take me under...I choose life.
- When I wonder what God could possibly be thinking...I choose trust.
- When I desperately want relief from unrelenting reality...I choose perseverance.
- When I feel oppressed by my disappointment and sorrow...I choose gratitude.
- When I want to keep my feelings to myself...I choose vulnerability.
- When nothing goes according to my plan...I choose relinquishment.
- When I want to point the finger...I choose forgiveness.
- When I want to give up...I choose purposeful action.

OUR CHOICES

Finally, an attitude of generosity has an impact on the choices we make in life. We can either choose to believe that all that we have and all that we are is a gift of God, or we can choose to believe that we are what we make of ourselves.

The words from the passage are used for slaves and owners. If you were a slave, you had no choices in life; you did what the master told you. However, when you are a slave owner, the choice is always yours.

When we believe that everything is a gift, we approach making something of ourselves out of gratitude to God for our gifts, talents and abilities. When we believe it is all up to us, we become a slave to succeeding at any cost that we fail to count the cost, or we give up too easily because we believe we are not good enough.

We have a choice about the way we view the world, and Jesus says that we cannot serve two masters. We either have to serve God or we have to serve material success. It is a matter of priorities. It does not mean that you cannot become wealthy as a Christian.

It does raise the question of what we do with the wealth that God allows us to acquire. Do we use it for ourselves alone, or is it for the benefit of others, as well?

A few years ago I got an email from one of the families in our church which said to me that our children were learning to make the right choices.

“Our four-year-old son has really taken an interest in church since he has been able to come to a ”big” church, attend the children's story up front, and go to a real class. He has been particularly intrigued by the offering taken each Sunday morning during the education hour. Every Sunday on the way to church, he asks us for some money for the offering. Lately we have been assigning him little chores around the house; upon completion, he gets some change and puts it aside for his offering.

Last week, he approached me with several dozen colored "poker" chips (which are part of a counting game he got a few months ago). He told me that he wanted to buy some apple juice. I told him that it would cost him three chips. He promptly forked the chips over. Later, he wanted to buy some pretzels; they cost two chips. A stick of gum is worth one chip. And so on. All week long, he really enjoyed spending his chips to obtain items he wanted.

On Sunday morning, after he was dressed, we thought he went downstairs to watch some cartoons while the rest of us got ready, which is his usual routine. Unbeknownst to us and while waiting for us, he filled up his little pockets with every green "poker" chip he had (probably about fifteen of them). When Janet requested that the children put their offering in the bag on their way out of the general assembly, his mother found him emptying his pockets of the green chips. When she inquired, he told

her that he wanted to give all of his green chips to God. It was one of those moments we will long cherish.”

I am so grateful to be part of a church which teaches generosity to our children. I did not learn it in my home, and what I know of it comes from my contact from people just like you in churches like this one who have shaped my life by encouraging me to give and give generously.

CONCLUSION

Why talk about generosity? Because it is about the response we make to the generous gift of God’s love in Jesus Christ. It affects our values, our attitudes and our choices, and it is a perfect vehicle to evaluate where we are in our journey of faith. If we believe that everything we have is a gift from God, then the question remains. What are we doing with all that God has given us?