

Extravagant Generosity

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Part 5

2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 21:1-4

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

Today is sermon number 5 in a series on the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.

Over the previous four Sundays we have focused on...

Radical Hospitality,
Passionate Worship,
Intentional Faith Development,
and Risk-Taking Mission and Service.

We have also held classes to discuss further the implications of the Five Practices for our church—I hope you will join us for the final class today.

I hope also that this has been a helpful discussion of the practices that enable a church to excel in ministry.

Most of all I hope this series has given each of you a fresh vision of what FPCP can do and be in the coming years.

II

Today we conclude the series with Extravagant Generosity.

Fruitful congregations practice extravagant generosity and committed followers of Christ give extravagantly to the work of God's kingdom.

Now maybe you are thinking,

“I don’t think Pastor Stan has seen the news lately. Maybe extravagant generosity would work in times of prosperity. But hasn’t he heard—we are still in an economy that isn’t growing very fast, too many people are still unemployed or underemployed, an poverty in Jay County is really high. People are anxious about the presidential election...Is this really the time to be focusing on extravagant generosity?”

And the answer is, yes, there is no time like the present,
because as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:7...

But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (NIV)

Fruitful congregations are made up of disciples who excel in the grace of giving.

Such churches develop a culture of extravagant generosity that enables ministry to thrive.

Fruitful congregations focus on four key stewardship concepts:

- 1. Priority.** Our giving to God is our first gift, the “first fruits” of our income, a commitment we make before anything else is considered.
- 2. Proportion.** God doesn’t care how much we give, but how much of ourselves we give to God.

The dollar amount doesn’t matter,
but the proportion of income does.

The biblical norm for proportional giving is the tithe, or 10 %.

Bishop Robert Schnase writes,

“Vibrant, fruitful, growing churches practice Extravagant Generosity. These churches teach, preach, and practice proportional giving with a goal toward tithing.”

3. Consistency. Giving is done on a regular basis, because the church needs support day by day, week by week, month by month.

Consistency of support allows us to be better stewards of our resources and more effective in reaching out to our community.

4. Joy. Giving is a spiritual pleasure,
 an opportunity to please God,
 to support the church we love,
 and to express our faith by our giving.

Paul reminds us *“God loves a cheerful giver.”*

Giving is one of the joys of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

So how do we generate the spirit of extravagant generosity in our lives?

How can we approach this practice in a way that will make this congregation more fruitful?

III

First, extravagant generosity is a response to the goodness of God.

Long before any of us thought about being generous,
 God’s generous love, grace, and mercy were poured out on us.

God created the world...
 made a covenant to be our God...
 loved the world so much he gave his only Son...

God forgives our sins...
and makes a way for us to inherit eternal life.

How could any act of generosity on our part approach the generosity of God?

Simply put, it won't.

We can never out-give God.

But we can respond to the extravagance God has already shown us by giving with extravagant generosity.

Consider this example:

Mike and Julie refinanced their house several years ago and were able to cash out what for them was a large sum of money.

It was coming up on Christmas and Mike had been studying the birth of Jesus and the great gift God gave the world in Bethlehem.

In his heart Mike began to have a desire to do something extraordinary in response to God's gift. When he talked to Julie about it, he discovered that she had been thinking the same thing.

They decided they would give the savings from the refi to help other people, and they felt great joy and freedom in deciding who would receive their gifts.

Mike said, "We had a blast giving it away and living the revolution of Christmas as we celebrated the giving of God's Son."

Such extravagant generosity is the only fitting response to the goodness and generosity of our God.

IV

Second, extravagant generosity requires a belief in the abundance of God.

If God is limited in his resources to bless his people,
then it would be wise to hang on to what we have.

It would be foolish to give it away because there might not be enough.

But if our God is truly the infinite, unlimited, all-powerful Creator of the universe,
then we don't have to worry about God running out of resources.

There will always be enough.

God has plenty to meet our needs.

And if God needs more of anything—
well, God created the entire universe out of nothing, didn't she?

In his book, *Sacred Economics*, Charles Eisenstein writes:

“We live in a world of fundamental abundance, a world where vast quantities of food, energy, and materials go to waste. Half the world starves while the other half wastes enough to feed the first half. In the Third World and our own ghettos, people lack food, shelter, and other basic necessities and cannot afford to buy them. Meanwhile, we pour vast resources into wars, plastic junk, and innumerable other products that do not serve human happiness. Obviously, poverty is not due to a lack of productive capacity. Nor is it due to a lack of willingness to help: many people would love to feed the poor, to restore nature, and do other meaningful work but cannot because there is no money in it. Money utterly fails to connect gifts and needs.”

If the resources are there,
if the production is there,

if the willingness is there,
then what seems to be the problem?

Is there really not enough...
or do we simply perceive a context of scarcity?

The late Stephen Covey explained this contrast in his best-selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

He contrasted the mentalities of scarcity and abundance.

The scarcity mentality is always thinking that our resources and supplies are limited.

Therefore we keep...
we hoard...
we are reluctant to share,
because we are not sure that we will have enough to meet our needs.

On the other hand, an abundance mentality sees the world as an unlimited source of life.

There is always enough and more for everyone to prosper,
especially if your primary resource is an infinite God.

Living with an abundance mentality is a more effective way to live.

It is also a more biblical way to live.

Our scripture reading from 2 Corinthians makes this point clear:

“God is able to provide you with every blessing, in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” (9:8)

When we see our lives as a gift of God,
 then we can trust that God's resources are always abundant.

V

Third, we can practice extravagant generosity because we trust in the providence of God.

Not only are the resources of God abundant,
 but in God's great love for us,
 God wants us to have what we need to live the abundant life.

God wants to bless us and meet our every need.

Again Paul writes,

“He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.” (9:10-12)

Give yourself to God,
 trust in the providence of God,
 and like the old gospel song says, “God will take care of you.”

Practicing extravagant generosity puts us in a position to receive the abundant providence of God.

And the practice of extravagant generosity on a church-wide level positions a church for greatness.

Bishop Schnase writes:

“The practice of Extravagant Generosity also changes churches. Churches that nurture proportional giving and tithing among their members thrive. They accomplish great things for Christ, offer robust and confident ministry, and have the resources to carry out ever new and helpful missions. They escape the debilitating effects of conflict and anxiety that are the fruit of a scarcity mentality. They prosper for the purposes of Christ and make a difference in the lives of people.”

Extravagant generosity enables us to trust in God’s providence as we create a culture of excellence in the church.

VI

Winston Churchill once said,

“We make a living by what we get, but a life by what we give.”

Those who have given of themselves in the past are the ones on whose shoulders we stand today.

Such generosity is the foundation of every church in the land.

There are many generous people in this congregation who faithfully give of their time, energy, and resources.

But the fifth Practice of Fruitful Congregations is not generosity,
but *extravagant generosity*.

Is it possible to be generous and still not meet the level of extravagant generosity?

When we are talking about extravagant generosity, scripture places the emphasis on something other than just the amount that is given.

Let me illustrate: Warren Buffett has pledged to give away almost all of his wealth by the time he dies

In July he gave almost \$2.9 billion in Berkshire Hathaway stock to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and four family foundations run by his children.

Does Warren Buffett's giving meet the standard of extravagant generosity?

Well, according to Forbes, with those gifts Buffett's net worth is down to \$65.6 billion dollars, the third wealthiest person on the planet.

Somehow I think he will manage to scrape by.

On the other hand, in Luke 21 Jesus extols the faith of a poor widow who gives two almost worthless coins to the Temple treasury because it was all she had.

The widow's offering was extravagant because it required complete trust that God would provide for her needs.

Warren Buffett is generous—there is no denying that.

But the poor widow is the one who embodies extravagant generosity.

She will not let her poverty define or limit her,
 but instead uses her generosity to express her trust in the...
 goodness,
 abundance,
 and providence of God.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines extravagance as...

“exceeding the limits of reason or necessity; going beyond what is justifiable; lacking in moderation, balance, or restraint.”

The poor widow mirrors the extravagant love of God for his creatures and creation.

Ultimately, extravagant generosity is not so much about our money—

it is about our hearts.

When Jesus said, “*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Matt. 6:21; Luke 12:34),

he was saying that how we spend our money and resources reveals...
 what kind of people we are
and what kind of people we will become.

It is not so much about supporting this church,
 as it is about doing the Kingdom-building work of Jesus Christ.

It is about expressing our faith through money, time, love and prayers.

If, as they say, money talks, what does your management of it say about you and where you place your ultimate trust and security?

The first question we must always ask is,
 “*What is God calling us to do?*”

Only then can we ask,
 “*What resources do we have?*”

When considering any new venture in ministry, don’t ask,
 “*How much will it cost?*”

Instead ask,
 “*How many will it reach?*”

Extravagant generosity changes us and it changes churches.

Just as with individuals, churches can become inwardly focused on their own survival.

Extravagant generosity enables us to keep the focus where it belongs:

on God and on how, by growing in the grace of giving,
we can make a difference for Christ in our community
and in the world.

VII

The great 19th century missionary to Africa, Dr. David Livingstone, once arrived at the edge of a large territory that was ruled by a single tribal chieftain.

According to tradition, the chief would come out to meet him, and Livingstone could go forward only after an exchange was made.

The chief would choose any item of Livingstone's personal property that caught his fancy and keep it,
while giving the missionary something of his own in return.

Livingstone had few possessions with him, but he dutifully spread them all out on the ground—

his clothes, his watch, and even the goat that provided him with milk (since chronic stomach problems kept him from drinking the local water).

To his dismay, the chief took the goat and, in return, gave Livingstone a carved walking stick.

Livingstone was upset. What could a stupid walking stick do for him compared to the goat that kept him well?

Then one of the local men explained:

“That’s not a walking stick. It’s the king’s very own scepter, and with it you will find entrance to every village in our land. The king has honored you greatly.”

Wherever Dr. Livingstone went from that time on, the doors were open to his party—and to the Gospel.

VIII

Friends, extravagant generosity opens up the Kingdom of God for our exploration.

If you respond to the goodness of God,
if you believe in the abundance of God,
and if you trust in the providence of God,
you can practice extravagant generosity.

It will enable you to experience the joy of giving.

It will make this great congregation,
First Presbyterian Church Portland, Indiana,
a fruitful congregation.

Amen.

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