



“Generosity in Uncertainty”

Texts: 1 Timothy 6:17-19; John 13:34-35

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Today, we are continuing to explore what it means to be generous, and what generosity means for us as God’s people. The Greek word for generosity is ἀπλότης (haplotēs) which translates into English as, openness. My Greek lexicon goes on to further interpret haplotēs as the state of giving things in a manner that shows liberality; sincerity, the moral quality of honesty of purpose or motivation. If you remember just one thing about generosity today, I want you to remember that generosity is equal to openness.

Being open is difficult when you lack trust. Most of us will not divulge our vulnerabilities with another person unless we know that they will not judge us or look down on us. Openness requires safety. It is the way we are made. We are created to close up, to get defensive when we feel exposed or if we suspect that we are unsafe emotionally, physically, or mentally. This is why when we go through a crisis or trauma that we often shut down in various ways. It’s a part of our human experience to be upset when we perceive danger, or when our lives go sideways and we are faced with the unknown.

Too many Christianities are guilty of magical thinking in the midst of crises and traumatic events. They offer toxic positivity, and empty promises to others and to themselves when pain, discomfort, and trouble comes. At the most inappropriate times, we have all heard things like, “The Lord will provide”, “All things work together for good...”, or “I can do all things through “a verse taken out of context”, or maybe we’ve even gotten a “bless your heart” or two. Sometimes, there is no silver lining. Sometimes all that we can process and feel is rage, anguish, weeping, and terror.

When fear, anxiety, and uncertainty become our guide under pressure instead of openness, love, and hope, it only compounds the pain for ourselves and for others. Following our fears, anxiety, and uncertainty instead of being guided by openness, leads us to look inward and close ourselves off from the world. Being led by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty instead of openness and trust in God's faithful presence causes us to turn to self preservation, to stockpile our own resources, and become isolated.

If it's natural human instinct to defend ourselves and close ourselves off to protect ourselves during crisis or trauma, how can we possibly react differently? In truth there are no easy answers, but the way out of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty is to open our hearts, not close them. This reminds me of when I was a child. My siblings and I rode bikes around the neighborhood all day in the summer, and every summer, our knees were covered in road rash. I remember going into the house crying, with my burning stinging bloody knee full of dirt and gravel, and my dread of getting the help that I needed. The last thing I wanted when my knee was already burning and stinging was to feel more burning and stinging, which is exactly what happens when you pour peroxide onto a wound. We open ourselves up to this burning, stinging care because we know that it will save us in the long run from an infection, and it will start to feel better once the dirt and debris has been washed away. In that same way, we can inject reasonable hope into the darkest of times, if we will gather our courage to offer our raw and bloody wounds to God and to each other for healing.

Lifting our wounds up to God, opens our hearts and our eyes to hope and love, allowing us instead of hiding our eyes to turn and see the world and each other. Faith and love opens our hearts and empowers us to stand with others in their pain and bear witness to their suffering no matter how horrific or painful it may be for us too. We will know we are following Christ, when in the midst of every horror, we think about the needs of others, rather than our own needs. That is the fruit of generosity.

I'm reading this great book by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, called, *Bearing the Unbearable*. The topic of her book discusses trauma, the gospel, and pastoral care. She offers three important observations that support us in being open during uncertain times.

Self-Empathy: First, we cannot be open to the world if we do not have compassion for ourselves. How can we possibly bear witness to the suffering of the world when we are not able to be cognizant of our own pain and our own needs. It is a spiritual discipline to practice self-empathy.

I stopped watching the news in 2016, because I couldn't bear it. I closed myself away, and it kept me out of the loop, unable to empathize with others who were facing the chaos with eyes wide open. It left me isolated from the struggles of the world around me, and the people that I love, including my spouse. Looking back, I realize that I did that not because I didn't care about what was happening in the world or how

it was impacting my family and friends, but because it hurt my heart so much to see injustice after injustice play out on the news. I needed justice. I needed people to care about other people, and I knew that I wouldn't find that on the news. So I closed up.

I missed the opportunity to take that pain and bear it before God knowing that in God's grace, and love, and kindness towards me, God would have met me in solidarity taking my pain, opening my heart, giving me courage, and turning my inward thinking outward to the needs of those around me allowing me stand in solidarity with them, and facing whatever would come with hope and with faith.

Lament: Second, we need to believe that God welcomes our prayers of lament. Hunsinger writes, "we thus facilitate healing when we help the afflicted cry out their sorrow, rage, and tears to God. Instead of protecting themselves against the pain, the afflicted are encouraged to go down into it, clinging to God's promises as they do so." (p. 17) We come before God aware of our own limits, of our own brokenness, and of the world's brokenness and we grieve, we lament. The 13th century mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg, penned these words so beautifully, "God, I will tear the heart of my soul in two and you must lie therein. You must lay yourself in the wounds of my soul." When we are able to pour out our pain before God and are allowed an untempered descent into the raw emotions of grief, then hope and trust may be restored. (Hunsinger, p. 20)

Community/Relationships: As we practice self empathy, as we pour out our grief in our element to God, our equilibrium is restored, when we share that journey with the people who love us. Our Gospel reading today instructs us to love one another. I think the most powerful demonstration of love that we can offer another human being is the gift of presence. It is a gift of immeasurable value, to be present and be open to another. I hope that you are able to be present with your immediate families first, but consider the ways in which you offer the ministry of your presence for each other here in this place and now.

It is the practice of self-empathy, it is creating space to lament, that frees us from fear and anxiety, and opens our hearts to love one another. We may never be faced with a situation of life and death in how we give ourselves to each other in faith community, but we may be asked to offer the ministry of presence, to be a safe non-judgmental compassionate friend who will bear witness to and listen to depths of another's pain and their story. Sharing that deeply requires a lot of trust, vulnerability, and spiritual maturity and this is what we are called by God to do. We are meant to live out our faith and our doubts in relationship with others. It is here that we are strengthened and restored.

Hosting the book study at our house these past few weeks, and spending time with all who have shared that space with Kathryn and I has been so rewarding and restorative. It reminded me of how much separation we have from one another since the pandemic began. It reminded me that we can't build trust and friendship with each other without spending time together. It takes time to build the kind of trust and friendship that makes it safe for us to share with others the hardest parts of our lives.

And as we are in a transitioning time as a community, I want to encourage you even more to be intentional in building community with each other, every single day. Invite someone out to eat after church, or to meet for coffee during the week. Find ways, create opportunities to get to know each other better. Start a fellowship group based around a mutual hobby or recreation. Seek out conversations before and after worship. Volunteer to help with an activity. I met more people at First Pres decorating for Christmas than at any other time as a member of this congregation.

I Timothy 6: 16-17 tells us that we are to be generous, and ready to share, not storing up treasures of a larger membership roll or attracting families with children, but generous with our open hearts, our extravagant and sincere welcome, of being who God is making us and letting that openness build the foundation of a good and great future together.

Trusting in the goodness and faithfulness of our God that this congregation has known for 200 years, let us be led by love who is God, and by God who is love, and let love open us up to the world and to each other with generosity. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, mother of us all. Amen.

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