



“Principles of Generosity”

Texts: 1 Corinthians 8:1-12, Matthew 6:33

a sermon by Jerusha Van Camp

October 29, 2023

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Today, our focus is again on generosity. This week pledge cards will be mailed out, and I hope that you are prayerfully listening for the heartbeat of God, and responding to God’s heart as God is leading you to give.

Your giving provides for important and exciting things like hiring a new permanent pastor, feeding hungry people in our community, providing exciting musical opportunities, times of fellowship, and the unexciting things like fixing water leaks, upgrading livestream technology, and paying the regular monthly bills. Our participation in monetary giving to First Pres will lend itself to the continued mission of this congregation and to the continued history that this building points to. Our giving sets the trajectory for how expansive that ministry and our witness will be for generations to come.

I often wonder what the world would look like if Christianity had not become the religion of the empire in the 4th century. The New Testament book of Acts chapter 4 testifies to a way of life in the early church that is radically generous. No one claimed private ownership of any possessions. Everything they owned, they held in common. There was not a needy person among them. Those who owned houses and land sold it and brought the proceeds from those sales to the church, and it was distributed to everyone who had need of it. Not only was there a spirit and a desire in the hearts of the early church to be generous, but there was also a sacrificial commitment to live into the Christian ideals of equality and equity.

Today’s text from 2 Corinthians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. Paul founded this church in Corinth, and he was its pastor for about 18 months. This was a church that he had a personal relationship with.

In the letter, Paul is speaking to the Corinthian people about a generosity campaign to provide a relief fund for the poor believers in Jerusalem. Corinth was one of the wealthiest cities in all of Greece, and so this congregation probably had some means. In his plea for financial support, Paul is operating on the same principal and the expectation that we can read about in Acts, that those who have much, should give to relieve the burden for others in their community who do not have as much.

Paul's methods are not much different from today's methods as he made his financial appeal to the congregation in Corinth. There are similarities that can be noted when we consider contemporary telethons and financial campaigns. He holds up the churches in Macedonia as an example to challenge the church in Corinth to give. Paul emphasizes the grace of God that was shown in their giving, especially because the Macedonian churches themselves were in great distress and experiencing extreme poverty, and yet they gave.

Though Paul is emphasizing the financial lack of the Macedonian congregation in comparison to the congregation in Corinth, Paul is not ignorant of the fact that not everyone in the church at Corinth had a lot of means. Remember, he pastored that church for 18 months; he knew that there were many within the Corinthian church who were also experiencing extreme poverty. Historic evidence indicates that 90% of the Roman Empire lived at, near, or below the poverty level, so this was not just an easy ask to a bunch of rich folks who could afford to part with their wealth. There was a varied mix of financial backgrounds and abilities.

From Paul's letters and the examples of generosity that we see in the Book of Acts, there are three principles that rise to importance. The first principle that is consistent with all of these examples indicates the relationship between generosity and sacrifice. These early church examples challenge us just like Paul is challenging the Corinthian church. He's not just asking to take up an offering, he is challenging them to make a sacrifice, and he is well aware of how challenging that sacrifice will be for some.

Sacrificial giving is at the heart of our faith. After all, Jesus humbled himself, even to the point of death, making the ultimate sacrifice. Sacrificial giving is not calculating how much expendable income we have and giving a portion of that. Sacrificial giving is not giving away unwanted material belongings that we no longer need. That is too easy.

I think about the sacrifices that have been made along the way to birth this congregation, to build this building, and to make this progressive faith community a reality. It started with the hopes of 12 people who first gathered in a makeshift wooden structure to worship God in what would become Evansville, Indiana. I think about how their sacrifices, their generosity and how their investment grew through struggles and through time, eventually constructing this space in 1874 in which we worship today.

This congregation continued to make financial sacrifices to build additions like the addition in 1936 that provided us with the Rose window, and this lovely stencil on the walls. An addition in the early 2000s provided us with a lobby and bathrooms, a nice kitchen, and made improvements to Fellowship Hall that make the space a place to worship, as well as break bread together.

Along the way there has been the expansion of mission. Somewhat invisible at times within the walls of this church, like our investment in every child and teenager that we have had the privilege to serve, the investment in the birth of the Ark Crisis Nursery, the Little Lambs store, River City Pride, the installation of the wonderful Fisk organ, the hiring of our fantastic staff, and supporting other community organizations and ministries who got their start in this building and who are now supported by this congregation's commitment to mission. Everything we know about First Pres, everything that has been invested in this building is a product of the sacrificial generosity of generations of faithful and flawed Presbyterians.

The second principle at the heart of generosity is love. Sacrificial generosity is bad news without love. Sacrificial giving is not about giving until it hurts, but about giving because we believe in something so much that our hearts are compelled to find ways to do more. The Apostle Paul writes in his letter, that the extent of our generosity is a test of that love, of our faith and of our commitment to live like Jesus in how we show our love to each other and to this community.

The Apostle Paul is the one who lifts up this precedent of sacrificial giving because of love. He praises the generosity of the poor congregation in Macedonia, astonished that even during a severe ordeal of affliction their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed into a wealth of generosity. Not only did they give according to their means, and beyond their means, they begged earnestly for the chance to partner in this ministry.

Giving is not a command. What you give should be given voluntarily, from a place of love, and it should spark joy. It is not how much you can give, or what you give, it's about what is in your heart to give. "For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have." (2 Cor. 8:12) Generosity and giving is about the attitudes and motivations of our heart.

The third principle of generosity is liberation. At the heart of liberation theology is knowing that God stands with the oppressed. God stands with the poor. God stands with the marginalized. And if we are followers of Jesus, then we too will stand with the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized. This is where generosity tests us, it tests how far we are willing to go to express our love and our commitment to be who God has called us to be. Generosity tests our willingness to follow Jesus' example of humility and of his becoming poor for the purpose of expanding God's kingdom of love, of peace, of justice, and of liberty.

If you're asking yourself, how does giving money to First Presbyterian Church liberate anyone? How does helping pay the bills and fix the leaky roof help anyone in a way that matters? It matters because it shows this community that there is something here worth believing in, and that there is something here worth fighting for. It matters because this congregation loves and accepts trans, gay, lesbian, and non-binary people just as they are. It matters because we see the divine spark of God in the face of every single human being, period. It matters because this a healing place for those who have been driven out of other churches because they refused to conform and align with oppressive ideologies and attitudes, malign the poor, the mentally ill, and the immigrant. The existence of First Presbyterian Church in Evansville, Indiana matters because we have chosen not to turn away from the pain of the world, but to face it head on to root out racism, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, misogyny, and every system that denigrates human lives.

Our giving should not be based on our assessment of how well we think we are doing today, and right now. If we're honest, we have failed more than we have succeeded. Our giving should be based on what God can do in and through us, despite ourselves. In the wise words of someone who has been here in this congregation longer than me, "It's going to take a lot more than us to topple 200 years of God's good work through this congregation in this time and space.

In a nutshell, generosity is sacrificial, giving from a place of love for the liberation of every captive. Those who are captive to their own trauma, brokenness and hurt, those who are captive to loneliness and isolation, those who are captive to oppression in all its forms, both inside the church and out.

We've been through some things, my friends. It has been hard, and it continues to be painful, and it will probably continue to be painful for a long while. But this is bigger than us, not just our generosity campaign for 2024, but everything that we do. We continue on here together in this place, we continue to love God and our neighbor in our feeble, but sincere way, because we believe that another world is possible, a world where peace and justice, love, generosity, and liberation reign. This is what it means when we say, seek first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness, and all of these things shall be added unto you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Mother of us all, Amen.



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