

“A Generous Church”
Mark 12:41-44; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Westminster, Greenville
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A number of years ago, I read about a large conference that took place at a mainline church. It wasn't a Presbyterian gathering, but it could have been.

There was an opening worship service at this conference, and clearly it had received a lot of preparation, a lot of painstaking attention to detail. Somebody wanted everything about this service to be just right, and so it was...

Well, almost everything was just right.
But wouldn't you know it, there was a typo in the bulletin.

The spell-checker did not catch it, because the word that didn't belong was actually spelled correctly.

During the communion liturgy, everyone was supposed to ask God to “bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.”

But instead of “joy”—the word that appeared in the bulletin was “job”.
So what everyone said was this:

“...bring us with all your saints into the job of your eternal kingdom.”¹

It's an understandable mistake, right?
To turn what is supposed to be a JOY into something that feels like a JOB...

I bring that up because, truth be told, I'm a little afraid of that very same thing happening right now.

You see, we are continuing our sermon series this morning on words of faith, and our word for this morning is “give”.

¹ From a sermon by Fleming Rutledge, “Quoting the Good News Right,” in her book *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Why is the word for today “give”?

The word for this morning is give, because—you guessed it: we are one week away from Commitment Sunday. Next Sunday, everyone is asked to bring your pledge card to worship. And I hope you will spend this week prayerfully considering what you will give to our church in 2019.

But as soon as I say all that...**I’m looking at your faces.**

And you don’t look very excited at this moment.

I say the words “pledge card” and “give” and “Commitment Sunday”...and maybe you’re just putting on a poker face, but no one had a very JOYFUL look on their face when I said those five words.

You see, I’m afraid that what happened with that bulletin typo could happen in my household or in your household this week...I’m afraid that making our pledge might feel like a JOB, like one more thing on our list of things to do this week, let’s just get it over with....

So I got to wondering what we can do to change that.
You know what I’d like to do to change that?

I’d like to change the sermon word for today.
Am I allowed to do that?

I know we’re a few minutes into a sermon about the word “give”...am I allowed to change the word?

I’m going to change the word.
I’m not going to change the word to job.
I’m not going to change the word to joy, although that’s a close cousin of the word I’d like for you to consider.

I’m going to change the word to GENEROUS.

You see, the word “generous” for me is a much more interesting word.

The Apostle Paul uses it four times in this brief passage to the church in Corinth. He holds up the churches in Macedonia as an example for the Corinthians, and writes:

“...their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”

“...they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means...so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

In other words, Paul isn't just asking the Corinthians to give something. He's asking them to be generous.

Now why should they be generous?

Is Paul trying to GUILT the Corinthians into generosity?

The Macedonians gave this much, therefore...you can give even more?!!

I don't think that's quite it.

Paul writes:

“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

Paul isn't talking about MONEY in that verse.

Jesus wasn't RICH with wealth, and then gave it away, becoming poor, so that you and I could be rich in wealth...that's not it at all.

Paul is talking about something else.

He's talking about a generosity that goes much deeper than the bank account.

He's talking about a generosity of the soul.

A generosity that just seems to FLOW out of a person.

A generosity that cannot be AVOIDED, because it's who a person is, who he or she was created to be...Paul is definitely talking about Jesus in that verse.

But I think he's also talking about you...and me.

Generous is who we were created to be.

So I'd like you to do something for me right now.
I want you to get in your mind's eye someone who has been generous with you.

And I want you to picture that person's face.
Can you do that?

Someone who has, in your past or present, gone OVERBOARD with you.
Someone in your life who has given you gift after gift after gift.

Do you have a person in mind?

I'm not necessarily talking about monetary gifts.
I'm talking about even more important gifts.
Gifts of grace, gifts of acceptance, gifts of love.

When you picture this person being generous...**what's the look on their face?**

What's their body language like?

Does their body language suggest that generosity is a DRAG, that they really don't want to be generous but they're going to tough it out and be generous again, just this one more time....

Or does their generosity just kind of bubble out of them?

And they're generous because it's who they are, and they delight in being generous, and wouldn't consider anything OTHER than being a generous person?

Do you have a face in mind?

Back in 2013, the film that won the Oscar for Best Documentary was called "Searching for Sugar Man."

Did any of you see this movie?
Marvelous film.

It's the true story of Sixto Rodriguez,
a Detroit folk singer who had a short-lived recording career
in the early 1970's.

He released two albums, and even though people in the music business thought he was a genius, both albums sold TERRIBLY in this country...no one bought them.

So he gave up on his career in music.

Unknown to Rodriguez, however, these two albums somehow found their way to South Africa, where they were ADOPTED by the anti-Apartheid movement and became an inspiration to hundreds of thousands of South Africans. People in South Africa recognized the musical genius that he had, and they were putting him right up there with the Beatles and Bob Dylan.

In other words, Sixto Rodriguez—completely UNKNOWN in the U.S.,
became a ROCK STAR in South Africa...

There was just one problem.
The people of South Africa,
who absolutely LOVED his music—
they all thought that Sixto Rodriguez was dead!

Somehow, a rumor had managed to take hold in South Africa, a rumor that Rodriguez had committed suicide, which then helped explain why there were no new albums and no one in South Africa had ever seen him perform in person.

For more two decades, all his fans in South Africa assumed this rumor was true.

It wasn't until the late-1990's that a few fans decided to "discover the truth" about how Rodriguez had died...which led them to discover, much to their astonishment, that Rodriguez very much alive!

He was working demolition in Detroit. Of course, all this time that Rodriguez is working in Detroit, he has NO IDEA that his music is beloved by thousands of people in South Africa.

So after those South African fans find him and get over their shock that their musical hero is in the Motor City, they invite Rodriguez to South Africa to play a concert...and almost 30 years after he cut his two albums, after almost 30 years of being a blue-collar worker instead of a rock star, Rodriguez arrives in Johannesburg.

He and his family get picked up in a limo.

And when the moment arrives, Rodriguez steps out onto the stage in front of thousands of cheering fans—and in one of the most moving parts of the film, EVERYONE knows all the words to all his songs and they sing right along with him!

Of course, his fans in South Africa won't settle for one concert.

He was asked to play again, and again, and again.

Finally, the money and fame that should have been his long before...it all starts coming his way...

Let's pause right there—if you had been in Sixto Rodriguez's shoes, what would you have done at that moment?

You know what Sixto Rodriguez did?

He gave it away.

When he returned to the United States, Rodriguez continued to live in the same barebones apartment in the same working-class neighborhood that he had always lived in in Detroit. And he continued to work demolition. And he gave the money he made from those concerts away to family and friends whom he said needed it more than he did.

Now...the movie does not show the moment that Sixto Rodriguez gave all his concert earnings away. But I want you to picture HIS face at that moment. When he's giving his concert earnings to his family and his friends...

Do you think it was like this...oh, my gosh, I probably better do this.

Or do you think there was delight, and EAGERNESS, at what he was about to do?

You know, I think you're getting good at this...this business of picturing the face of generosity.

You've got it down.

So let me invite you to picture another face.

I'm going to read to you some verses from the very beginning of the Bible, and as I read these verses, I want you to picture the look on GOD'S face.

Can you do that?

Yes, I know you can do that.

Genesis 1:

“So God created humankind in [God's] image...”

“God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...”

“God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed...And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air...I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

Now...what's the look on God's face at that moment?

After all the giving and giving that God does at creation...is the look on God's face...tired and bored?

Is it only the SIXTH day?

How long is this creating the world thing going to take???

Is that what God is saying?

Or is the look on God's face one of enjoyment?

One of sheer pleasure and DELIGHT at all that God is giving?

G.K. Chesterton once put it—this is a paraphrase—Chesterton once described it this way, that the sun does not simply rise every morning because of the laws of science.

The sun rises because, when God sees it come up, God bursts forth like a small child who just had the time of her life—think of a child being tossed gently in the swimming pool, playing a game with her mom or her dad, and she's laughing and loving it, and coming out of the water and saying: Do it again!

That's how Chesterton pictures God—God sends the sun up every morning, and God is this picture of delight...and God says, "Do it again!"²

Can you see the face of God when God gives and gives and gives?

This is why we're generous.

Not because our church tells us to be generous.

Not because we'll feel guilty if we don't try to be a little more generous.

We're generous because we are created in the image of God.

Just like it is in the character and nature of God to be generous, to take delight in giving gift after gift of grace...so it is with us.

Generous...is who you and I were created to be.

In fact, it's one big reason why I felt called to come to this church.

- 28% of the operating budget to mission giving.

² G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 1994, as quoted by M. Craig Barnes in his book *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

- A gift of \$100,000 that's being given to the city of Greenville this very week, to help create affordable and decent homes for more of our brothers and sisters in this city.
- Mission trips, Sunday school teachers, volunteers who welcome 240 children coming to our Wednesday "It's Elementary" program...

Before I ever met you, I heard story after story about the generosity of this congregation...

On this Veteran's Day, I'm remembering another story. It's a story that a dear friend of our family shared with us. It was about her experience as a nurse at the end of WWII. She was in Madison, Wisconsin, part of the psychiatric unit of Wisconsin General Hospital.

Valentine's Day was approaching, and the nurses were informed that they were needed, needed for a dance with soldiers at the VA hospital across the lake.

Well, of course she would go. Dancing with soldiers on Valentine's Day? Even if those soldiers were being treated for shell shock or other unknown ailments, it would be an HONOR to dance with those who had fought for freedom and peace.

Our friend, this young nurse, showed up at the dance.
There were soldiers there, all right.
And they were suffering from shell shock and other ailments, it was true.

But she and the other nurses were STUNNED, because the soldiers they were being asked to dance with were the age of their fathers.

In other words, they were veterans all right—
not of the current war, but of WWI.

What to do?
Do you leave the dance?
Do you go back to the other side of the lake, and say, "Well, THAT was a big misunderstanding..."

That's not what those nurses did.
Our friend and her fellow nurses danced the night away with those hurting
WWI veterans on Valentine's Day.

Now was that a generous thing for those nurses to do?
Yes, yes.
It was a generous thing to do.

But I think if you asked her, she would just say: it's what we wanted to do.
In other words, there was no question about it.
Of course they would do it, they took delight in doing it...

They did it because it's who they were created to be.

When you prayerfully consider your pledge to Westminster for 2019, don't
fall into the trap... don't fall into the trap of asking yourself, "How much am I
supposed to give?"

...like it's one more job, one more thing to check off your list.

When you fill out your pledge card this week, take some time to consider all
the ways that God has been generous with you, and then...
just be the person,
the extraordinarily joyful and generous person,
that God has created you to be.

Amen.