

The Fifth Mark of Discipleship: Disciples are Generous

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Luke 18:9-14

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

This fall we have been taking a journey together as disciples of Jesus Christ. Along the way, we have been learning about the marks of what it means to be a disciple. We have already discussed four. So let us review those marks of discipleship once again. First, disciples extend hospitality and a warm welcome to others. Second, Disciples are committed to service and justice. Third, disciples worship the living God, and fourth disciples are devoted to a life of learning and growing.

Today I want to talk about the fifth mark of discipleship: Disciples are generous. Let me be more specific. Disciples are not afraid to talk about money openly and honestly and really believe money can and should be offered generously to benefit the community and world. In the Bible, Jesus was not afraid to talk about money with his disciples. Some scholars estimate that Jesus talked about the use and abuse of money nearly a third of the time in his ministry. But in so many churches, we have engaged in a terrible conspiracy of silence where we get this strange idea that it's bad to talk about money as if it is something dirty and the root of all evil.

I chuckle when I hear this, because I think Jesus would not last very long in such a church. Why, Jesus would ask, would you not want to talk about something which has the potential to do such incredible good in the world? To give is one of the greatest sources of joy that disciples could ever know. And yet so strangely, in our anxiety, the church spends its days depriving its membership of that joy. We lower everyone's expectations by speaking of our poverty rather than our abundance.

Martin Copenhaver, who was the Senior Minister of this congregation many years ago, imagined out loud once what his response might be if a wealthy donor came to him and offered to write his church a check to cover the entire operating budget . “I will write this check”, the donor said, so the church won’t have to talk about money any more and so as not to put a burden on its membership. But Martin said he would decline that check because the donor would in effect be depriving the church membership of their need to give.

Now, should I get such an offer, I would pray that I could think quickly acknowledge that person’s need to be generosity and suggest the donor give a sizable fraction of the \$650,000 as a pledge and then give the remainder to be used for other needs of the church. I have a few things in mind should we be offered such a sum. But I digress. If you think about your life, it just feels so wonderful and so right to freely give and make a difference in the world. In a Christian community, no one has the right to deprive another person of that opportunity to be generous.

Our giving so often can be born out of an intense feeling of compassion for the world. There is such joy to be found in doing such simple things to help your family and to enrich community. Remember the joy you may have felt by helping your kids buy their first home? Or remember the joy you might have felt if your received such help that you in turn wanted to help others? Or what might it feel like to offer a little money to help a refugee family get into their first apartment?

Some of you may know the joy of taking that extra time to prepare a nice and festive dish for the church fellowship hour or for a church potluck. It feels good to buy the ingredients, and prepare it knowing that your community will be enriched in some way. Indeed, this morning I took note of the wonderful coffee cake someone brought to supplement food for our fellowship hour.

In this last stewardship campaign, there was much joy to be had from people offering their generosity. It was great to have so many participate.

I know of people who have given small amounts of money and great sums to add to great endowments for universities and churches that have allowed them to educate young minds and do incredible ministry and justice in the world.

Sometimes our giving is in response to tragedy. On a couple of occasions, I have seen the story about a man who was so moved by the tragedy at the Sandy Hook School, where a gunman shot dead 20 children, that he sought to build a play ground to honor each of the 20 children. He gathered his community together to raise money and donate materials to make it happen. Those play grounds offer a vivid symbol of life in the face of death. To see children playing in a new playground built in defiance of death brings a joy that cannot be measured.

Turning to our own community, our brothers and sisters at College Street Congregational Church had an unspeakable loss to their church building. We are so grateful that no one lost their life, but the scars from this tragedy are deep. So we, along with many other churches and the synagogue and other organizations, have offered to make our space available. The Burlington Free Press donated office space. As I have watched this community reach out this week, and, as we welcome our sisters and brothers from College Street into our midst this morning, we remember the two marks of discipleship to be hospitable and generous. This is what disciples do for one another without thinking about what we are going to get out of it or out of our need for institutional gain.

Disciples give and they give generously without seeking glory. It's just the right thing and the faithful thing to do. It is within this frame in mind that we come to wrestle with this morning's particular Gospel lesson where Jesus talks about money and our approach to generosity. In this passage, we are introduced to two men with rather different giving styles. The first man, the Pharisee is a bit of a show off. The purpose of his giving was to look good and to elevate himself above others.

He had a little bit of what I would call the BP syndrome. Do you know what I am talking about? As you recall, a few years ago, an oil platform owned by BP oil company exploded and several people lost their lives. Oil also spilled into the gulf. A lot of oil spilled into the gulf. Now this is a tragedy for which BP rightly sought to atone through a victim's compensation fund. But here is the kicker that always makes me grimace. BP has spent millions on television ads to tell the world how great they are doing. I guess I would understand a little bit of self promotion to dislodge the public's perception of them as an uncaring and unrepentant corporation for which they have been unfairly charged. No one in that company would have wanted to do anything to make their employees unsafe. And a little public relations, might help BP to prop up their stock price which is not a bad thing for their stockholders or employees.

But with every month and year passing by as I watch BP boast of what they are doing, I can't help wonder what they could do with all that money they invest in self-promotion. It has a little feel of that Pharisee who boasted God, "I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' Look at me."

So often we see this boasting in other ways where people give large sums but look down on others who might give much less but give a much larger percentage of their income. I remember the story we told in my fund raising circles about someone who called up the development office at a prominent university to plead his case that he was entitled to two prime seats at the homecoming game because he was important and gave a lot of money to the university. The development officer politely listened and then said he would

get back to the donor. The development officer went down to check the donor's record and noticed he had given about \$50 to the alumni fund in the past year. Now this was highly unprofessional, but in a moment of impishness, the development officer decided to call the donor back at 3 in morning to say that he would not be getting those seats. Some persons of means boast of giving \$100 while some one on a school teacher's salary is more quietly giving \$3,000 or \$4,000 and not boasting about it.

The other man in the Gospel story was really a sinner in so many respects. He was a most despised tax collector. Tax collectors in those days were very unsavory characters because they skimmed a lot of the money they collected off the top for themselves. Tax Collectors were the poster children in the ancient world for graft and political corruption. There was nothing they could boast about. They would be a lesser person in every respect when compared to the piety of the Pharisee. And yet this tax collector humbled himself. He was so embarrassed by what he had done in his life that he could not even look up to heaven. He beat on his breast and asked God to be merciful on him because he was a sinner.

These two opposing pictures of generosity point to the nature of good giving. Jesus would say the point of giving is not to engage in a kind of narcissism where we use our giving to promote ourselves, elevate ourselves over others, or seek privilege. The purpose of our giving is instead to humble ourselves to enrich community. The point of giving is to lift up the lowly, to level the playing field and to do justice. Giving is a joyful thing but it is also about confession where we say that for too long we have hoarded too much for ourselves or used our giving as self-promotion. Our repentance for our sin comes from using our money in an un-pretentious way to enrich the lives of those around us.

My favorite passage on the power of generosity comes in the book of Acts, "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Disciples are generous. They are generous in spirit and they are generous with their money. For in our generosity, we really do cultivate glad and generous hearts as we seek to use what God has given us to save the world from aimlessness and sin. Amen.