

From Stewardship to Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Whitefish UMC

November 6, 2011

- † What is the difference between stewardship and generosity, and why does it matter? A few years ago, a staffer at a very large United Methodist church changed his title after reflecting upon the Book Five Practices for Fruitful Congregations. One of the five practices is “extravagant generosity,” the theme for our stewardship focus this year.
- † Formerly the Executive Director of Stewardship, he was now the Executive Director of Generosity. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Was it just a gimmick or did the change have real purpose and meaning?
- † The author of the “Five Practices” book, Bishop Robert Schnase, asks: This made me think. What's the difference between “stewardship” and “generosity”? What comes to mind when you hear those words? For what distinctive purposes are they best suited? How do people respond to those terms?
- † We are stewards of the earth. We are stewards of those things entrusted to us, inherited by us, and earned by us. We are stewards of our wealth and possessions and physical bodies. Stewards are those people in ancient times who were trustees, who had responsibilities, who cared for things owned by someone else. Today you don't hear much about stewards and stewardship outside the church; it's a language derived from our biblical roots and our

church heritage. It risks becoming insider language, not easily accessible or immediately understandable by those new to the church.

- † There is something slightly weighty, heavy, dutiful, and legal sounding about the word. I grew up hearing about stewardship, stewardship campaigns, and committees on stewardship. The language focused our attention on supporting the church financially.
- † Generosity is an aspect of character. It is an attractive quality which I aspire to and desire to see cultivated in my children. The opposite of generosity is selfishness, self-centeredness, greed, and self-absorption. Generosity extends beyond just the use of money, although it most definitely includes that. There are generous spirits; generous souls; people who are generous with their time, with their teaching, with their love. Generosity finds many biblical sources, and is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). It sounds more organic, more generative, less legalistic, less formal than stewardship. I have to explain to my teenage sons what stewardship means. They know generosity when they see it.
- † I admire and respect people who are generous, and I want to become like them. Generosity is not a spiritual attribute someone acquires apart from the actual practice of giving. It becomes discernable through action. We never describe people as generous who keep everything for themselves and only serve themselves. And generosity focuses on the spiritual qualities of the giver, derived from the generosity of God”...rather than the need of an institution.
- † All right then—but for me it all comes down to the difference between duty and joy. Let me tell you two stories that involve trembling. I hope they help illustrate what I am trying to explain. About a dozen years ago, shortly before I arrived in Whitefish as your pastor, a young father with a young son drove

by the place where our church building now stands. In the field stood a sign saying “future home of the United Methodist Church.”

- † Now the young father had recently experienced significant financial success. He hoped one day to move to Whitefish, away from the city, and he wanted a vibrant, strong church for his future home. So he contacted the pastor at the time, Jerry Bechtle, and asked what it would take to make it possible to build the new church. To make a long story short, the young father eventually gave our church enough money to proceed with a building campaign and to step forward in faith to complete the new church.
- † Years later, this young father, now Tom’s and my good friend, described for me what it felt like to be extravagant in his generosity. “I’ve never written a check that large, and I remember trembling all over as I wrote it. It may not have been prudent—I could have used that money many times over since—but it was the most amazingly good feeling of blessing.”
- † Fast forward to a few days ago. A young man entered this church, wearing only short sleeves on a cold morning. Ronica, always gentle and kind with folks coming into the church for help, explained that the young man and his wife were living out of their car after he had lost his job because his employer had no more work.
- † The young man hesitantly stretched out his hand in greeting to me, and with a quaver in his voice, asked if we could help him with gas money. After we talked for a bit and discerned that he had been to Neighbors in Need, received assistance from the Catholics, and still needed gas for his car to look for work, I was faced with a choice.
- † The church doesn’t keep cash for purposes like these. I could have told him that it would have taken a couple of days to get a check written, or I could have sent him on his way to another possible source—although I can’t think

of where. Instead I went to my wallet and took out all the cash I had—a whopping \$15 that day.

† Now I don't usually do this—I am usually more prudent and circumspect. But I gave him the cash. He needed the money then and I needed to give it in that moment. When I gave him the cash, only \$15 remember, he began to tremble with gratitude and joy, and so did I. I can't get him out of my mind and heart.

† Now I don't tell you this second story, especially, to make myself look noble. On the contrary. I tell it because I spiritually needed to give him the money more than he needed \$15. And through your generosity, we have a church that can offer hope and support not just in cash but in extending ourselves beyond what might normally be expected.

† My friend Marianne Niesen tells this story: “A couple years ago, I was browsing through an airport bookstore when the title of a book caught my eye. The Go-Giver by Bob Burg and John David Mann. It was in the business book section but the title intrigued me enough to read the inside flap. “The Go-Giver tells the story of an ambitious young man named Joe who yearns for success. Joe is a true go-getter, though sometimes he feels as if the harder and faster he works, the further away his goals seem to be.” (Sound familiar?)

† “Joe learns that changing his focus from getting to giving - putting others' interests first and continually adding value to their lives - ultimately leads to unexpected returns.”[3] I bought the book. The story is told as a kind of parable. Joe meets up with a legendary consultant known as ‘the Chairman’ who agrees to impart his ‘secret to stratospheric success.’ Joe learns that secret the first time he meets with the ‘Chairman.’ It was a Saturday morning. Joe is amazed that such an important man would meet with him on a Saturday but he is in for even more amazement.

- † “There’s nothing wrong with making money. Lots of it, in fact. It’s just not a goal that will make you successful,” the Chairman says . . .”You want to understand success, yes?” Joe nodded.“All right. I’m going to share my Trade Secret with you now. . . (He leaned forward and stated simply.) . . . giving.”
- † Joe waited for more, but apparently that was it. “I beg your pardon? . . . Giving? . . . That’s the secret to your success? Your Trade Secret? Giving? . . . “Indeed,” said the Chairman. “That’s too simple . . . is that what you’re thinking?” “Something like that,” Joe admitted sheepishly.
- † . . . “Most people have that reaction. In fact, most people just laugh when they hear that the secret to success is giving.” He paused. “Then again, most people are nowhere near as successful as they wish they were.” (There is more conversation and then the Chairman continues . . .) “Most of us have grown up seeing the world as a place of limitation rather than as a place of inexhaustible treasures. A world of competition rather than one of co-creation.” He saw that Joe was puzzled again. “Dog eat dog. . . that about sum it up?” Joe admitted that it did.
- † “Well, it’s simply not true.” And then he goes on to explain that what is true is that you get what you expect in life . . . “Go looking for conflict and you’ll find it. Go looking for people to take advantage of you, and they generally will. See the world as a dog-eat-dog place and you’ll always find a bigger dog looking at you as if you’re his next meal. Go looking for the best in people, and you’ll be amazed at how much talent, ingenuity, empathy and good will you’ll find.[4]
- † Following the initial exchange with Joe, the Chairman agrees that he’ll do something more to help him grasp this trade secret - in other words, how giving can change life for him. He’ll teach him the ‘Five Laws of

Stratospheric Success’ as long as Joe agrees that, as he learns each of the ‘laws’ he will put them into practice immediately - before he goes to bed that night. Joe agrees . . . and here are the laws he learned over the course of a week - complete with my shorthand translation for us.

- † 1. The Law of Value: your true worth is determined by how much more you give in value than you take in payment. (That is, worry more about how much you give than what you get.)
- † 2. The Law of Compensation: your income is determined by how many people you serve and how well you serve them. (Wesley said it like this . . . do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, by all the means you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.)
- † 3. The Law of Influence: Your influence is determined by how abundantly you place other people’s interest first. (As Wesley said . . . earn all you can, save all you can so you can give all you can away.)
- † 4. The Law of Authenticity: The most valuable gift you have to offer is yourself. (Genuineness and generosity go hand in hand.)
- † 5. The Law of Receptivity: The key to effective giving is to stay open to receiving. (Admit there are things we don’t know. Be open to learn, to grow, to move beyond the negative.)
- † Ostensibly, this is a business book. But, if you think about it, its ‘trade secret’ is a way of life for followers of Jesus since we’re actually in the ‘giving’ business. We’re in the business of generosity - not so much because we like it but because that’s what Jesus’ business was fundamentally about. In other words, the secret of a successful church is not measured by how beautiful our building is or how excellent our music sounds or even how many people are here.

- † Our success is measured by how generous we are - individually and collectively. How good are we at giving our goods and selves away? How good are we at sharing our faith with our children . . . and at sharing the fruits of our faith with all children? How good are we at keeping our building beautiful and at sharing it with the community? How good are we at passionate worship that feeds and nourishes us and at going beyond our comfort zones to explore new and different kinds of worship that will nourish others? How good are we at giving enough to care for our own needs and at giving abundantly so that we can even work miracles?
- † Today we focus on the last of the five practices for a fruitful congregation. We will only be as vibrant, alive, vital and growing as we are extravagantly generous - with a big vision, taking big risks, doing big things. This is a particularly challenging practice because it calls on each of us to examine our personal lives as well as our life together. How are we doing in the ‘giving’ department? The challenge is for each of us to look at our patterns of giving. Are we approaching the biblical tithe - giving 10% or more of our income away? As a church, are we responding generously to the needs of our community and the world? And we cannot do that adequately if we are not each doing the first. We are in the ‘giving business’ - giving time, talent and resources as we follow Jesus, the one who gave himself away. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, when people looked at our church and at the people in our church they said . . . look at [Whitefish UMC] - they sure are a group of go-givers! In many ways we are already a church that gets things done. The growing edge for all of us is to add go-giving to our go-getting.”
- † And here’s the real secret to this extravagant generosity business. We can only become generous when we realize how much we’ve been given. You’ve heard me do whole sermons on this so today, I just ask one thing. Reflect for

a moment this week on a time you were a ‘victim of extravagant generosity.’
Of course for me it was the wonderful surprise you gave me last Sunday—a
total, mind-blowing, spirit-lifting gift. See—you’re already getting it!

† You not only have the capacity to be extravagantly generous, you’re already
practicing it! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble. Where do we learn
it? From Jesus, of course, who on the night he gave himself up for the sake of
love....Amen.

Sources:

Marianne Niesen, <http://www.stpauls.org>

Robert Schnase, <http://www.ministrymatters.com>