

Extravagant Generosity
II Corinthians 8:1-7; Luke 12:13-21
October 12, 2008

There is a story about the ancient king of Macedon, Alexander the Great. One day a beggar by the roadside asked for alms from Alexander as he passed by. The man was clearly destitute, and was quite bold and presumptuous even in asking anything from the powerful ruler. Yet the Emperor threw him several gold coins. A courtier was flabbergasted at his generosity and commented, "Sir, copper coins would adequately meet a beggar's need. Why give him gold?" Alexander responded with the kind of conviction and certainty that characterized his exploits: "Copper coins would suit the beggar's need, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving."ⁱ

The story prompts us to ask, "What kind of giving suits us as God's children?" What does it mean to be generous? What does it mean for our generosity to be extravagant?

In his second letter to the Church at Corinth Paul writes about the collection of money he is taking as he travels through Greece and Asia Minor. Paul received the blessing of the church leaders in Jerusalem for his mission to the Gentiles; their only request was that they "remember the poor." In a previous letter, Paul had suggested to the Corinthians that they set aside a little money every first day of the week. Later representatives could accompany Paul in taking their offering to Jerusalem. In the present letter, Paul is seeking to ignite their generosity through the example of the Macedonians. In spite of great affliction and extreme poverty, they gave beyond their means for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The Gentile Christians felt spiritually indebted to the Jewish Christians headquartered in Jerusalem. Without their faithful sharing of the gospel, the Gentiles would not have known about Jesus. Thus they felt overjoyed to share out of their poverty in order that the gift of faith might be imparted to the poor. Paul notes that the Macedonian Christians first gave themselves to the Lord. Giving God first place in their lives was the catalyst for the generosity. Their giving was not based upon what they could afford; it was extravagant because of the priceless value they placed upon their faith. Like Alexander the Great, copper coins were not sufficient; gold coins were the appropriate symbol of their gratitude, faith, and generosity.

The word generosity is a cousin of the word generate. Their root means "to produce," "to bear life," "to bring to birth." Generosity is a participation in giving life to something. I can imagine the Macedonian Christians enthusiastic about giving birth to faith in new Christians, just as the gift of faith had enriched their lives. The joy in giving returns to us in ways we cannot imagine.

A few weeks ago I attended the grand opening celebration of a Multifaith Living Community across the street from the UC Davis campus. Eight years ago our United Methodist Campus Minister at Davis had a dream of a multifaith community for students where they would come to understand persons of different faith traditions. By living together in the community, they will learn how to interact with one another in healthy, peaceful ways. This community of Jews, Christian, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others is a microcosm of our world. Through this community these students will contribute to the ways of reconciliation so desperately needed in our world. It took the generosity of many, including our California-Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. A portion of our gifts to the Annual Conference support campus ministries on seven different college and university campuses in California and Northern Nevada. Our generosity is helping to foster communities

of students who are the emerging leaders of our church, our communities, and our nation. Generosity brings new life to birth.

I was surprised to read last week that many Christians in the United States have chosen not to know the joy of generosity. At least one of five American Christians – 20% - gives nothing to church, parachurch or nonreligious charities. The vast majority of American Christians who do contribute give a small percentage, a little more than one-half of 1 percent of income. The percent of giving increases to 2% among regularly attending church members. Higher-income-earning American Christians—like Americans generally—give less money as a percentage of household income in comparison with lower-income-earning Christians. In the year 2000 Americans who earned less than \$10,000 gave 2.3% of their income to religious organizations, whereas those who earned \$70,000 or more gave only 1.2%. Despite the massive growth of real per capita income over the 20th century, the average percentage share of income given by American Christians not only did not grow but actually slightly declined during this time period.ⁱⁱ

In the Gospel of Luke, we heard someone from the crowd yell to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” In Jewish law, the oldest son received a double portion of his father’s inheritance, while the remaining sons divided the rest equally. Perhaps the man who made the request was a younger brother who was not satisfied with his one-third. He may have believed that he deserved an equal share, which according to the law, was not rightfully his.

Jesus was not interested in mediating this dispute. Instead, he seized upon the moment to deal with a sin that tempts each of us, a sin that reveals the true nature of our selfishness and self-centeredness. Jesus said, “Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).

Jesus spent more time talking about money than virtually any other subject. He talked more about it than prayer, and he spoke of it more than hell. In so doing, he was consistent with his Jewish tradition. After idolatry, the Bible condemns greed more than any other sin; in fact, the Bible refers to greed as idolatry; it is self-worship.

Greed is the opposite of generosity. Greed is selfish; generosity is self-sacrificing.

The economic crisis our nation is experiencing is symptomatic of an underlying moral and spiritual crisis. For years we have been invested in accumulating more and more possessions in order to keep up with the Joneses. We have increased our debt in order to impress others with possessions, for we have erroneously sought to find our worth in the accumulation of wealth. We have allowed the relentless assault of advertising and a culture of consumption make us covet our neighbor’s wealth. We are experiencing the corruption of earthly treasure. It is an opportunity to evaluate the roles of need versus greed in our lifestyles.

Martin Luther, the man who sparked the Protestant Reformation, said that every Christian needs to experience three conversions: a conversion of the heart, a conversion of the mind, and a conversion of the purse. Luther knew how deeply satisfying the spiritual life can be, but he also understood that unless we commit all of ourselves to it without reservation—unless we make Extravagant Generosity part of our spiritual formation—we will not come to know that satisfaction for ourselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

John Wesley said, “Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.”

These great spiritual leaders of significant religious movements knew the joy of extravagant generosity. They understood the power of sharing our resources with others. They held a vision of the kin-dom of God in which all people lived meaningful lives, sharing their

talents and treasures to improve the common good. Like the early Macedonian Christians, they gave themselves first to the Lord. Their commitment to God and the values of Jesus Christ set the tone for their lifestyles and their relationships with neighbor and community.

One area of our lives that is difficult to relinquish to the lordship of Jesus Christ is the financial. There is an ancient story about the army of Emperor Constantine. Before Constantine's soldiers went into battle, many of them wanted to be baptized so that they would feel protected by God as their lives were in danger. But when the companies waded out into the middle of the river for baptism, they held their swords up high above the water, as if to say, "This part of me does not belong to God. This part of me will not be subjected to the transformation that my baptism brings. The battle that I will wage is only under the authority of the Emperor."^{iv}

We followers of Christ must ask ourselves whether we have allowed our wallets to be baptized along with the rest of us, or whether we have reserved that part of our lives for ourselves. This is undoubtedly the most challenging season in which I've ever had to preach a stewardship sermon! The climate of financial fear in our nation is likely causing people to hold back their resources instead of extravagantly giving. I have even found myself a victim of the fear. Last week when Mark proposed a modest increase in our pledge to the church, I clarified with him that as a student teacher for the spring semester next year he won't receive an income. As an employee of a nonprofit organization, I know that the church may likely experience decreased income in uncertain times. I had to wrestle with my fear and make a conscious choice to allow my faith to overpower my fear. There are ways in which our family can simplify our lifestyle even further in order to give more. The joy of being part of a mission greater than my own life is worthy of a significant investment and even some self-sacrifice.

One Sunday a pastor made an appeal in worship for a great and worthy cause. A member of the church came and handed him a check for \$50, asking if her gift was satisfactory.

The pastor immediately replied, "If it represents you."

There was a moment of soul-searching thought and she asked to have the check returned to her. She left with it and a day or two later she returned handing the pastor a check for \$5,000. Again she asked, "Is my gift satisfactory?"

The pastor gave the same answer as before, "If it represents you."

As before, a truth seemed to be driving deeply. After a few moments of hesitation she took back the check and left. Later in the week she came again with a check. This time it was for \$50,000. As she placed it in the pastor's hand, she said, "After earnest, prayerful thought, I've come to the conclusion that this gift does represent me and I am happy to give it."^v

May our generosity be a worthy representation of who we are: children of an extravagantly generous God.

ⁱ Allan R. Bever, "Children of God Practice Extravagant Generosity," *Five Practices Leader Manual & Media* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 135.

ⁱⁱ Christian Smith, Michael O. Emerson and Patricia Snell, "Who gives?" *The Christian Century*, October 7, 2008, pp. 26-28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, Bever, p. 136.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v *Homiletics*, July 2006, p. 15.