

Series: Generosity**Today: To Whom Does It All Belong?****Text: Luke 10:25-37**

**A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

If you have been counting, this is the ninth week we have focused on the spiritual practice of Generosity. What we have found is that anytime we spend a period of time with one of these practices, it causes a good deal of conversation among those of you who are regular participants in our life together.

The more cynical among you have felt choosing generosity as a practice to explore as merely a ploy to heighten the awareness of our Annual Giving campaign. Let me say right from the beginning that you were wrong. Of course we need your support, but that is not why we chose Generosity as a practice. Generosity is about shaping our hearts and minds to the heart and mind of God.

The question before us throughout this series is reflected in our topic for today: To whom does it all belong? When we think about our time, our talent, and our treasure, how do we answer that question? When you make decisions about the way you use your time, is honoring the One who created time at the top of your list, or do you just fit prayer, worship and service in as one part of an overcrowded schedule? When you think about the talent that you have been given, how are you using those to honor the One who gave you your talent in the first place? When you think about your treasure, how does your checkbook or your estate planning reflect that you believe that what you have belongs to God and you are merely the steward of all God has given you?

Paul Harvey enjoys telling a true story at this holiday season. It happened during Thanksgiving week a few years ago, and the story reflects the reluctant generosity that is too often a part of our lives.

The Butterball Turkey Company set up their annual telephone hotline to answer consumer questions about preparing holiday turkeys. One woman called to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in the bottom of her freezer for 23 years. That's right—23 years. The Butterball representative told her the turkey would probably be safe to eat if the freezer had been kept below zero for the entire 23 years. But the Butterball representative warned her that even if the turkey was safe to eat, the flavor would probably have deteriorated to such a degree that she would not recommend eating it.

The caller replied, "That's what I thought. We'll give the turkey to our church."
[Source: Paul Harvey daily radio broadcast (11-22-95)]

The Setting and the Characters

This morning we conclude our series on Generosity by examining the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. In order to understand its meaning, it will be helpful for us to understand the setting Jesus chooses for the parable and the characters who are part of the story.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a notorious place which travelers tried to avoid at all costs. Dick Foster has led many trips to Israel, and he says that even with improvements this winding road still drops from 2,300 feet above sea level to 1,300 feet below sea level in just 15 miles. In first century Palestine, it was a road with switchback twists and turns where robbers could lay in wait for unsuspecting travelers and rob them at will. In fact, into the 20th century, it was a place where people feared what might

happen to them from thieves and local tribal leaders who demanded protection money from travelers who feared for their safety. So when Jesus told this parable, his listeners could identify immediately with the traveler who was robbed and beaten.

The characters in this story all play an important role. There are the thieves who seem to care for no one but themselves. There is the priest who was on his way to perform religious duties in the temple, and assuming that the man lying on the side of the road was dead, he did not stop because he would have become ritually unclean. There is the Levite who simply did not want to be involved. And there is the Samaritan who was considered a half-breed by the Jews to whom Jesus was telling this story who does the honorable thing; the right thing in the sight of God and the right thing in the sight of humanity.

To whom does it all belong? There are three characters I want us to focus on this morning. The thief's answer, what is yours is *mine*. We are going to give a pass to the priest who is so concerned with his religious ritual that he fails to answer the question at all, but we at least have to wonder if the use of religious faith can sometimes be an excuse from getting involved in the messiness of what it means to be a human being. The Levite's answer, *what is mine is mine*. The Samaritan's answer, what is mine is *thine*.

Yours is Mine

There are those in our society who operate under the principle that the world owes them a better deal and they intend to take advantage of every possible angle to be sure they get what is coming to them. The principle is that what you have I deserve, and I am going to do everything in my power to take it from you.

Over at the Safety Coalition building they have reels of videotape of people who operate on this principle. They smash car windows and grab whatever they think may be of value without regard to the impact it makes on the one who is stolen from.

I remember all too well that sinking feeling one gets when years ago someone broke into our car and stole the briefcase which had all of the research I had done for my doctoral dissertation. It meant having to start all over again, but the person who stole it didn't care. They assumed there was something valuable which could be sold in the case and it was their right to steal it.

However, this attitude of *what's yours is mine* can be even more subtle. When we take advantage of the kindness of others, we live it out in less obvious ways. Perhaps you have heard the story of the businessman who was about to leave on a two-week business trip who drove his Rolls-Royce to a downtown New York City bank and went in to ask for an immediate loan of \$5,000. The loan officer, taken aback, requested collateral. The man replied, "Here are the keys to my Rolls-Royce." The loan officer promptly had the car driven into the bank's underground parking for safekeeping and gave him \$5,000.

Two weeks later, the man walked through the bank's doors and asked to settle up his loan and get his car back. "That will be \$5,000 in principal, and \$15.40 in interest," the loan officer said. The man wrote out a check, got up, and started to walk away. "Wait sir," the loan officer said. "While you were gone, I found out you're a millionaire. Why in the world would you need to borrow \$5,000?"

The man smiled. "Where else could I safely park my Rolls-Royce in Manhattan for two weeks and only pay \$15.40?"

Not many of us are thieves, but our behavior can exhibit the attitude of the thieves in our story: that the world owes us a living; that there is always a loophole to find in a contract; that people are here to be used selfishly for our best interests. The Parable of the Good Samaritan points to a higher ideal.

Mine is Mine

The Levite could be any one of us. He is a man who just doesn't want to get involved. He sees what the others see, a person in need, but he chooses not to get involved. Maybe he was late for an appointment, or maybe he was fearful that the man lying on the road was a decoy; that if he stopped to help he would be the one who would be robbed. Or maybe he is like many of us who when we see a need we feel helpless to address that need, so we just keep on moving.

We have all been there at some point in our lives, haven't we? We see an accident on the side of the road but we are late for an appointment and we pass on by. We are approached by a homeless person on a busy street and we brush by them as though we did not see them or hear them. An acquaintance needs a ride to the doctor, but we are afraid if we offer it once we will have to do it all the time. There are times in all of our lives when we operate by the principle that if we give away what we have there will not be enough for us, and we fall short of becoming the generous person God intends for all of us to become.

Bruce Larson tells the story of a man who was building a home in the mountains of Vermont in a place that was very difficult to get water. So his friend asked an old Vermonter to come over and divine the source of water on his property. Sure enough, the

old timer found the spot. He said, “Just dig fourteen feet down and you will find an underground river. When you hit the water, pump it out every day.”

Larson’s friend followed the instructions and found the underground river. He pumped it out the first day, and more water came in. In the next few days the water rose to eight feet and then seemed to stop, so he left it. Some months later, when the house was finished, he immediately turned on the water. The first day there was enough, but by the third day the well was dry.

He called the man who had helped him find the water to see what he had done wrong. The man asked, “Did you pump it every day?” Larson’s friend said no, he hadn’t, and the Vermonter said, “You fool! An underground river is made up of thousands of little capillaries running underground. When you pump the water, you enlarge the capillaries and more water comes in. However, once you stop pumping, the water backs up, the capillaries close, and the river is formed somewhere else.”

Our life in Christ is like that. As we give of our time, our talent, and our treasure, our wells fill up. When we believe the myth that what’s ours is ours, somehow our lives dry up and we have lost the key to everything.

Mine is Thine

The Samaritan is the one whom Jesus uses to teach us the lesson of generosity. Here is a man who has had to suffer ridicule because of his race, yet he is the only one in the story who offers compassion. He tends to the wounds of the injured traveler. He places him on his own donkey and takes him to an inn where he pays the bill out of his own pocket. It is neither the religious figure nor the upstanding citizen who receives the

praise of Jesus. It is the social outcast, the half-breed, who rises to the occasion and does what is right in the sight of man and the sight of God.

There was a story in the news this summer about a Michigan resident, Matt Jones, who decided to offer one of his kidneys, simply because he knew someone would need it. "I thought that if I could help one person live a decent life, that would be great," Jones said. "It's turned out to be a lot more than that."

Michael Rees, the medical director of the Alliance for Paired Donation, says Jones started the first ever kidney donation chain. A kidney donation chain is an innovative idea wherein family members continue to "pay it forward" (that is, after an individual is blessed by a new kidney, someone in the recipient's family agrees to donate a kidney for someone else in need). Matt Jones' kidney was donated to Barbara Bunnell. Barbara's husband, in turn, will donate his kidney to Angela Heckman, a woman he barely knows. After Angela Heckman receives Bunnell's kidney, Angela's mother will donate her kidney to someone.

Ron Bunnell, Barb's husband, says, "I look at it as Barb got this gift from Matt, and I'm just paying it forward. It is terrific to be part of something bigger." [source: USA Today (7-24-07)]

Conclusion

Generosity calls us to something bigger. When we give of our time, our talent, and our treasure we discover that we cannot out give God. As we use what we have been given, we receive even more, and we discover that we cannot out give God. It is then that we discover the joy that a lifestyle built on generosity shapes our hearts and minds to the image of God.