

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

October 11, 2015 Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31

The Joy of a Generous Heart

I believe that Christians ought to be the most generous people there are.

The Bible is nothing but consistent on this point. From the early writings of the Old Testament with injunctions to share with the poor, whether by allowing access to their land and crops (Prov. 13:23) or giving them clothes (Job 31:19-20), or just general exhortations to be generous to others (Prov. 14:21, 31)... To Jesus' constant teaching and preaching on a Kingdom perspective to our wealth... To the Apostle Paul's work with the first century churches, lifting them up as examples of generosity in their sacrificial giving and care for each other.

The church through history has never lacked for generous souls. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters developed an entire system of lifting up those who are extraordinarily generous...they call them Saints. And it's not hard to find stories today of people who in big and small ways give of themselves for others.

And though we all know, you don't have to be Christian to be generous - I believe that if you ARE Christian, you ought to be generous. Because Christians live in constant awareness of the great and generous act of God toward not just us, but the whole world, in the giving of His Son, who shows us what unconditional love looks like.

Christians are generous NOT because we think we'll earn favor with God - we already have that.

Christians are generous NOT because we want others to notice us or think better of us - that doesn't matter.

No Christians are generous because we know what God has done, and the most proper response is - GRATITUDE; which, I believe is best shown, by living a generous life. Here's another way of saying it: We don't have an acceptable excuse for NOT being generous!

So what does generous look like?

B. J. Gallagher tells this story when she experienced the Joy of a Generous Heart:

Reverend Ed Bacon of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, stood in his pulpit, resplendent in his flowing white robe and colorful vestments. He's a big man with a booming voice and charisma enough to light up the sanctuary without candles. On this particular Sunday, he was practically glowing with joy - energized by his guest of honor, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Prize-winning peacemaker from South Africa.

"Most people say, 'Give 'til it hurts,'" Reverend Ed announced to the standing-room-only congregation. "But I say, 'Give 'til it feels good!'"

The crowd's laughter and applause thundered their approval. The choir burst into song as ushers made their way down the aisles with collection baskets.

This wasn't just any Sunday -- and it wasn't just any collection. Archbishop Tutu had come to All Saints to tell us about the latest developments in his homeland. Apartheid had been abolished and the country was now embarking on the long, slow, painful journey of healing. A *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) had been established to facilitate the healing process. It was a court-like body, chaired by Archbishop Tutu, which played a key role in the transition of South Africa to a full and free democracy. Anyone who felt that he or she had been a victim of apartheid's violence could come forward and be heard. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty and forgiveness.

But, as Reverend Ed pointed out to us that Sunday morning, justice isn't free. It costs money to hold tribunals, to handle the paperwork, to underwrite the process of hearings and all the administrative details. So he asked the congregation to dig deep into our pockets and purses, since he was giving all the donations that Sunday to Archbishop Tutu to help support the ongoing work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

"I've never done this before," Reverend Ed said, "But I'm going to do it today. I am urging to give what you can, in whatever form you can. If you want to donate your car, we'll take the pink slip. If you want to donate jewelry, we'll take that. If you want to give cash or a check, or even put your donation on a credit card, fine. We'll take it all. We here in Southern California have a wonderful standard of living - we're rich by any standard. So I'm asking you to give as much as you can to the people of South Africa to support their healing and reconciliation. Most people say, 'Give 'til it hurts' - but I say, 'Give 'til it feels good!'"

There wasn't a dry eye in the place. We were so moved by Tutu's sermon, so inspired by his moral authority and loving compassion, that we could do no less than give our all.

As the collection basket made its way toward me, I wondered what to do. My business had been slow, so I had no extra money to give. I needed my car, so I couldn't donate that. What can I give? I asked myself. I desperately wanted to support this marvelous process unfolding in South Africa. I wanted to contribute something - no matter how small - to the good people half-way around the world.

The collection basket finally came to me and I looked down into it, still not sure what to do. As my hands cradled the basket of love offerings, I noticed that I was wearing a 14K gold and garnet ring my mother had given me on my 12th birthday. Instantly, I knew what to do. I took off the ring, put it in the little white offering envelope, and dropped the envelope into the collection basket. Tears of joy streamed down my face as I passed the basket to the person next to me. I imagined the South Africans melting down my gold ring to help pay for their national healing. I was filled with gratitude and happiness to be a tiny part of something so momentous, so important, so essential to humanity.

As I wiped away my tears and joined the choir in song, I realized that Reverend Ed had been right. I gave ... and it felt good. (Huffington Post, 2011)

The Joy of a Generous Heart indeed!

And I wonder...What does it take to have a heart like hers? My guess is that her heart was moved, because she gave her heart, symbolized in the giving of a ring that was more than a ring...

And I wonder some more... Would I ever be so generous? I don't know. Though I DO know that I WANT to be that generous.

I wonder if I'm more like the man in the gospel reading - who when asked to be THAT generous, went away sad. No "Joy of a Generous Heart" for him! No following Jesus for him! He walked away - from Jesus and his love! Did you notice that? Tucked right in there in verse 21: "And looking at him, Jesus loved him."

And while it doesn't say it in there - I imagine that not only was the man who walked away sad, but Jesus was too! I really believe that Jesus / God wants us, all of us.... Every minute of every day.

Imagine that Jesus is a pearl in a jewelry store. And one day, a man walks in and marvels at it. He says to the store clerk - let's imagine the clerk to be God - and says, "I want this pearl. How much does it cost?"

The Clerk says, "it's too dear, too costly."

"But how much?"

"Well, it's very expensive."

"Do you think I could buy it?"

"It costs everything you have - no more, no less - so anybody can buy it."

"I'll buy it."

"What do you have? Let's write it down."

"I have \$10,000 in the bank."

"Good, \$10,000. What else?"

"I have nothing more. That's all I have."

"You have nothing more?"

"Well, I have some dollars here in my pocket."

"How many?"

"Let's see... Thirty, forty, fifty, eighty, one hundred, one hundred twenty - one hundred twenty dollars."

"That's fine. What else do you have?"

"I have nothing else. That's all."

"Where do you live?"

"I live in my house."

"The house, too then."

"Then you mean I must live in the garage?"

"Have you a garage, too? That, too. What else?"

"Do you mean that I must live in my car, then?"

"Have you a car?"

"I have two."

"Both become mine. Both cars. What else?"

"Well, you have my house, the garage, the cars, the money, everything."

"Are you alone in the world?"

"No, I have a family: wife, two children..."

"Your wife and children, too."

"Really?"

"Yes, everything you have. What else?"

"I have nothing else, I am left alone now."

"Oh, you too! Everything becomes mine - wife, children, house, money, cars - everything. Including you too. Now, you can use all those things here, but don't forget they are mine, as you are. And when I need any of the things you are using, you'll give them to me because now I am the owner." (Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Call to Discipleship*, (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975), pp. 42, 43)

To be a Christian, to follow Christ, is to be all in.
The joy of a generous heart is ours when we're all in.

Amen.