

Be.Church.Now: Be.Generous.Now
Luke 6:27-38
October 18, 2020

One morning a three year old requested potato chips for breakfast. Ana's mother, who wasn't too strict when it came to food, met the request. The child took four chips, then gave her mother one of the four. "Let's share," she said.

That afternoon they had been to the store and Ana was climbing back in her car seat. She hated being strapped in, so she balked and jumped up and down on the seat. The mother said, "Ana, please sit down, because someone is waiting for this parking space." Ana turned, saw the car, and instantly sat. This wasn't unusual for her; whenever she knew that someone was waiting, she quickly took her car seat. Ana's mother reflected on the fact that selfishness and consideration exist in all of us. Ana exhibited selfishness, until she became aware of the need of someone else, and she responded in kind.ⁱ

Both selfishness and generosity are natural human tendencies. There are times in which we look out for our own interests, and there are times to be considerate of others. Scientists have observed that groups whose members helped one another survived better than groups whose members did not.

Generosity is inherent in us. It is like a river that is always flowing within. To enter the stream of generosity more readily, we need to remove the dams that we have built up over our lives. We need to rid ourselves of the blocks that prevent us from feeling our own pain and the pain of others. We need to eliminate the attitudes that reinforce our possessive aspects, so that the stream of generosity in our hearts can burst forth. One thing that blocks the flow of generosity is fear that there is not enough, so we cling to what we have. But when is enough enough? Is \$5,000 enough? Is \$50,000? 100,000? A recent study found that no matter how much money people made, they thought they would be happier if only they had more. Once we uncover whatever blocks our generosity, the more it will gurgle and pour like an ever-flowing river. And as we give, we experience the abundance of what we have.

We see how generosity is flowing these days, especially as people are considering the needs of others. Many of you are giving food to the FISH Food Pantry. Some are generously giving time to serve at the Redwood Empire Food Bank, which is serving nearly 200% more people than before the pandemic. We are grateful for your generosity to the congregation, which has not only kept our employees working, but made it possible for our ministry to continue. Knowing

that some have lost employment, others have stepped up to cover the difference. Thank you.

Multitudes in our community and beyond are offering the gift of hospitality as they opened homes to those evacuated during the fires. Our church members have been far-flung from Sacramento & Fairfield to San Leandro and the Peninsula staying with friends and relatives, some of whom were awakened during the middle of the night by a plea for safe refuge. Generosity comes in many forms.

Today's reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain can prompt a multitude of sermons. The thread that we focus on today, woven through the passage, is the theme of generosity. "Give to everyone who asks and don't demand your things back from those who take them. Treat everyone in the same way that you want them to treat you.... Do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. If you do, you will have great reward....Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.... Give, and it will be given to you."ⁱⁱ

The principle of reciprocity has been typical in human relations. It was in Jesus' day and it is in ours. A lender expects a return of the loan. We work from a ledger sheet – you do this and I'll repay you by doing that. Somewhere in the back of our minds, we keep track of our giving and receiving to make sure it comes out even. You give me a present worth \$100, and I must give you something of equal value. In this system, everything is a commodity, and we must exchange equally, or one of us is going to feel ripped off. You invite me over for dinner and I don't reciprocate, you'll feel shortchanged. This ledger perspective implies that there is not enough to go around, so things must be very carefully doled out and tracked. It is really exhausting to keep this ledger sheet. And it completely squashes genuine caring, because it fails to take into account the circumstances of one another's lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

As is typical, Jesus flips things upside down. Lend and expect nothing in return; this is your reward. "A good portion—packed down, firmly shaken, and overflowing—will fall into your lap. The portion you give will determine the portion you receive in return." This verse refers to a farmer who pays the laborer who harvests his grain. The farmer fills a measuring jar with grain, shaking it to make more room, pressing the grain down to make still more room, and then filling it to overflowing. Then he pours the grain into the laborer's shirt, which he holds out like a sack. The employer wants to give at least a fair portion of wages earned and even more. Jesus says the one who gives a good portion will receive it back in kind.

A couple years ago, a cousin called me in distress, asking for my husband's help in refinancing her oppressive credit card debt. She was miserable in her job, wanted to retire, but given her debt, she felt she would be working forever. Mark agreed to help her develop a financial plan, and we chose to give a gift to help reduce her debt. I also called my Bank of Dad and invited Dad to spend part of my future inheritance on paying off his niece's debt. Dad agreed. It was a joy to call and tell her to expect two checks in the mail! She was able to retire the debt, retire from her miserable job, and regain stability and sanity. Since then when we talk on the phone she is happy, healthy, and shares how she is helping others. I had completely forgotten about the money until last month when she said she wanted to repay us. We hadn't expect that, but it came back to us. Still, the greatest gift is knowing that my cousin is happier and more content than she has been in a long time. If we had some small part in her happiness, thanks be to God!

Jesus encourages us to toss out the ledger sheet; to stop keeping track of gifts given and reciprocity received. Rejoice in the opportunity to share a potato chip even at breakfast, to give a parking space to the next car in line, to double or triple the tip for a service provider. The joy of generosity is among the richest rewards we will ever experience. Thanks be to our Creator God who is exceedingly generous to us!

ⁱ M.J. Ryan, *Radical Generosity: Unlock the Transformative Power of Giving* (Newburyport, MA: Conari Press, 2018), pp. 42-43.

ⁱⁱ *Common English Bible*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, Ryan, pp. 72-73.

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