

FROM SIMPLE TO SACRED

Text: Philippians 4:14-17

LHUMC 11/10/13

Stewardship/*Practicing Extravagant Generosity*

I. Introduction

A. Do you have a simple gift?

1. Something you enjoy doing—maybe you're good at it, maybe not so much, but it's something you get enjoyment from?
2. Maybe what you would define as a hobby?
3. Probably something that in the big picture, you've never really thought was all that important?

B. What are you doing with that gift?

1. Is it strictly for your own enjoyment?
2. Or do you share that skill or what comes from that skill with others?

C. Historians haven't been able to figure out what the simple gift that the Philippians shared with Paul that he was talking about in today's scripture.

1. It probably wasn't money, since we know that the Christians there were at the bottom of the socio-economic heap of Philippi.
2. Maybe it was an act of hospitality, perhaps an offering of food to take with him on his journey.
3. Whatever it was, Paul saw it for what it was—a simple act of generosity.
4. And so he (as someone who tended to be sparing in his thankfulness) was able to say "You were the only church that was generous to me...and I will never forget it."

II. So, intrigued by this passage, and by Monday's reading in the book entitled "As If For the Very First Time" that talks about simple gifts and simple giving, I've been pondering simple gifts and the difference they can make in the lives of those who receive them and those who share them. And my ponderings have brought me to the conclusion that this sharing of even the simple gifts that God has given us with others and with the church is yet another definition of what true generosity really is. Here are some of my other random thoughts.

A. I think kids get this sometimes more than adults.

1. To test my theory, I googled "Stories of Generous Children". And I was blown away with what came up. The screen lit up with stories about kids sharing simple gifts that came to make a difference in other people's lives. Some examples:

- a) There was the little girl in England who held a Pajama Day at her school (where everyone wore pajamas and took pledges) to raise money for victims of the Boston Marathon Bombing.
 - b) There was the boy in Alberta, Canada who began a few years ago by buying five backpacks filled with toys and warm clothes to give away to kids in his town who needed them. Now a few years later, adults have joined him, and they give away over 1,000 backpacks every Christmas.
 - c) There was the girl in Amarillo, Texas who felt so bad for people in her community that lost their homes in the wildfires a year ago that when she invited friends to her fifth birthday party, she had them bring donations for those families instead of gifts for herself.
 - d) And on and on the stories went. You may have a favorite “generous kid” story that you’ve heard recently because there are a lot of them out there.
2. As I’ve pondered these stories, what I’ve come to realize is that kids understand simple gifts and simple giving because that’s all they have. For them, life in general is pretty simple, and so is the act of being generous.
 3. The problem that we adults have sometimes is that we make this whole generosity and stewardship thing too complicated. We tie ourselves in knots trying to figure out whether our gifts are worth sharing and how much of them to share. We stress out about whether we have the time for it, if it’s going to make a difference, etc. etc. Kids tend to just do it.
 4. And one other thing I read this week was about a scientific study that was done on all of these generous kids that are out there these days. Do you know the one thing they had in common? They had parents that modeled generosity for them. Go figure!
- B. Another thing that is true about simple gifts is that we are called to not just share them, but to develop them. And when we do that, it adds meaning to our own life.
1. The book talks about this and raises the example of the fiddle player in the book *Cold Mountain* who was a pretty sorry fiddle player—at least until he was asked to play the one tune that he knew at the bedside of a dying girl.
 2. The devotion quoted the passage about how that experience of sharing a simple gift changed not just his approach to fiddle playing, but his very life. Let me expand it a little: “Time and time again he stopped and looked at the fiddle as if for the first time. He had never before thought about trying to improve his playing, but now it seemed worthwhile to go

at every tune as if all within earshot had been recently set afire. The music he had made up for the girl was the thing he had played every day since. He never tired of it and, in fact, believed the tune to be so inexhaustible that he played it every day for the rest of his life, learning something new each time. His fingers had stopped the strings and his arm had drawn the bow in the shape of the tune so many times by now that he no longer thought about the playing. The notes just happened effortlessly. The tune had become a thing unto itself, a habit that served to give order and meaning to a day's end, as some might pray and others double-check the latch on the door..." (Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain*, p. 232)

3. When we begin to not just share our simple gifts but develop them into something even more, we might just begin to see not just the gift as if for the very first time, but the opportunities that God gives us each and every day to be generous, even in small ways, in the very same way.
 4. And eventually, we begin to see and then live our lives like the fiddler, learning something new every time, making generosity, even in small and simple ways, a habit that gives meaning to our lives.
- C. All of which leads to the reality that the book talks about—that as we get in the habit of being generous, even with our simple gifts, those gifts have a way of moving from simple to sacred.
1. My late father-in-law was always an example of this.
 - a) He was a great woodworker, and when I first got to know him, he was an avid maker of furniture and toys that were pretty amazing in their detail and craftsmanship.
 - b) As he got older, he developed Parkinson's Disease, which affected his ability to make these large and intricate items.
 - c) But his illness didn't keep him from woodworking—over the years, it just meant that he made more simple things--he especially loved to make small crosses made of different kinds of wood.
 - d) And by the end of his life, the other thing that happened was that he was giving away just about all the crosses that he made.
 - e) In retrospect, I think he understood this idea of simple to sacred, or more specifically, that it is perhaps inevitable that as we give away our simple gifts, whether they are crosses or anything else, that they become sacred not just in the eyes of those who receive them, but in the eyes of God.
 - f) In fact, he might have told you that it is in those gifts that are the most simple that we are most likely to find the sacred.

- g) Because by definition, our simple gifts that we give away are the ones that aren't about us, that aren't the ones that glorify us, they are too simple for that. No, these gifts by definition glorify God, and God's ability and willingness to take that which is simple and make it sacred.
- D. And then the other thing I'm realizing is that if we really want to be like Jesus in our generosity, it really does begin with the sharing of our simple gifts. For in Jesus and his life, we see the notion of simple to sacred lived out.
- 1. There is a misconception sometimes from more casual readers of the Bible that Jesus was all about "show and go". That his ministry was filled with big and flashy acts of generosity. You could call it generosity with a capital "G".
 - 2. Upon closer reading, I've realized that this is not always the case. Maybe you remember some of this stories.
 - a) A story in which he gave a simple drink of water to a Samaritan woman at a well, which became the Living water.
 - b) A story in which he gave some simple bread to his disciples that became the Bread of Life.
 - c) A story in which a simple touch from a woman in a crowd became an act of healing.
 - d) And on it on it goes—Jesus' ministry is full of simple acts of generosity that develop into something much more.
 - 3. And so it can be for each of us as we continue to share our simple gifts.
 - 4. And so it can be for our church, for the church at its best is when a group of folks gather together to share the vast array of simple and complimentary gifts that God has given us.
 - 5. That's what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians when he talked about the church as a body—all the parts, simple and complex, inward and outward, working together, sharing together, to become the body of Christ.

III. Conclusion

- A. When I read that sentence in the devotion about the simple to sacred nature of our generosity, I knew that we would have to sing "Simple Gifts" this morning.
- 1. It is a hymn from the Shaker tradition that isn't found in our hymnals.
 - 2. But if you know about the Shakers, that group of early American Christians, you know that they knew about simple gifts.

3. What they are most famous for today is their furniture, which is stunningly beautiful in its simplicity.
 4. Their furniture is symbolic for the way that they lived, which was simple, and yet at the same time generous, sharing what they had with those who were in need.
- B. The words of the hymn that we are about to sing are very instructive about all of this as well.
1. The first verse ends with these words, as you will see: “When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan’t be afraid. To turn, turn, will be our delight, till be turning, turning will be our delight.”
 2. When the Shaker hymnwriter Joseph Brackett wrote those words back in the 1800’s, he recognized even back then, that to value the simple things in life and to share our simple gifts with others meant that we might have to “turn, turn” away from what the world tends to view as valuable—as well as from the mistaken notion that those with the biggest gifts aren’t necessarily the only ones whom God sees as being generous.
 3. And as it says, we need not be ashamed when we have gained an understanding that sharing in a spirit of simplicity can be another way to be truly generous.
 4. Or another way to put it might be that in order to be truly generous, sometimes we have to simplify our lives—that’s kind of what our teaching video was talking about this morning.
- C. So today we give thanks for the generosity that comes from sharing God’s simple gifts.
- D. We give thanks for this church as a place where we come together to share even our simple gifts with each other and with our world, and in doing so, we witness how God takes those gifts to make a difference.