

## ALIGNED WITH GOD'S PURPOSES

Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

LHUMC 11/17/13

Stewardship/*Practicing Extravagant Generosity* #3

### I. Introduction

- A. This week, the phrase that intrigued me was the title of Tuesday's devotional—"Aligned with God's Purposes" .
- B. As I've pondered the phrase, and pondered some of the scriptures that also came to mind, here's what I'm realizing:
  - 1. First is that this phrase is yet another pretty good definition of generosity.
    - a) As the book says, if we are going to align ourselves with God's purposes for our lives, being generous is a huge part of this.
    - b) If you go back to Genesis, at the very beginning, it's pretty clear that God created us to be generous, when it says that God created us to be good stewards of the rest of His created universe.
    - c) The great OT commentator Walter Brueggeman puts it like this: "all creation is infused with the Creator's generosity." That would include us—God created us with the same spirit of generosity that He has, and if we're not, we're out of alignment with his purpose and plan for us.
  - 2. And the witness of scripture reminds us that it's easy to be out of alignment with our generous God. For example:
    - a) I remember the Israelites during the Exodus. When they were starving in the wilderness, God showed them what generosity was all about when he sent the manna from heaven to eat. He sent it with simple instructions—Eat only what you need, and share the rest. And what did they do?—They hoarded it for themselves. A little alignment problem there!
    - b) I think also of that rich farmer that we met now a few months ago and who keeps coming back to my mind. As he built those new barns to keep his ever-increasing hoard of stuff, you get the idea that he too had a little alignment problem.
    - c) And then there is another story that came to my mind. Remember the rich young man who asked Jesus what it would take to get into the Kingdom? And Jesus said that he'd have to give up his stuff? And the rich man basically says, "I don't know, Jesus, I'm not sure I can do that". To which Jesus says,

“It’s easier for a camel to fit through the eye of the needle than for those who are rich to get into the Kingdom.” Historians tell us that “the eye of the needle” was actually a tiny, skinny, little door that was found in the walls of a city. And so I’m picturing at that point, not so much the camel, but the rich young man trying to fit through that skinny little door. It takes a certain alignment to be able to do that—you have to line yourself up just right to do it or you’ll get stuck, which is kind of where the rich young man was at that point--Stuck in his “unalignment” with the purpose that Jesus had for him, which was to be generous with all that he had.

3. And so when Paul describes to the Corinthians this morning the spirit of generosity that he found in the Christians over in Macedonia, when he says literally, “their giving/generosity flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives,” he was actually raising up a somewhat rare example from the Bible of a group of folks who had managed somehow to figure out what it means to be properly aligned with God’s purpose for them .

- a) Perhaps if nothing else, they had figured out that the kind of alignment we are talking about today has nothing to do with what we have, and everything to do with what we give away

II. Beyond those, there were some other non-Biblical images that came to mind.

A. My first car, a 1983 Chevy Chevette.

1. That car had issues—the clutch cable broke about every 10,000 miles , it had some electrical gremlin in the starter, so that sometimes, completely out of the blue it wouldn’t start. But maybe the most annoying thing about that car, was that the front end was constantly going out of alignment.
2. And keep in mind, we lived in Minnesota some of the time we had that car, and if you think the potholes are bad around here, try Minnesota—some of those potholes I remember could have been classified as the sixth Great Lake.
3. But the thing of it was, it didn’t take much of a pothole to throw that Chevette out of alignment. The tiniest little bump could do it.
4. Most of the time when you drove it, one shoulder or the other was sore from trying to keep the thing going straight.
5. By halfway through our first winter in Minnesota, I was on a first-name basis with the guys at the tire place down the street from our apartment.

6. So here's the analogy—as we go through life, on this road of discipleship, it can be easy to get out of alignment.
  - a) Maybe it's a pothole that shows up on the path that gets you going in the wrong direction.
  - b) But in terms of today's topic, it could just be the pull of our possessions, the pull of our misunderstandings of wants and needs, the pull of what our culture teaches us about all of that, that can get us out of alignment.
  - c) Picture yourself driving down a street with your favorite places to shop for those things that you just love to have (maybe it's sporting goods stores or shoe stores or clothing stores or home improvement stores or bookstores or car dealerships—I think I just described Harvey Street) and there is this pull, isn't there? That car seems to just pull in that parking lot on its own power sometimes, doesn't it?
  - d) These tremendous cultural influences to get what we want, to keep up with what our neighbors have can so get us out of alignment with God's purposes for our lives—which is to stay on the straight road of generosity and of faithful sharing and faithful stewardship.
  - e) What is it that pulls you to one side or the other of the road toward more extravagant generosity? We all have those things or attitudes or habits.
  - f) The thing is, as I said before, We need to remember that God created us in his generous image, to stay on the straight path.
  - g) So when we sense our front end going a little out of alignment, if nothing else, we need to remember that—like a brand new car coming off the assembly line, we were created in perfect alignment.
- B. And then there is this image that came up at our brainstorming meeting a while back when we talked about today's message.  
(Domino)
  1. Watch this—the coolest falling domino video I've ever seen.
  2. My brother and I used to spend hours setting up dominoes in long lines—we could only aspire to something like that in our wildest imagination.
  3. But here's the analogy, and it has to do again with proper alignment.

- a) When you set up dominoes in a line for a spectacular display, all it takes is one domino a little out of alignment to stop the whole thing dead in its tracks.
- b) For it to work, they all have to be in alignment.
- c) And so it is with our generosity.
- d) For us as Christians, to be truly generous and to practice truly extravagant generosity, it involves all areas of our lives.
- e) For example, we can be wonderfully aligned with God's purposes in the area of material generosity, and at the same time feel like we just don't have the time to share our spiritual gifts with God and the church.
- f) Actually, it's even more than that—last week when we welcomed some new members, you heard a question that I asked them about their willingness to share their “prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.”
- g) In the United Methodist Church, we call those the five pillars of church membership, because all are equally important for us as we live out our discipleship together here at Lake Harbor.
- h) In light of this morning's message, I might call them the “five dominoes of extravagant generosity”
- i) For to be truly generous to God and the church, we have to be willing to be generous in our prayers for our church, our community, for each other, for those who are hurting, for those around the world.
- j) We have to be generous in our presence—we have to be here in order to grow in our faith and our understanding of what it means to be generous. You can't just drive by out here once in a while and hope that that will happen by osmosis.
- k) We have to be generous in the sharing of our gifts—material and spiritual.
- l) We have to be generous in our service to others wherever we find those who need the kind of love that as followers of Christ we are uniquely qualified to give out.
- m) And we have to be generous in our willingness to witness to the love of Christ, in words and deeds, as we invite others to join us on the journey.
- n) Prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness--If any one of those five dominoes is out of alignment, then the whole generosity chain is broken—for us as individuals and for our church.

- o) And I do think that the falling domino image really works for us as a church. When that chain is falling, what a great example of every piece working cooperatively together, with every one making a sacrifice for a greater goal.
- p) Isn't that what the church is supposed to be?
- q) It's a reminder that extravagant generosity, when it's lived out in the church, is a relational activity. It's not about me or you, it's about us. Like those dominoes, we all fall together, or not at all!

### III. Conclusion

- A. And then the other thing I'm realizing is that we United Methodists should know something about being aligned with God's purposes through our generosity.
  - 1. Why? Because our founder, John Wesley had a favorite adjective that he used to describe God's most generous gift to us, the gift of grace.
  - 2. He loved to talk about "justifying grace", which he understood as the only thing that makes it even possible for us to ever align ourselves and our lives with God's purposes for us. He understood that we could never do it on our own or through our own efforts.
  - 3. If you spend any time typing on a computer, you see the connection—when we "justify" the lines in a document, they become perfectly aligned with each other.
  - 4. Which just goes to show that John Wesley beat Microsoft to the punch by about 250 years!
  - 5. He understood that it is only through the extravagantly generous gift of God's justifying grace through Jesus Christ that we can in turn be extravagantly generous ourselves.
  - 6. That because God aligned himself with us by sending Christ into the world, we can now be aligned with God
  - 7. One commentator puts it like this: "To be a Christian is to receive grace. To receive grace entails becoming a conduit of (that) grace through...acts of generosity toward others. (Daniel Harrell, "Pressed into Service", *Christian Century*, June 27, 2006, p. 16)
  - 8. That gift of grace is like the first little nudge of that first domino in the line—as we receive it, we share it with the next in line, and they share it with the next in line, and on and on it goes.
  - 9. And if our lives are in alignment with God, and if we are in alignment with each other, what a cool thing this generosity can be.

10. This time of year, when we are preparing to express our thankfulness to God for all that God has provided for us, may we never forget to be thankful for God's ultimate gift—the gift of grace that allows us to practice our own versions of extravagant generosity.