

FRUITFUL LIVING: EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

Text: 2 Corinthians 9:8-15

LHUMC 11/4/12

Stewardship/All Saints

- I. Introduction—Extravagant generosity
 - A. Today, Bishop Schnase’s adjective may be the toughest one of all.
 1. I looked it up—to be extravagant in something means to “exceed the bounds of what is reasonable” or “to go beyond what is justifiable”.
 2. I read those definitions and it would seem that to be extravagant makes no sense at all.
 3. And he says we’re supposed to be that way in our generosity?
 4. No wonder it’s hard—aren’t we taught when it comes to what we have—money, possessions, time, talents, to be reasonable? To dole it out carefully, to save for a rainy day, to take care of ourselves first?
 - II. Of course it’s hard—and our good bishop never says that it isn’t! In fact, he lists some reasons why it’s hard to be extravagantly generous in all things—to sum it up:
 - A. First and foremost is the fear.
 1. Fear that if we’re too extravagant, we’ll have to give up some of our stuff that makes us “happy”—(and I put that in quotes because as we’ll see in a minute, generosity has a lot to do with figuring out what really makes you happy.)
 2. You may know that Jesus talked about money more than anything else, and usually when he did, it was on this part of it.
 3. He talked about foolish farmers who built bigger and bigger barns for the crops that they couldn’t take with them when they went.
 4. He talked about birds and flowers that were happy (truly happy) and beautiful because they knew that God always provided them with enough to get by.
 5. When Annette and I made the commitment to tithe years ago, we knew going in that we were going to need to be content with shorter vacations that were closer to home, and becoming good bargain hunters, and all the rest. And as you know, so it goes with any of us when we try to be a little more extravagant in our generosity.
 6. And as you also know, what goes along with being more extravagant is that it is always accompanied by a greater trust in God that enough is enough and we can get by with what is left.
 - B. The other point he emphasizes is that becoming more extravagant is hard work.

1. And by that, he means spiritual work.
2. It's kind of interesting that when I've asked people over the years about what spiritual disciplines are important to them, their answers are fairly predictable—I hear of things like prayer, and reading the Bible, daily devotions, etc. All of which are great, and should be a part of our discipline as disciples.
3. It's kind of rare, however, when someone mentions “stewardship” or “giving” or “sharing” as something on that list of disciplines.
4. But to care for and be generous toward God's creation, which is what stewardship is, really is a spiritual discipline.
5. Like our prayer life or Bible-reading life, how often we are truly and extravagantly generous says more about where we are in our relationship with God than anything else.
6. And by definition, anything that is a “discipline” in our life is hard work.
7. He says that extravagant generosity requires “focused work, deep conviction, a mature spirit, learning, practice, and extraordinary intentionality.” Wow! Is that all?
8. It just goes to show that nobody said it was going to be easy!

III. And so amidst all of this talk about why it's so hard, he also gives some keys to figure out that can make it possible for us to be more extravagant in our generosity. Of those, a couple are especially important:

A. Ownership

1. The question is, who really owns our stuff?
2. He says that the options are pretty simple—we can see the material things in our lives as owned by God, and we are just here to manage them, or we can see them as owned and completely controlled by us.
3. Any time the scriptures talk about stewardship, and stewards, beginning at the very beginning in Genesis 1, where we humans are created last and instructed to be “good stewards” of everything that was created before us, it's always about “management” and “caring for” and being “responsible for” instead of “ownership”.
4. When you understand that it's not ours to take with us, that is so tremendously freeing—we are freed to be more extravagant in our generosity because when we are, we understand that it's just giving it back to the One who created it to begin with and still owns it.

B. The other factor that I talked about before is “Contentment”.

1. And here the question is “What is it that really makes me happy?” (with the emphasis on the “really”)
2. He quotes Paul in Philippians with that one verse, which even more than what we heard him tell us already in 2 Corinthians, is the key to

being generous—"I have learned to be content with whatever I have."
(Stewardship/Generosity 101)

3. Until we become content with what we have, it's hard to get off the treadmill where we work harder and harder and are busier and busier, trying to reach that elusive "enough" that just has to be out there somewhere, all the time really not moving anywhere ahead, spiritually speaking.
4. He calls it "breaking the cycle of conditioned discontent."
 - a) It's conditioned in that our society teaches us to always want more, and that we can only be content with more.
 - b) And it's a cycle in that once you are on that treadmill, it takes that really hard spiritual work that we talked about before to get off and truly move forward.

IV. And so if that's why it's hard and those are a couple of the keys to it all, and so what about saints? What's up with talking about extravagant generosity on All Saints' Sunday?

- A. One of those "mixed emotion" times of my job is when I meet with a family of someone who has just passed on and we are talking about the service and what that's going to be like.
 1. Obviously, what happens in those times is that we end up talking way more about the person that we're getting ready to celebrate than the service itself.
 2. And what inevitably happens is that I hear all of these stories and memories.
 3. And what they always have in common is that people remember what their grandma or grandpa or mom or dad or son or daughter shared with them. They are always stories about extravagant generosity, every one of them. Some day maybe I'll write a book with some of those stories, and I can entitle it "Extravagant Generosity"
 4. They are about everyday activities like baking Christmas cookies and homemade chocolate sauce and frying fish and camping trips and bike rides and teaching how to play Chinese checkers or how to fish and being hospitable and friendly to neighbors. They are stories about faith, stories about encouragement, but most of all stories about generosity—of people sharing their gifts with those around them.
 5. They are stories and experiences that if you are on the outside looking in, perhaps don't seem all that remarkable. But to those of you who have a name on the list today, whose memories are still right there and vivid, you know them for what they are because you were there, and you were on the receiving end of that extravagant generosity

6. Story by Heidi Newmark (poet and pastor)
7. I like that image—maybe one definition of a saint is one who hangs something on the door for the rest of us, urging us, encouraging us to be the people God calls us to be. Maybe that too is an example of extravagant generosity—the sharing of the gift of love and encouragement and support.
8. And stories like that, and stories like I’ve heard about the saints that we celebrate today remind us that that kind of love and support and generosity are possible for us.
9. They are a reminder that to be a saint in this life doesn’t mean that we’re perfect, but it does mean that we keep running this race that we keep talking about—this race that is a marathon, and not a sprint. This race that is in the end, all about becoming even in small ways, more extravagant in our generosity.

V. Conclusion

A. One final reminder—it’s so simple and fundamental that it’s easy to overlook.

1. Never forget how extravagantly generous God has been and will continue to be with us.
2. Don’t forget that this is the God who extravagantly gave us the gifts of these saints that we celebrate today, who gave us the time that we had with them and will have with them in the life to come.
3. Don’t forget this is the God who extravagantly gave us everything we have to share with others and with the world.
4. And finally, don’t forget that this is the God who extravagantly gave us the gift of His son, who lived and died for us so that we might be freed to be extravagantly generous.
5. As we gather now at his table we prepare to experience again this most extravagant gift.
6. We will also as a part of the communion liturgy read the names of those saints that we remember today. There will also be moment of silence at the end of the reading of the names for you to speak aloud names of other saints in your life or to simply remember them in silence.