

“Learning to Live Generously”  
October 15, 2023

Isaiah 1:10-18  
II Thessalonians 2:13-17

Through the prophet Isaiah, God calls out to the leaders and to the people. Isaiah speaks to those in the nation of Judah, to the residents of Jerusalem. But he imagines them as the leaders of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah.

And when we hear those names, our ears perk up. They get our attention much in the same way that they would have seized the attention of Isaiah’s original audience. Because of the ways in which these two ancient cities are regarded in popular imagination, however, we cannot go further in hearing the words of the prophet or thinking about the meaning of those words without first exploring just what was really going on in those places.

Since Isaiah doesn’t really say, let’s start with another prophet: In the sixteenth chapter of the book of Ezekiel, that prophet says, “This was the guilt of...Sodom. [They] had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Centuries later, when Jesus speaks of this city, the context suggests that the inhospitableness of the people, their lack of welcome for strangers is what best characterized its failing and caused its downfall.

This is what we are actually dealing with when we read about Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible in general and in Isaiah in particular: Prosperity. A lack of concern for the poor in their midst and hostility toward strangers who sojourn among them.

Isaiah addresses people separated from God and therefore lacking in generosity. The prophet calls both leaders and the common people to listen to the teaching of God. The word that Isaiah uses here is *torah*, the familiar word used for the Law, the Way that Moses taught. All the people, the high and the low are called to hear this teaching, to learn again what God requires—that they might learn to do good.

Consistently in scripture, doing good is connected to a generous spirit and generous actions.

So, I have a question for you this morning: How did you learn to be generous?

Who taught you?

I ask this because generosity is a defining characteristic of this congregation. This is not, by any means, the case with all churches. Congregations can be stingy. Congregations can be overly cautious. Perhaps you know congregations like that. I once had a conversation with an associate UCC conference minister in Connecticut. He asked me, “What’s the culture of money in your congregation?”—that is in the church I was then serving. I said, “Well, it’s a little strange for me, coming from the Midwest,” I said. “It’s as though we have money, but we act like we don’t.” “Welcome to New England,” he replied.

Michael Durall, who served on the stewardship committee in his church in suburban Boston, knows what he’s talking about when he says the problem is not only with church members but, well, also with church leaders:

Members of mainline traditions are rarely challenged to increased generosity. Church leaders often believe that asking people to increase their giving would *offend them*. Thus many congregations accept small gifts from parishioners, usually in the form of weekly envelopes or through the annual pledge drive. Over time, congregations inadvertently reinforce the belief that giving little is acceptable. It is not uncommon for church leaders to believe that parishioners, despite outward signs of wealth, have little to give; or that parishioners are giving as much as they can . . . The small-gift mentality that exists in many congregations diminishes people's capacity to grow spiritually in personal faith and to grow in character as human beings.<sup>1</sup>

That's the key, isn't it? Generosity—in how we give, in how we act—gives us the opportunity to grow in faith and to grow in character.

I don't know. It seems to me that some congregations just don't want to be generous. Or they can't live graciously out of the abundance that they have. Or they lack a spirit of liberality. Or all of the above.

The good news is that it's different here.

This congregation is generous and actually seems to welcome it when we are challenged to increased generosity. We share a joyful spirit of giving—a giving of time, a sharing of abilities, and, yes, a joyful giving of money. We give freely to support the work that happens in this place. We give freely to maintain this wonderful and temperamental old building. And we also give generously to support, among other things, disaster relief efforts in the United States and theological education in southern Africa, as we have in recent months.

It's different here.

So again, I ask, how did you learn to be generous?

Who taught you?

Was it a family member who helped you learn how to give? Did you have parents or grandparents who were generous with their time or their abilities or their money whose example showed you a path to follow?

Maybe you learned from a friend the importance of giving for living.

Perhaps it was something that you read somewhere.

I remember many years ago reading Karl Menninger saying: "Money giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. Generous people," Menninger concluded, "are rarely mentally ill." I'm not sure if he was suggesting that giving is the cause or the effect of mental health, but there certainly seemed to be some connection that recommended generosity.

Last Sunday I mentioned John Templeton, the financial advisor and zillionaire, who said that in all his years of working with people he never encountered anyone who was generous in their giving who did not grow in both wealth and happiness. When I first read that, many years ago, wealth and happiness both seem good to me. They still do.

In fact, you might have learned to be generous simply by giving and experiencing the happiness that came with that.

It might even be that you learned to be generous from someone in this congregation or another congregation. A friend once told how, when he was a young adult and a new member in a church, two older members took him aside and told him, “We want you to know our theory of giving. Give first and you never miss what you don’t have.” It worked for him for decades to come as he, too, grew in wealth and happiness.

“Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught...” we hear in that Second Letter to the Thessalonians. When we have learned generosity and practiced generosity it seems to stay with us.

We have learned from the Psalmist that God gives generously and has no needs. We have learned from Isaiah that this same God calls us to cease to do evil and to seek justice. We have learned not only from the scripture that we read and the people in our lives. We have also learned from our liberal Protestant tradition. Liberality—generous giving—is a foundational part of our heritage, built upon the knowledge that each person is made in the image of God. Out of this deep faith, we call on our political and religious institutions to be generous. Out of this deep faith, we call each of us as individuals to the same generosity.

Our own Marilynne Robinson makes this clear in her troubling essay, “Open Wide Thy Hand: Moses and the Origin of American Liberalism.” For many years now, I’ve read it each fall as I think about my own generosity. You can find that essay in her collection *When I Was a Child I Read Books*. But I must tell you, it is some of her most disturbing writing.

We seek to be generous people. Quite often, by the grace of God we *are* generous people. And when we are not, we confess this, well, this *sin*, seek forgiveness and pray that God will continue to work in our lives.

Which is why it is so important for each of us individually and all of us as congregation to seek to continue to grow in generosity.

One translation of II Thessalonians expresses the prayer: “May God, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, put a fresh heart in you.”

We who have learned to be generous have the responsibility—I might say we have the *calling*—to share this tradition with others.

This calling is both a great challenge and a great opportunity.

In our consumer culture, young people are not deaf or blind to all the messages sent about *having*, whether in the comment of a friend or the words of a television ad or the great number of posts on social media. The messages are everywhere. In the face of this we recognize that our values and the commitments of this congregation need to be as much a part of the fabric of children’s lives as the values of the market. We need to make it readily apparent to the children and youth of this congregation that liberality, generosity, and respect for the value of each person characterize who we are as God’s people in this place.

Isaiah recognized it—and we should as well. Faithful people, people in the community of a church are always in danger of succumbing to the ethos of the world around us. But we are also able to announce to the world that there are still higher values. We can say that something else matters more than money and profit.

We are encouraged by Mary Jo Bane, who is a professor of public policy and management at Harvard's Kennedy School, who says: "Churches are among the few institutions I see that [can] provide forums for deliberations based on our values and our morals and our commitments—as a kind of counter to the market."<sup>2</sup>

Churches—and I think she means congregations like this one—need to be leading the discussion about value and human worth. In more and more places money seems to be all that matters. Consequently, what Professor Bane calls "our values and our morals and our commitments" are indeed threatened.

But in the church—again, in *this church*, we keep discovering that the God of surprising generosity puts a fresh heart within us.

A liberal spirit will be generous with all things—with love and patience, with sweat and effort, with prayer and companionship. And yes, with money as well.

God does not need our gifts. But by the grace of God, we discover generous giving as an expression of God's love for us and our love for God.

We've been hearing a lot about "stewardship" and the fall pledge campaign around here in recent weeks. And, yes, it will be great if you fill out and return a pledge card and support our congregation in ways that astonish and delight. But what we're really talking about in these days is a far greater matter than how much we're giving to the church each week. It's about how we are living each day. It's part of how we learn to do good and seek justice.

How did you learn to be generous?

Who taught you?

Give thanks that you have had such people in your life.

May God continue to put a new heart in each of us and all of us, that as people who have learned to be generous, we may teach others as well.

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<sup>1</sup>*Creating Congregations of Generous People*, pg. 4.

<sup>2</sup>*Harvard Magazine*, July-August 1999, pg. 99.