

“Beginning with Generosity”
October 16, 2022

Isaiah 43:18-21
II Corinthians 5:17-20

I want to take a few minutes to speak about stewardship this morning—about our wise use of all that we have received from God’s so good and gracious hand. And before I get too far into this, I simply want to observe that ours is a very well-rested congregation. You are all obviously getting plenty of sleep!

I don’t say this because you all seem so alert as I speak this morning.

It’s just that I recently read an article in the *Washington Post* with the title: “Too Little Sleep Makes People Less Generous.” Apparently so.

Less willing to give.

Less willing to help others—even family members and friends.

Our congregation, on the other hand, has a strong tradition of generosity and actually seems to welcome it when we are challenged to increased generosity. We share a joyful spirit of giving—readily offering our time, eagerly sharing our abilities, and, yes, showing a joyful generosity in giving money. We give freely to support our common ministry that happens in this place. We give freely to maintain this wonderful and temperamental old building.

We give generously to support, among other things, theological education in South Africa. Last Monday, a group from our congregation met with members of the Soweto Gospel Choir to welcome them to Iowa City. They were thrilled to learn about our long-standing connection to South Africa through our giving.

And we also support disaster relief efforts and hunger relief efforts. This month, we heard that the CommUnity Crisis Center Food Pantry is low on food and we responded by donating hundreds of pounds of food. Thanks! And you can still give more if you want.

One of the best things about this is that we are passing on our joyful spirit of giving to the next generation.

Last Sunday I sat up here as Bill and Tim played that wonderful offertory duet and the ushers walked through the congregation with the offering plates. At the back of sanctuary, I saw one of the children of the church go to the end of his pew with an envelope. There he stood waving it, as if to impatiently signal to the usher: “Hey! Here’s my offering! Hurry up! Come and get it!”

It was a beautiful sight.

I’ll know we’re really doing well when the adults start standing up and waving their envelopes—but even now we *are* a generous congregation. And I give thanks to God who has inspired such generosity in our hearts.

I think of our church and I want to change the punchline to that old stewardship joke. You know, the one in which the minister stands up and tells the congregation: “I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is that we have all the money we need. The bad news is that it’s in your pockets.”

The reality here is just good news. The good news is that we have all the money we need. The good news is that you are always reaching into your pockets and giving generously.

We can all be grateful for that.

So again, keep getting all the sleep you need to get in order to keep giving all that you need give.

While a lack of sleep is not our problem, we do face two challenges to our joyful generosity in these days. I want to lift them up so what we can be aware of them and meet them head-on.

The first challenge is a growing sense of scarcity in our world and even in our congregation. The ongoing war against Ukraine threatens to bring higher prices for fuel worldwide. Inflation seems to be raising the price of everything. The stock markets tumble and reduce the value of investments. A recession threatens.

Here in our congregation, members have moved, members have died. We’re in a time of new beginning, but we worry because not everyone who was with us on the journey before the pandemic is with us now. We worry: will there be *enough*?

You probably know that generosity can be constricted by a sense of scarcity. There’s that very human response to hold on tightly to what we’ve got when there doesn’t seem to be enough.

And yet generosity can expand as we discover abundance.

The Hebrew word for “salvation” comes from a root that suggests “space and freedom and security that are gained by the removal of constriction.” The good news of salvation is deliverance from what “constricts” us.

It helps to remember.

Remember those times in your own lives and in the life of our congregation when fear of not having enough of something, while understandable, proved unfounded. Remember times when, although you thought the roof would fall in, it never did. Or times when the roof did fall in, but this was not the end after all—times when serious trouble proved not to have the last word.

By remembering, we open our eyes and our hearts to the signs of God’s open hand in our lives and our congregation. In this way we are “saved”—set free from the grip of the lies that scarcity whispers into our hearts. We are set free for generosity.

By opening our eyes and our hearts to the abundance of God we discover how much we have received. We grow in our ability to share with others. And the strange thing is, when we share, when we give, the roof usually just stays in the same place, doesn’t it?

God is the giver of all good things and we live our lives in the presence of this generous Giver. When scarcity urges us to constrict, let us remember that there is a power in the universe that is immeasurably superior to ourselves.

We can face and overcome the challenge of scarcity by opening ourselves to God's abundance.

While scarcity is an age-old challenge to generosity, there is also a new challenge that we face in these new days.

We're used to giving for what is familiar. We're used to giving at times when we know that the future will be pretty much like the recent past and the present.

But that's not how things are now. And this, too, challenges our generosity.

One person gives us an historical perspective when she says that "Rather quickly, in the New World, the Congregationalists became, *as churches are always in danger of becoming*, complacent and doctrinaire."ⁱ

That's certainly part of the challenge. Whether in the seventeenth or the twenty-first century, we Congregationalists can lapse into thinking that everything is fine just as it is—or, as is often the case right now, everything was fine just as it was.

I have to confess that on bad days, that's what I think. I tell myself: We were doing just fine—new members were joining, programs were developing, worship was well-attended, our mission in the world was significant, giving was strong. And then this pandemic came along. We just need to get back to where we were.

Then I hear those words of God through the prophet—and you heard them along with me this morning: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness..."

The "former things," the "things of old," were central to who God's people were: the Exodus from Egypt, a path through mighty waters.

The "former things," the "things of old," are all the good things that were going on three years ago.

But God is doing a new thing. It is springing forth even now, even though we aren't quite sure what it looks like, even though we don't quite perceive it.

We are not in familiar times. The future very well will not look like the past. So the leaders of our congregation are inviting us to give generously, not so that we can become like we were but so that we might be part of the new beginning that God is making in our midst in these days.

We are not in a familiar time.

And that's OK, because we are in God's time. We are in God's care.

Here's the thing. It might not always be comfortable around here in these days.

But it's been said that a congregation "is a *healthy congregation*, though not necessarily always a *comfortable* congregation if it is receiving new members (and we will do that during worship on October 30), is passing on the faith (and that child waving his offering envelope is just one example of that), and is in earnest dialogue about what is importantⁱⁱ (and from masks to mission we are talking about what matters with a new and creative openness and honesty).

At our best, that's what we've been doing and will continue to do. At our best, we will be healthy, if not always comfortable.

I think it was Scott Peck who pointed out that we are—all of us—survivors. As difficult as things have gotten for us as individuals—and as a congregation—at times, it hasn't been our end.

Nor are these unfamiliar and changing days our end.

Life—and not death—has the final word.

God has the final word and that word is "Yes."

The God of surprising generosity is doing a new thing in us and among us and through us. The God of surprising generosity is making us a new creation in Christ. "Everything old has passed away," Paul tells us.

And he adds: Open your eyes. "See! Everything has become new."

Rather than the roof falling in, we are able to see the abundance of this world, the abundance of our lives, the abundance of God.

Let your generosity grows out of the abundance and joy that surround you.

Let us continue to move forward through this new beginning.

Let us begin with generosity.

ⁱ Elizabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer*, pg. 92.

ⁱⁱ Gil Rendle, *The Multigenerational Congregation*.