

“The Year of Living Generously”
October 8, 2023

Proverbs 11:24-26
II Corinthians 8:1-9

When we welcomed the University students in August, we handed out ice pops, a small—and free!—offering of refreshment on hot summer days. A lot of students received them gladly, some stopped to talk, and they all went on their way.

One student, however, came back. He had gone downtown on several errands. An hour or so later, he returned to the church with a box of ice pops and gave them to us so that we could continue handing them out to other students.

As we heard from Proverbs this morning: “One who gives water will get water.”

This student was a living example of what we have known around here for some time: generosity leads to generosity.

I was thinking about that experience this week as I mulled over those Proverbs and Paul’s words to the church in Corinth. These scripture lessons invite us into a life of generosity.

When you give it some thought, ongoing giving to congregations—and to this congregation in particular—should astonish us. There are many reasons for this giving, but as one person has pointed out, the fact is that “People give more money to their places of worship than to *any other organization*. Dedicated churchgoers give to their congregations for decades on end, through good times and bad. They see ministers come and go, adjust to variations in worship, and as the years go by, accept all manner of changes, many of which they may not like. Yet large numbers of parishioners give generously their entire lives, until they draw their final breaths—and indeed after, as they often include church in their wills and estate plans.”¹

Astonishing. But you know that because that is what you do. You know about giving.

So, this morning, even though I promised the Stewardship Board that I would preach a stewardship sermon, I’m not going to talk about giving.

And I know that some of the Trustees are getting anxious right now! They’re thinking: This is October! You’re supposed to talk about giving! We’ve got bills to pay—and, Bill, certainly *you* want to get paid. They look at the financial shortfall that we’ve been expecting all year and they’d like someone—probably me—to encourage someone—probably you—to give more this year and to pledge to give more next year.

I’ll come back to those Trustees in a few minutes.

And please understand me. There’s nothing wrong with giving. Go ahead and give. It’s just that there’s probably some truth in the survey that found no more than 3% of people give because of the urging of their minister. Three per cent! So much or all those stewardship sermons in all those Octobers!

This morning, instead of encouraging you to give, I want to encourage you to develop a gift that you already have within you—the gift of generosity. It is a gift that you have known and a gift that you have been shown.

I want to encourage you to live generously.

And we can start with those words from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians that we heard this morning.

For a variety of reasons, the early Christian congregation in Jerusalem needed financial support. The leaders of that church—James, Peter, and John—and as we’ve been learning in the recent adult education sessions, no doubt several prominent but unnamed women—asked for a collection among the Gentile churches that were developing.

And the church in Corinth responded. When Paul wrote the words we heard this morning, they had already been collecting money for the church in Jerusalem for over a year. But knowing these faithful yet difficult people, Paul thought that they could be more generous.

A lot of people think of Paul as being harsh and judgmental, but he was actually pretty good at calling forth the best in a congregation—even a congregation as troubled as those Corinthians. So he wrote to the Corinthians, and encouraged their generosity by reminding them that, since they excel in so much, they should also excel in generosity.

And he also told them about the Christians in Macedonia.

Now, the Christians in Macedonia were poor. The whole region was suffering greatly under the Romans. Added to their poverty was their persecution. Yet when they heard about the need of the poor in Jerusalem, their response was a generosity that, as Paul saw it, grew out of nothing less than the grace of God.

So, Paul told the Corinthians what those Macedonians had done: “Their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” Paul is gently suggesting that certainly the Corinthians wouldn’t want to be outdone by the Macedonians. It would be like suggesting that the people over at Faith UCC are more generous than the folk here at the corner of Jefferson and Clinton.

How would we respond? With our own growing generosity.

Being a generous person is one of life’s great privileges.

So where do we begin?

We grow in generosity by

Living with joy in the presence of God.

Sharing abundance in many ways.

Developing our financial resources.

Generosity grows as we live with joy in the presence of a loving God.

Our culture teaches us that money is power. Our culture teaches us that money is security. “What our culture teaches us is true—for our culture. In the United States—and, let’s face, here in Iowa City—if people have money, our culture grants them prestige, power, and security. Our culture values people with money.”²

Our faith, however, teaches us that we are more than our culture; we are more than our money. Each one of us has a value far beyond that given to us by our culture.

You are valued as a child of God. You are valued as a human being created in the image of God. Each of us and all of us have value in the sight of God for who we are and whose we are. No prosperity, no adversity can change your worth.

Generosity does not grow out of a sense of wealth. Survey after survey indicates that poorer people give away a greater percentage of their income than wealthy people. Generosity does not develop as we look around and see how much we’ve got. Usually that leaves us thinking we’d like a little more.

Generosity grows as we live with joy in the presence of a loving God. God loves you. Let that reality sink into your heart this week and see the difference it makes.

We develop generosity by sharing God’s abundance in many ways.

Generosity is not primarily about money—it is about a spirit that is ready to share many gifts in many ways. That readiness to share grows out of an attitude of gratitude.

We give thanks for the beautiful, safe homes we live in. And we find ourselves wanting to share that goodness, seeking to make sure everyone has the shelter, the home they need. Generosity grows.

We give thanks for the food we have, the meals we enjoy with family and friends. And we find ourselves wanting to share that goodness with others. We support the food pantry at the CommUnity Crisis Center with our time, our money. We serve at the Free Lunch Program—once again this month. We support the Agapé Café down the street at Old Brick, providing free breakfasts. Generosity grows.

We are thankful for the love we have received—so we are generous in giving love.

We are thankful for the forgiveness we have received—so we are generous in forgiving others.

We are thankful for the grace we have received—so we are generous in extending grace to others.

Generosity is about much more than money. It grows as we share God’s abundance in many ways.

And yes, generosity does include how we relate to our money. It grows as we develop our financial resources.

The advice of John Wesley might help here—even though we are not Methodists. Wesley famously advised for things: “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can, for as long as

you can.” While warning that no one should gain wealth at the expense of their health or their life, Wesley knew that earning and saving, the development of our financial resources helps us to develop the possibility of generosity.

There is some truth in the idea that what we do with our money is what we do with our life—and that what we do with our life is what we do with our money. The person who is developing, building, growing his or her financial resources is also growing and developing his or her life. We are not asked to grab and hoard, conserve and hold our financial resources. We are asked to develop and grow those resources.

One part of developing our financial resources is being generous with them. John Templeton, the financial advisor and zillionaire, said that in all his years of working with people, he never encountered anyone who was generous who didn't grow in both wealth and happiness.

Develop generosity as you develop your financial resources.

We grow in generosity by

Living with joy in the presence of God.

Sharing abundance in many ways.

Developing our financial resources.

As we grow the possibility of generosity in our individual lives, we grow that possibility as a congregation as well. And this is why I'm thankful for the concern and work of our Trustees—even if they might worry about my “stewardship” sermon. The Trustees in one congregation were described as the group that stood between the congregation's heart and its wallets and purses. Here at Congregational UCC, the Trustees—and the Stewardship Board—are better seen as the group that allows this congregation with a heart to reach around and get to those wallets and purses.

As we develop the possibility of generosity, we start to discover that we do live in the presence of a loving God who gives to us in abundance and invites us to similar generosity. We begin to relax a little and trust in the God who provides. We develop our financial resources—the gifts and offerings that come to us—not out of a spirit of fear for tomorrow but out of a spirit of hope in the future that is in God's hands.

I don't want to encourage you to give this morning—as I said, the studies suggest you won't respond to that plea anyway. I do want to encourage you to grow in generosity.

Like those Corinthian Christians, as you excel in everything, so excel in generosity.

I invite you to discover what might happen if you make the coming year the year of living generously—and maybe even start that in the remaining months of 2023. As a congregation, we need people who are growing the possibility of generosity. We need people who are generous in teaching others about the love of God. We need people who are generous in compassion and caring. We need people who are generous in hospitality and welcome. We need people to share with newer, younger members their own history of generosity before God.

Receive the love of God.

Receive the generosity of God.

Grow as generous people.

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Michael Durall, *Creating Congregations...*, pg. ix.

² Callahan, *12 Keys*, pg. 150.