

A Generous Life Week 1: We Are Blessed

Genesis 1:27-31; Deut. 8:17-18; Matthew 6:26

We are in a brand-new series today, and it's one we do every single year, focused on Stewardship. And yes, if you're keeping track, that means that we just spent 4 weeks talking about religion and politics and NOW we're going to talk about MONEY!

And sometimes this topic gets us almost as squirmy as the last series. We feel a little weird talking about money, maybe our financial state is something that causes us a lot of anxiety, maybe we feel a little defensive when we see a pastor start to talk about generosity, because it's like, "oh yeah. I know where this is going. She just wants my money."

So I want to just name those things, and also name the fact that Jesus talked about money a lot. He taught that our relationship with money isn't something we experience in a vacuum, but that our relationship to money is deeply intertwined with how we relate to God. So I want to encourage you to let yourself be really curious about this area of your life. How DO you engage with your finances? What role DOES money play in your faith and your life?
(SLIDE) What does it mean to live a generous life?

We actually asked that question in a small survey of St. Luke's folks a few weeks ago. There were lots of interesting responses, especially around how faith influences the actual practice of generosity. And as we're looking at this on All Saints Day, it feels like a good moment to point out that so many of the answers had to do with this spirit and practice of generosity being handed down from parents and grandparents and people who are no longer with us, but whose legacy is so very clearly lived out in the way that they give.

One responder shared:

I was fortunate to have parents who instilled in me the importance of generosity even though we were not wealthy. They tithed at our church, and that had to be some very small amounts in the collection plate each Sunday. I watched and helped give our food away as well as invite people into our home. There always seemed to be enough to go around. Their faith in Jesus Christ became my faith and made a lifetime impression on me.

When I hear that kind of perspective, it's a good reminder of what it takes to cultivate a generous life. Because while what we do is important, the action we take isn't actually where we begin this conversation. Living a generous life actually begins with understanding some truths about what

makes a generous life in the first place. And today, we want to start by exploring this idea that we are blessed people.

We're looking at a few different scriptures as we unpack this, and to quote one of my favorite movies of all time, the Sound of Music, let's start at the very beginning--it's a very good place to start!

But it's true, because if we go all the way back in the biblical narrative, to the very beginning of creation in Genesis 1, we have the scene set for us. We have this creative God who looks at the world that's being formed and gives it every single thing it needs. In this moment of creation, God is exceptionally generous. There's unlimited blessing, unlimited resources, and God looks around, at all of this abundance, at all of this creation...and God says every single thing that's going on here--it's good.

From the very beginning of the creation story, this is what the storytellers wanted people to know: God is generous. God is kind. And because of those things, we are blessed.

That's how our whole beginning gets framed. And what's so fascinating about this is that we don't even see scarcity enter the picture until this thing that we know as "the fall". You know when Adam and Eve eat the apple and they're

like “Oh no, we're naked. We need to figure this out on our own.” THAT is when we see these feelings come into the story. That’s when we see the first encounter with of all these “what ifs”: **(SLIDE)**

What if we don't have enough?

What if we don't know enough?

What if we can't be enough?

Those are real questions. My guess is most of us are holding at least one of those questions in this very moment...but I don't think that was God's intent for how this world would be and how humans would live. Because God is generous. And God is kind. And God gives what we need.

It’s just hard to believe that sometimes. And it’s hard to believe that we not only have enough, but for some of us, it’s hard to see the abundance that we’re living in. And it makes sense because the message that we often hear and internalize is that we simply don’t have enough. And while for some people that is absolutely true, for some, it’s absolutely not. I would actually argue that for a lot of us who have what we need and have MORE than we need...sometimes those of us in that situation struggle to see the abundance of what we have the most.

During college, I worked for a short-term missions organization in Chicago, where we would host youth groups for a week during the summer. As part of the prep process for the churches we hosted, they'd fill out an intake form telling us a bit more about their context. We quickly realized that nearly every single church categorized themselves as being "middle class." While this was sometimes true, often we found that very wealthy churches were using this term to describe themselves. One of the most memorable examples was a church from the Highland Park neighborhood of Dallas. This is an exceptionally wealthy area. The median income is \$250k a year and the median home value is \$1.68 million.

That's not exactly middle class. But it was such a real example of how sometimes our self-perception and the reality that we are living can be very different. And it matters that we notice this difference because if we give into this idea that we're living in scarcity and that we don't have enough, it can become really hard to live in a way that IS generous. We can start to forget who God is and how God works and we start to hold on just a little too tightly to what we have.

And so that's where this passage from Deuteronomy has a lot to teach us. We read just a few verses from chapter 8 but if you go back and look at this entire chapter in the

book of Deuteronomy, the whole point here is: **(SLIDE)**
Remember. Remember. Remember.

This is the story of the ancient Israelites, and remembering is so key for them. They've been through some really extreme ups and downs throughout their history. They've lived as enslaved people in the land of Egypt, and then they've experienced this moment of freedom and release and that leads to this really strange wilderness season, where they don't feel like they have a lot of stability, they don't feel like they have a lot of abundance. In fact, even though they're living and breathing and they're free...my guess is that for most of that wilderness season, they don't really feel very blessed. It's probably a lot easier for them to see the scarcity in front of them instead of the blessing that God is providing. It's probably a lot easier to see the struggle than to see how God is at work.

And in this specific chapter of Deuteronomy, God is kind of laying out this road map for the people. Highlighting their history and pointing them towards their future. They need to remember all of this because even though they are in the wilderness, soon enough, the Israelites are going to get out of this wandering wilderness season and they're going to get to this land that they've been waiting for. They're going to get to this place where they can settle and they can build and they're going to feel like ahh...we

have a home finally. And so they are about to actually have a lot of abundance. They are about to experience all the things that they have ever wanted; they are about to get exactly what they've been hoping for and praying for and waiting for.

And so they need the reminder: that when you reach that moment, remember how God showed up. Remember that God was faithful in the worst days and God will be faithful in the best days and remember that so very little of it is because of anything you've done. You're still dependent, you still need to trust, this God who loves you and gives you the blessings you experience. Remember to hold these things with open hands and not clenched fists.

Because this conversation is never just about the stuff we have. It's never just about the things we acquire. The way we view our possessions, the way we view how we give, the core of that is how we relate to God and how we trust our God. There's this intersection of wisdom and mystery that comes into play. We know some things about who God is, we have this thread that goes all throughout Scripture of this loving, caring, generous God...but then we live our real lives. And they're complicated! And challenging! And sometimes we really struggle to see and believe and experience that we're actually going to have enough and that we are actually blessed people.

It's a holy practice to let go of control and trust God in the midst of all the things our lives can bring. It's a holy practice to really let the words of Jesus actually shape how we live. When Jesus says in Matthew: **(SLIDE)**

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:26)

It's both a comfort AND an invitation. It comforts us because it reminds us that God is going to take care of us. God is going to be present. God loves us in a way that is incredible and generous and absolutely enough. And it invites us to live like we believe those things. It invites us to set down control and be on the lookout for how God is working. It invites us to name blessing even when things are hard.

There was a Tik Tok trend called the "Good things are always happening to me note." And it's so simple, but sometimes it's the simple things that help us make the most important changes. All you do is keep a running list, just add something to it every day, on the Notes App of your phone, or you can do a journal, whatever makes you

happy, and you write down the good things you're noticing. You might note things like:

I crunched some leaves today.

I saw a puppy.

I ate lunch with a kind friend.

I had 10 minutes of quiet this morning.

None of it is complicated, but all of it is good. All of these simple things remind us that God is at work. That we are blessed. And that we can live in a way that is open and generous because **(SLIDE) if we're experiencing this much goodness...then maybe we have goodness to give in return.**

We're going to transition into Communion in just a moment, but before we do, I just want to name that for some of you it might feel like a stretch to ask you to be on the lookout for all these good things and all these ways that God is working. I'm very aware that we're just a couple days out from Election Day and that there is a heaviness that we're feeling. There's anxiety, and it's not unfounded. There's just a weariness that a lot of us are carrying right now.

Last year, Kylee gave me a couple of these little quote cards. She had used them when she spoke at the Soul

Care Retreat as part of what was on the tables. And I've been really looking at this one lately, that's a quote from Teresa of Avila. It says this: **(SLIDE)**

Let nothing disturb you.

Let nothing frighten you.

All things are passing.

God never changes.

Intellectually, I get it. In my heart, it's harder. But these words have been a centering prayer for me over the last couple of weeks, and so I just want to leave us with these words and create a moment for you to hold on to the consistency of God. A moment to be reminded that we do not have to approach the world around us with fear or scarcity, but that we can approach the world around us with the heart of God and with a generous spirit.

So as we go to the Communion Table, I want to invite you to say these words with me, out loud, as a moment of prayer together:

Let nothing disturb you.

Let nothing frighten you.

All things are passing.

God never changes.

Amen.

Transition to Communion.