

St. Luke's UMC
November 10, 2024
Volunteer Appreciation Day

A Generous Life
Characteristic #2: It's Better to Give
Acts 20:35; Luke 6:35-38

Opening Ministry tributes...

If you asked all of these volunteers why they give their time and energy as they do, they would probably say its because of what they get out of it. That's what giving does for us. It gives back to us. That is confirmed by those who took the generosity survey.

I explained last week how we conducted a survey of generous United Methodists around the country over the last several months asking what inspires their generosity. Last week we looked at one of the most common responses, a belief that we are blessed. Well, this week we consider the second most common response, that it is better to give than receive.

Listen to some of the responses people gave:

"When I act out of generosity, I feel satisfied, happy, and peaceful..."

"I believe the more you give the more you get."

"As I give away kindness and love, I get the same in return."

"Whenever I give I receive."

People who practice generosity say that what motivates them to give is not doing so out of obligation or duty or fear of punishment if they don't. What really motivates them is to discover what they receive from generosity.

On Paul's last missionary journey he stopped at the port of Ephesus where he was met by the leaders of the church. It was the last time he would ever see them. Paul knew that if he goes to Jerusalem he would be arrested. He knew what was coming. The political realities he faced would not be favorable to him, but he said to them I am going to still keep giving. I am going to help others where I can. Its as if Paul were saying, "There's a lot I can't control in this world, but that I can control." What was his reason? The words of Jesus, , ***"It is more blessed to give than to receive."***

Why did Paul believe that? With so much appearing hopeless about his own life and even his cause, why would Paul hold onto words about giving? And why would Jesus have said them? In a world where people get crucified and where the love of God is often not emulated by the powerful, why wouldn't Jesus say something like, "Just hang in there!" "Don't give up!" "Be bold!" Why would he say it is more blessed to give than to receive?

In one very practical sense, Jesus said and Paul believed it because it's true. **Generosity makes us better.** Are you feeling depressed? Discouraged? Out of hope? Try giving? It is one thing we can do that makes us better.

Science supports this claim. There have been numerous studies conducted on the relationship between physical well-being and generosity. According to the Cleveland Clinic giving to others releases the “feel good” chemicals in the body like dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. Such physical reactions to generosity include: better mental health, lower stress, lower blood pressure, improved sleep, and more.

Generosity makes us better, but its deeper than physical benefits. There are emotional benefits that are released in us that happen only through generosity.

I discovered this in my first church. In my novice understanding of generosity at the time, I believed that people give because you make a compelling case for what their giving can do. That's my job, to make the case. But I learned better from a woman named Betty Henson. Betty would have never called herself poor, but if you compared her to the statistics at the time she would have most likely fell into that category. She was a widow who lived across the road from the church right which was at the base of Cold Mountain—the namesake of the Claude Frazier novel.

While I was there our conference sponsored its first building team to South Africa. This was during Apartheid. This team would help build a church in a black township. I shared about this mission opportunity and two men from that tiny, remote, mountain congregation stepped forward to volunteer. So we raised money to support them. One day I got a check in the mail from Betty for \$200. I was shocked. I knew she couldn't afford to make that kind of gift. Besides we had a lot of folks in the church who lived at a neighboring country club. We would be able to raise the money. Because, you know, I made a compelling case.

I went to see Betty to give her back her check. I explained how we were going to raise the needed funds. Honestly I was feeling bad that I made such a compelling case I was afraid I made her feel guilty to give beyond her means. This was the only time Betty got stern with me. She put the check back in my hand and said, “Rob, do not deny me this joy.”

Now I had been to seminary and took classes on stewardship, but Betty educated me on generosity. Her giving was a source of joy that was released only through generosity. Why did Jesus say it is more blessed to give than receive? Because it's true.

But there's another angle to this truth, and it goes beyond the physical and emotional benefits we receive. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive because **Giving Deepens our Hope in God.**

I believe the reason so many people don't like hearing about stewardship and giving in church is because we immediately relate giving to having less. We focus on what we give

up, but we don't think about what we gain. The most important gain that generosity produces is hope.

You know what hope is? Hope is the practical demonstrations of our faith in God when we have no practical evidence to justify it. And generosity is what deepens our hope, because we make room for what only God can fill. Think of Jesus' words in Luke: ***"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."*** (Luke 6:38)

Now that's a rather obtuse statement but I heard a pastor one time compare this verse to bagging leaves. He said, you fill the bag and it seems full, but then you stand on the leaves. You press the leaves down, squeeze the bag and then you have room for more. So you fill it again. Then you step on them again, squeeze again, and make more room. This might go on three or four times before you actually filled the bag.

Generosity is like that. It makes room for the blessings of God. It's a counter-intuitive idea, but when we give, we open ourselves to the more God can give us.

There was an article in a publication some years back about a young man who grew up in a strict church that taught if you don't tithe, give 10% of your income to the church, God will punish you. Of course, he turned against tithing and the church. Jump ahead a few decades. He had degrees in engineering and law from prestigious colleges, got married, started a family and even returned to church. Yet, though he was earning a significant salary he and his wife were frustrated that they weren't able to save a dime. There was just never any surplus.

Then one Sunday he hears another sermon about tithing, but this time without judgement and guilt. Just a promise: tithing liberates the tither. You might be 10% poorer but you'll discover that God can stretch your 90% better than you can. The pastor challenged anyone who wasn't tithing to try it, and to prove he wasn't trying some gimmick to get money for the church, he told the people to spread that 10 percent around. Give it to other places.

The couple decided to try. The article says, "Almost immediately a mysterious transformation took place. They found (even with giving away 10%) they were able to save 10% of their income. At last! They retired their house mortgage ahead of schedule." It made no practical sense. Yet it was a practical demonstration that brought new hope in God.

The title of this article is "An Irrational Act." What do you think was the publication? *Christianity Today*? *The Christian Century*? No. Forbes Magazine! It described tithing as a good investment strategy! Now, I don't believe that's what Jesus had in mind, that tithing is a great get-rich-quick scheme. But I do believe Jesus would agree that it gives us room, it makes space for what God can do.

But this principle goes even deeper. When we give we make room for hope.

One morning this week I had breakfast with Jay Height, the director of the Shepherd Center. He told me the story of a boy named Brian who used to attend activities at Shepherd. Brian grew up in a rough environment. His mother was a prostitute and Brian was responsible for taking care of his 5 year-old sister. So having a place like Shepherd Center to go was very healing and helpful for Brian.

Every Christmas Shepherd participated in Operation Shoebox, an international mission through Samaritan's Purse that sends gifts to children in need around the world. There are always compelling stories about the needs and conditions of children with names and information about them.

Well, one day a volunteer came back to Jay's office and said, "You need to come here." He followed her into a room where children had been bringing their shoeboxes with the needed items to donate. She handed Jay Brian's box. (*show pic*) He took a picture of it. Inside it were two matchbox cars, the only toys Brian had. He gave them away. By realizing he had something to give he had a reason to hope.

When I shared this story with Pastor Jen earlier this week, because she's preaching today at Midtown, she made this statement. You'll want to get a picture of this or write it down, because it's a keeper. She said, When we see we have something to give we realize we are not empty.

Could that be why Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive? What do you think?