

Generosity

February 14, 2021

Last week, three Union members and I started a three-month long course called “Cultivating Congregational Generosity.” For the next three months, Clay Reese, Jeff Carels, Jeff Gibson, and I will be spending a couple of Tuesday evenings a month learning about current trends in faith-based fundraising. As the name of the course implies, the idea is to sow seeds that will bear fruit.

I’ll be honest, for years, I’ve struggled with church fundraising, largely because of a message I heard very young. The message I heard was from someone who had read a book on increasing the church budget which said, “Everything we have ultimately belongs to God; the task of the church is to convince people to give it to us now.” That seemed so manipulative and guilt ridden, and even if that wasn’t the explicit message in other churches, it still often seemed to be the undercurrent. It has taken me decades to get over this idea!

More recently, I’ve come to understand engaging people in the financial life of the church as an invitation to help people bring vitality to our ministries, a way that you all can really make a difference and can ensure that the vibrant work that Union does has a future.

This week, two aspects of the class stood out for me. First, is the paradigm shift from giving as obligation to giving as a way to connect donors with mission. What we mean by that is, instead of telling people they need to give “because the church says so,” more and more often, people are going to give to churches if we inspire them with what we do. The idea then, is to help people see the value of what we do, and to want to be a part of it.

The second thing that stood out for me was a simple little exercise we did, reflecting on the characteristics of the most generous people we know. What was interesting to me was that the people who came to mind for me, the people I think of as most generous, aren’t necessarily folks who’ve been big dollar givers. The folks who came to mind for me as most generous were people whose giving is woven throughout their lives, people who are thoughtful, who take the time to get to know what is needed, and within that, people who are willing to give to the nuts and bolts of what is needed, not just the flashy stuff that makes us feel good. They’re people for whom generosity is a spirituality. It’s something that flows out of their attitude of gratitude, as well as their understanding that we are the agents of God’s grace in the world.

When you think of the most generous people you know, are there other characteristics you can think of? I’d love to have you add those characteristics in the Facebook comments, or drop me a note with what comes to mind.

Perhaps it’s because of this lens of generosity that what sticks out to me today in our Gospel from the second chapter of Mark is the actions of the four friends. We read that, after teaching and preaching and healing around Galilee, Jesus returns home, and when word gets out that he is home, so many people flock to encounter him that there is no room to get into the home, indeed, even the doorway is blocked.

Jesus is home, but the doorway is clogged. Let that sink in, metaphorically, for a moment. Jesus is home, but the home is so chock full, that the people in need, even someone who is paralyzed, cannot get to him.

Before I get back to what this has to do with generosity, let's turn our attention to the passage that Jan read for us from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Many of you know that it is widely understood that this book was written in three wide swaths: the first 39 chapters probably some time during the 8th century BCE, chapters 40-55 during the Babylonian Exile, and chapters 56-66 after the Exile.

This is important, because the passage we heard today is from that middle section, called Deutero-Isaiah, written while the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon. There are two major currents that run through the scriptures that were written during the Exile: Why would God allow this to happen, and, somehow, God is going to bring us home.

Now, some interpret bringing us home literally; God is going to bring the Jews back to Jerusalem. Some Christians interpret it eschatologically; God is going to bring us home to heaven in the last days.

I prefer to interpret it psycho-spiritually; God is constantly working to deliver us out of the psycho-social exile we have gotten ourselves into. In chapter 43, which we read today, we hear God saying, I know what you've done. I know the context. I'm not going to hold you to unreasonable expectations and our old paradigms of behavior. BUT, some things are going to need to change. You need to acknowledge what you've done and be willing to change. I'm already doing things that you used to imagine were impossible – making paths in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert. Especially in our current context in the U.S., this reflection on God's promise to forget our transgressions is important.

Dr. Dan Clendenin wrote about this passage over a decade ago:

“‘Forgetting’ your past does not mean ignoring it, denying it, sanitizing it, rationalizing it, or repressing it. In this sense ‘remembering’ is necessary, good, and healthy. With all the brutal realism, genuine candor, and ruthless honesty that we can muster, we name our past for what it is, claim it as our own, and believe that God will redeem and use it for our good. We also embrace our past with empathy and tenderness for the human condition. Our goal is not shame, blame, fear, exposure, or sadness, but liberation from obsessing about the past in ways that paralyze our present and obscure God's future for us.”

The scripture tells us that God is absolutely frank: I know what you did, there's no use in pretending or making excuses. AND, I'm going to create a new way forward so that you can grow into the people I know you have the potential to be.

When we layer Isaiah 43 with Mark 2, we hear two stories of coming home in new ways. Isaiah tells us of God's creativity and persistence in finding new ways to draw us back home, and Mark tells us of four friends' boundless generosity as they seek to bring their friend to Jesus' home. These four friends, finding the doorway into Jesus' home clogged, dig a hole in the roof so that their friend can get to Jesus' divine healing, so that their friend won't be paralyzed anymore.

What do you and I do with this? Honestly, please don't dig a hole in my roof or in any roof I manage. But this was never about that, really, was it? What if this is a story of being the kind of people who, when they encounter someone who is paralyzed, whether by fear, or by societal conventions (you know, “that's just the way it is / some things will never change”), are willing to

help that paralyzed person find a way home, find a way to get the healing they so desperately need, even if the conventional way ahead is blocked?

I think that this story then, brings us back to that reflection I began with: what are the characteristics of the most generous people you know? They're not necessarily the people with the most means. They're the people who see a need, and pause to learn more about it before responding. They're people who don't see the world transactionally, "I gave you this so I expect that," but rather, "I see that I have the means to make this life better for you, and it would be an honor to do so." Sure, they're people who are willing to spend their resources to support a cause they believe in, but they also spend their being on enriching others' lives. The most generous people I know are creative in how they dole out hope.

On the flip side, this passage then tells us of the scribes who, rather than trying to find a way for the paralytic to get into the home, get hung up on the way we've always done things. Jesus asks, is it easier to restore someone to community, to tell them their sins are forgiven, or to affect physical healing? Then says, you know what? Let's do both.

There is so much more to this passage, but to wrap up this generosity thread that we've been pulling today, I'm excited to invite you all into contemplating how you can be more like the four friends, attentive to the needs of others, creative in your thinking, and generous in life. We're starting a "Generosity Team" within the congregation, a group of folks who will work to help us find faithful, integrated ways to invite our community into behaviors and attitudes that will breathe life and vitality into our ministries, a group of folks who will cut a hole in the roof (figuratively, I'm pretty sure), to help someone else come home to God's healing, saving, redeeming love. If being part of this team sounds like a way you might be being called to share your gifts and skills, please reach out to Stewardship Ministry chair Clay Reese or me.

Friends, let's seek to model ourselves after the four friends from Mark 2, not letting a little thing like a clogged doorway, a bottleneck in the way things have always been done, stop us from connecting ourselves and others with God's grace. May it be so!

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