

A Most Generous God
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
First Presbyterian Church
November 4, 2018
Fruit of the Spirit – Generosity

Introduction

We are in the next-to-last week of a series of sermons on Paul's "fruit of the Spirit." Today we come to the fruit of generosity. At the beginning of the series Steven Mowery literally begged Heather and me not to preach the same sermon nine weeks in a row. His fear was that since these fruits are all expressions of the first fruit – the fruit of love – and since they all are very closely related to each other... Steven was terrified that we would preach the same sermon nine times. We hope that hasn't been the case and hope it isn't the case this morning.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul has just listed a whole bunch of behaviors and ways of living that are the fruit of this world. And then he writes: By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

6 Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. **7** I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving. **8** God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. **9** As one psalmist puts it, He throws caution to the winds, giving to the needy in reckless abandon. His right-living, right-giving ways never run out, never wear out. **10** This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, **11** wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God. **12** Carrying out this social relief work involves far more than helping meet the bare needs of poor Christians. It also produces abundant and bountiful thanksgivings to God. **13** This relief offering is a prod to live at your very best, showing your gratitude to God by being openly obedient to the plain meaning of the Message of Christ. You show your gratitude through your generous offerings to your needy brothers and sisters, and really toward everyone. **14** Meanwhile, moved by the extravagance of God in your lives, they'll respond by praying for you in passionate intercession for whatever you need. **15** Thank God for this gift, his gift. No language can praise it enough!

Sermon

Most of us in this room have done some financial planning. We have a retirement plan... a savings plan... some sort of strategy to pay for college... the weddings of our daughters or long-term care when we need it. We have a financial plan. Do we also have a Generosity Plan?

Paul uses the metaphor of fruit when talking about the characteristics of God's Spirit. He wants to say that these traits are born in you. You don't manufacture this fruit. If the Spirit of God dwells in you, they are already there. Your job is to cultivate them. So, I ask you again: Do you have a Generosity Plan for doing that?

In this morning's Scripture reading the Apostle Paul is asking the Corinthian Christians to pay the pledge they had made to the church in Jerusalem. And you thought I came up with the idea of pledging. Nope... it goes back at least to the early church when congregations in Philippi, Ephesus, and Galatia heard of the need and made a financial commitment to support the Mother Church in Jerusalem. The Christian Jews had fallen on very hard times... so this financial support was not only a practical necessity, it was an important sign of church unity. Because the Corinthians were mostly Gentiles, their offering for their largely Jewish sisters and brothers in Jerusalem would be a sign of their oneness in Christ. So, they made the pledge. But time had passed... and the Corinthians had not yet kept their promise. So, Paul writes to remind them of their commitment. (again, you thought I was the only one who wrote stewardship letters). Paul writes to remind them... and he does this in an interesting way. Rather than trying to "guilt" them into paying up, he appeals to their highest instincts... he wants them to listen to their better angels... by lifting up the example of the Macedonian Christians... folks who were experiencing very hard times themselves, but who insisted on being a part of the offering and ended up giving more than they could really afford. One translation says they "gave their last penny." Paul tells the Corinthians this story to appeal to their higher instincts... to remind them who they are... and to activate this spiritual gift of generosity in their lives. Using a familiar agricultural image, Paul speaks the obvious: we reap what we sow. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it: "A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop." What he's talking about here "reciprocity" – a reciprocal relationship between input and output... between investment and reward... between sowing and harvesting. They go together, Paul says... the quantity and quality of seeds that are sown will determine the quantity and quality of the harvest. All things being equal – good soil and weather and rainfall – if all of these are equal, the stingy planter should expect a stingy harvest and the lavish planter should expect a lavish harvest. We reap what we sow.

Now, let me pause here and possibly anticipate a question some of you may be asking about now. "OK, Malone, if that's true – if we reap what we sow as you say – does that mean we give in order to get? Is this sort of a quid pro quo between us and God? I'm sure you know that's what those prosperity gospel preachers are saying. Plant so many dollars with me and my ministry and God will bless you with a bountiful harvest: five-fold, ten-fold, even a hundred-fold. So, what about that? Do we give in order to get?" Well, the answer is NO! We do not give to get. We give because God is a giving God. We give because we are grateful for God's many blessings in our lives. We give because that's what Christians do. We give because there's no such thing as an "ungenerous Christian." It's an oxymoron.

HOWEVER, the Bible is a very practical book.¹ It knows that we are human beings and that “reciprocity” makes sense to us. So, the Bible never misses a chance to advance the notion of reward... including the reward for giving. Generosity does not go unrewarded, the Bible says... No person is ever a loser because they are generous. But the reward is not in the form of cash and cars and houses that the prosperity preachers promise. The reward, as William Barclay says, is “the awareness of the expansion of love’s capacity.” The act of giving EXPANDS love’s capacity within us. I believe this is a spiritual principle that is at work here. It is at work in each of us as individuals and families... and it’s at work in our congregation – the more we give away... the more we give ourselves away... the more we WILL BE ABLE to give away. Our capacity for love... our capacity for generosity... expands. Christian generosity flows from a heart that belongs to Christ... it springs from a spirit that is filled to the brim with Christ. It’s like we are little mirrors... and what we do is reflect the image of God in the world. We reflect the God of inexhaustible generosity into a world that desperately needs it. And when we do that – when we take that first step and pledge to the church... when we put a number on the capital campaign card (maybe a number that is bigger than we ever dreamed we could) – each time we offer generously our time and energy and skill... each time we do without things WE might want so that OTHERS can have what they need... each time we do this we become even more thankful for what we have been given... and our ability to share what we have will expand. It is as William Barclay says... it is the expansion of love’s capacity within us.

So, reflecting the generous nature of God is not about meeting a need that we have thoroughly vetted and judged to be worthy... although we should be prudent. It’s not about satisfying the CPA who says you need a place to put some money... although that IS a benefit both to you and to whoever receives the gift. It’s not about being recognized or earning stars in your crown... although I genuinely hope you are thanked and appreciated. It is about expressing gratitude. The sole motive of Christian giving is always, and in every case, gratitude. That’s it. Gratitude gives birth to generosity... and generosity (once it is on the loose) is like throwing a boulder into a pond – it has ripple effects.

Adam Hamilton tells the story of his family’s camping trip to the Grand Tetons on his birthday. When they arrived, he gave each of his young daughters \$20 spending money for the three days at Jackson Hole. One of his daughters – Rebecca – went to the gift shop on the very first day, found a ball cap for \$20, and wanted it. He tried to persuade her to forego the cap and spread her money over the three days, but to no avail. She spent her entire \$20. Later that day they took a walk around the lake and found a great spot to watch the sun set. That’s when his daughter, Rebecca, handed him the cap and said, “Daddy, I bought this for you. I love you. Happy Birthday.”²

¹ Dr. W Frank Harrington in a sermon preached November 3, 1996 to the Peachtree Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, AG.

²Adam Hamilton, *Enough*, Abingdon Press, 2009, p. 87

Now the reason he tells this story is not to get all sappy... although as the father of three daughters I can do that. The reason he tells it is to say this is what generosity looks like... it is uncalculated... it is not manipulative... there are no strings attached... it takes something that is not ours in the first place and gives it away in love. Talk about the kingdom of heaven belonging to little children. Would that I could be so uncalculatingly generous!

Well, when we see Paul's word "generosity" in this list of fruit, many of us think of money. And obviously, that's mostly what I am talking about this morning. Some of us have more money than others. Those who DON'T have as much often think those who do should be more generous! Those who DO have more money often feel "nibbled to death" by all the requests they receive asking for their money. But when Paul uses the word generosity, he provides no qualifiers. He doesn't say the rich person should be more generous. Nor does he say the poor are exempt from generosity. He simply implies that the Spirit of God is generous. If God's Spirit dwells in us, then we share in the generosity of God. It doesn't matter how much, or how little we have.

Steve Eason tells of the time he was invited to conduct a chapel service for a nursing home in Norfolk, Virginia.³ The residents were mostly classified as below poverty level. They came into the dining room for worship in wheelchairs, on walkers and canes, with oxygen bottles, hearing aids and all the rest. Steve didn't remember much about the service, but he did remember that as he stood at the door to greet the residents, there was a woman still in her bathrobe and bedroom slippers who shuffled up to him. Bent over with age, she grasped his hand and thanked him for the sermon... and in her hand was a one-dollar bill. Steve quickly told her that they were not taking an offering to which she said, "Well, then, this is for you." And she shuffled off! He didn't even know her name. He was standing there with a dollar bill from a poor woman in an indigent nursing home. Reflecting back on that, he said, "The jacket I had on was worth hundreds of dollars. The car I drove home in was worth thousands. I felt guilty for taking her dollar, but it would have been condescending to give it back to her. Figure the percentage of that dollar to her income and she likely gives more than most of us. That dollar bill is taped inside the back cover of my Bible to this day, reminding me of her generosity. She would never remember the sermon I preached that day, but I will never forget the gift.

As we take communion together this morning, we are literally tasting the generosity of God. Our generous God comes to us in bread and wine. We receive God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's love poured out in Jesus Christ. We consume it. When we leave this Table, may we do so with a renewed commitment to allow the spirit of God's generosity to flow through us... sowing lavishly... and anticipating God's good reward... the expansion of love's capacity in us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

³ In a sermon preached to the people of First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA. July 24, 2016.