

# **GROWING A GRATEFUL AND GENEROUS HEART**

October 12, 2014

## **“GROWING A GRATEFUL AND GENEROUS HEART”**

Since this morning is the last Sunday of our Stewardship series called “Give it All You’ve Got,” I want to talk with you about the joy of **growing a grateful and generous heart**. The heart of the Christian message is that God is above all a giving God. *“God is love,”* and *“We love because God first loved us,”* says 1 John 4. God’s love is freely given to each one of us and to the world. And let’s not forget the most quoted scripture passage of all time, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* (John 3:16).

It’s God’s very nature to love and to show that love by giving. Our response to this love is that we learn to love others. As recipients of all God’s gifts to us, we are **growing grateful and generous hearts**. As we experience the transforming power of God’s love, we become giving people.

Why is it so difficult, then? Why is it so hard for us to **grow grateful and generous hearts**? Why are we so afraid to become giving people? Why on earth would we hold back in our giving?

A lot has been written from sociological, psychological, and theological perspectives concerning why people give and do not give. We give for a variety of reasons: religious commitment, guilt, personal recognition, tax benefits, need, obligation, gratitude, pressure, and out of love. Some of these reasons for giving are more commendable than others.

We hold back from giving for other, different reasons. First of all, and this is a biggie, we hold back from giving because we are afraid. We are afraid that we won't be able to survive without whatever we're being asked to give away. That's why people don't even want to give up their bad habits, their burdens -- their sins.

That's why so many problems people go to counseling for are related, in some way, to giving – or lack of giving. I mean, people get frustrated because they know they need to give up guilt, fear, poor self-image, inflexibility, hate, envy, anger, or their dependence on tobacco, alcohol, drugs, or food. People choose not to give up these things; they hold onto them and let them rule their lives. They cling to their hurts as if they were priceless treasures – like the bad guy in the movies who won't take the gold out of his pockets so he can swim to shore. We've all met people who nurse their grudges, hate, and resentments, refusing to let them go. Even bad memories - In a curious way, they seem to enjoy them.

Have you ever noticed that some people collect resentments and hurts like others collect stamps? I had a friend who used to call it collecting gold stars or brown stamps. These people go through life looking for people to hurt them, remembering every time they've been hurt over the past twenty years. They add new hurts to their collections regularly and delight in telling others how bad off they are, how persecuted and unlucky and unloved. That's a form of pride by the way – in reverse.

When they finally do give something up – a little bit of love or a little bit of money – they do it with strings attached, which isn't really giving at all. When we have any strings attached to our giving, it means that we

haven't let go of what we gave. We want to hang onto it and keep control over it.

Now, when it comes to giving money, many people are even more afraid that they can't do without it, so they give away very little money for anything. This problem affects those who have lots of money, as well as those who don't have much.

This fear we have of letting go of anything we have – this fear of giving oneself to God and to others – prevents us from **growing grateful and generous hearts**. This fear is one that must be overcome if we are to become joyful, giving persons. To give nothing, only take and try to hold on to as much as possible, actually hardens our hearts and results in our becoming shriveled, unhappy people. Remember Zacchaeus – and his shriveled heart?

I saw a cartoon one time that showed two caterpillars crawling across the lawn. They look up to see a butterfly soaring above them. One caterpillar said to the other, "You'll never catch me in one of those contraptions!" Metamorphosis just happens to a caterpillar. There's no choice involved, but for us to **grow grateful and generous hearts**, we have to make a choice. We have to decide to take a risk by becoming truly giving people.

A second reason for not wanting to give up anything is that all our lives we are taught to accumulate stuff -- wealth and possessions. As they say, we are born naked and we're going out the same way – you can't take it with you. But this process of accumulation begins immediately at birth. Just look into a nursery sometime, or look at all the paraphernalia parents

take with them when they take their baby out, even for an hour. We are taught from the get-go how to acquire things, not how to give things away. We are taught how to get friends, how to make money, how to invest so that we make more money, how to hold on to things. As we reach middle age, many people have acquired at least one house with all the stuff that goes in it, and probably a car for each member of the family. It's no wonder we're so much more comfortable getting and keeping than giving. This mindset, while perfectly normal and natural, is definitely not conducive to **growing grateful and generous hearts!**

To us humans, it just makes sense to hold on to what we have and, every chance we get, to acquire even more. Then we will be happy, secure, successful, and fulfilled. Of course, this is just the opposite of what the Bible tells us, right? *"...if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup> and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you"* (Matthew 5:40-42). Here's another one, right from the lips of Jesus himself, *"Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Luke 12:33-34).

In today's world, most of our giving to the church is done in the form of money. In this day and age, money is one of the important, man-made media through which the love of God can be expressed. Money is like a language and other cultural expressions. It is a human creation that makes certain forms of communication possible between individuals and groups.

Through money, relationships can be established, human needs can be met, values achieved, and purpose realized. As God **grows grateful and generous hearts** in us, God enables us to use our money to **give it all we've got** in order to spread the Gospel.

Like most of our human cultural expressions, money can be used to build up or to tear down, to serve or to dominate, to liberate or to oppress. The potential for money to be an instrument for injustice and oppression is greater than any other cultural invention, but that does not mean that money is bad or even "the root of all evil." The Bible really says, "*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil*" (1 Timothy 6:10). Money, when used properly, can become a vehicle of care, and of service – of liberation and of redemption.

When you give money to the Church, that money is changed into life. Imagine -- money translates into the beauty of a musical composition, or into heat and light in a building where kids and adults alike can come for classes, recreation, and Scout meetings; facilities are provided for support groups, community activities, or special forums; and, especially, where people can come each week to hear the Word of God and to participate in the life-giving Sacraments. The Church is in the business of transforming money into life. Your giving is multiplied.

Although you give freely, you will never be without! The Bible tells us that our fear of not being able to do without that which we might give away is completely unfounded. "*Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every*

*way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (2 Corinthians 9:10-11). Since God is the one who supplies us, we have no need to fear that we will run out.*

Not only will we not run out, we will prosper: *“A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed” (Proverbs 11:25). And not only will we prosper, our **grateful and generous hearts** will be lights to lead others to Christ. “And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday” (Isaiah 58:10).*

Furthermore, your giving to the Church will actually help you **grow a grateful and generous heart** so that you can **give it all you’ve got** in response to all God has given you. It will help change you into a person who, like your Lord, seeks not to be served, but to serve others with all the gifts that God has blessed you with. As you **give it all you’ve got** in the generous giving of your money, God is glorified and praised and thanked.