

New hope sermon extravagant generosity Dec. 15 2019

Our theme for this Advent week is extravagant giving. The impetus behind it is two-fold – first our being inundated by the crass materialism of this culture since Thanksgiving – with Black Friday, cyber Monday etc.etc.etc. We can't watch a movie on TV without half the time being ads for all kinds of clothes and toys and must-haves for Christmas. That is Not, I think, an emphasis that befits Biblical living. The model for biblical living is God himself. So my second reason for this theme this Christmas is to connect Christ's coming with this theme of extravagant generosity. One of the most well-known verses in the Bible is John 3:16. Let's Say it together" *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believe in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.* God so loved that He gave. Everything. His very heart. He gave His Son. That's extravagant giving. It's a model I hope we can all being to live into as a lifestyle in 2020.

I want to frame this theme around 4 stories – one contemporary, one historical, one Biblical and one allegorical.

The first comes from one a contemporary pastor and one of my favorite authors – Gordon MacDonald. time. MacDonald says "As a young person. I grew up in a home in which there was little teaching about money. I didn't know how to manage money or what you were supposed to do with it. I was anything but a generous person. I was far more on the take than on the give. If you're going to be a follower of Christ and you have those attributes, something has to change. It is an anomaly to say, "I am a follower of Christ," and not know what you're supposed to do with your money. [That's his view now, but in his earlier days money management and God didn't go together. The whole idea was outside his sense of being a Christian].

If I were to look back at my giving record in the first 20 years of life, I would call myself an impulsive giver. Every once in a while I might throw a quarter in the collection plate or give a dollar to the Salvation Army or find some other place where for a moment I was stimulated and persuaded, and I'd empty my pockets and take out a coin or two, or a dollar or two, and I would put it in. And I called myself a follower of Christ. That really doesn't work. Impulsive giving is not something that the Bible teaches whatsoever.

I graduated from impulsive giving to what might be called obedient giving or basic giving when I met my wife, Gayle, 51 years ago. We fell in love in the first hour of our meeting. We were engaged three weeks later and married four months later. I'm a quick decision maker when it comes to wives!

Gayle and I went off on a brief, cheap honeymoon, because when we got out of our wedding we had 93 dollars to our name. Even in those days that was not much money to begin a family life. We had this brief honeymoon, and then we came back to our little apartment. We had decided that Gayle would be the money manager in our marriage. This was one of our first great decisions. There always has to be someone who's better at managing the cash. Whether that person is male or female makes no difference. In our case it was Gayle.

The first night, after we were home and unpacked from our honeymoon, Gayle sits down at our little desk to write out checks for our first bills. Because it was such a significant moment I looked over her shoulder to see what she was doing, and I saw this brand new checkbook—001. She starts to write the check. First the date, and then the "To" line. And she writes it out to our church. Then on the next line she puts in the amount—nine dollars. I say, "Sweetheart, we only have 93 dollars in the bank. We can't afford to give the church that much. Write a smaller check." My sweet wife looks up at me—calm, composed. She says, "Do you intend to preach the Bible for the rest of your life?" I say, "Of course." "What does the Bible say about the standard of giving?" I say, "The Bible says that ten percent of all you earn ought to be given back to the Lord for his purposes." "If you really believe that stuff, then you will not mind my writing out this check for nine dollars." The case was closed.. So I graduated from an impulsive giver to a basic giver.

A few years later I discovered that I wasn't far enough along in the journey. I came to that insight...when a missionary visited our home. He was going to speak in our church, and he was a godly man. When he came through the door of our home for the first night's visit, I immediately noticed his clothes. He was wearing a very

cheap sport coat that had seen better days. The threads were so bare on the elbows you could look through them and see the shirt underneath. The lapels were tattered. And it was the only sport coat he had.

I was shocked. I went to my wife later in the evening and said, "We have to buy this man a new sport coat. There's a sale going on." And I named the store. "We can get him a new sport coat for 39 dollars." Gayle said, "That's a great idea." I believed in that moment that my idea had come from the Spirit of God. There are those moments that a follower of Christ has when he or she experiences that strange, mysterious nudge, and something in you notices a need, and you say, "I have to meet that need." That night I experienced that nudge.

Later in the evening, Gayle said, "Your idea of buying a sport coat is wonderful, but we can't do it." "Why not?" "Well, we only have one credit card. That's for Sears & Roebucks, and it's maxed out. We owe Sears & Roebucks about 1,000 dollars." That was astronomical in those days for a young couple like us. We bought all of our furniture and all of our appliances, and we had no more credit. And furthermore, we were living on next week's paycheck.

I got very disturbed when Gayle told me that. I had never faced the reality of our spending platform till that moment. We couldn't do what God had moved us to do. That's Story #1.

Story #2. In the first three centuries, the Christian movement was known for its generosity. They were always on the give.

In the second century a man named Dionysius wrote about common life among people in the pagan culture of that time. In those days in the Roman Empire every town, every village, every city faced a major calamity on average about once every thirteen years. By calamity I mean an earthquake, a fire, a plague, or a military conquest. Because cities in those days were constructed with such flammable materials, a fire could sweep across the whole city and devastate it. Or an earthquake would bring all the buildings tumbling down. There was no medicine for plagues. What did the pagans do when these catastrophes hit? Dionysius says, "The pagans thrust aside anyone who began to be sick and kept at a distance even from their dearest friends. They cast the sufferers half dead into the ditches and left them unburied."

In the third century Eusebius of Caesarea writes:

The Christians were the only people who amidst such terrible ills showed their fellow feeling and humanity by their actions. Day by day some would busy themselves with attending the dead and burying them. Others gathered in one spot all who were afflicted by hunger throughout the whole city and gave bread to all. When this became known, the people [that is, the pagan population] glorified the Christian God and convinced by the very facts confessed that the Christians alone were truly pious and religious. They were the only people in those days who genuinely stood up for what they believed in and acted out of charity and love and generosity. For three centuries the Christian movement expanded in one of the most dramatic periods of growth in Christian history. The countries of the Mediterranean world became filled with communities of believers, and the secret to it all was they were known for their generosity and their service. That's a historical story.

Story #3 – Jesus Himself . Jesus said one day to some would-be disciples, "You have to understand the Son of Man doesn't even have a place to lay his head." He modeled a giving, not a taking attitude. He told stories – of the rich young ruler, of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, of the good Samaritan. And as his disciple, the Apostle John told the story of Mary of Bethany's extraordinary generosity in his gospel, ch. 12.

Mary anointed Jesus' feet with her bottle of expensive ointment. Jesus had just raised her brother from the dead, and this was her gift of immense gratitude in response. Perhaps she also sensed the Lord's impending death in Jerusalem. He had predicted it many times to his followers. Yet, when she poured all that expensive ointment on Jesus's feet, the disciples, especially Judas, reprimanded her for that costly "waste". That was not God's take on what she did. Jesus defended Mary and acknowledged that it was a gift which would prepare

him for his death and burial. Her sacrifice was in line with the enormous sacrifice he was about to make for the whole human race and so he praised her.

I want us to think about her sacrifice realistically for a minute. Do you think Mary and Martha had so much money that they could “afford” to spill out that cost ointment without it affecting their lifestyle? Surely not. I believe in a sense Mary’s gift was like the widow’s giving in the Temple. Jesus watched her give in her two small gold coins and told the disciples she had given so much more than the wealthy Pharisees who plunked in their money as a show of their piety – money they could spare and that did not affect their lifestyle. But not so the widow – she gave everything she had. I think Mary’s sacrifice was in the same vein – she gave everything she had.

The issue for us is how sacrificial is our giving to Christ this year? Have we gotten to places like Gordon MacDonald and his wife did, when the Spirit prompts us to give to someone in need or tithe to the church and we hold back because we don’t think we have sufficient funds or that God can’t supply our need if we give beyond what our circumstances dictate? That’s the challenge I want us to face today! Actually for our church to continue in 2020 and beyond we will have to become more sacrificial in our giving. Keith and I cannot just keep carrying the church financially on our own. We do have gifts from 3 people who give from outside the church but that generosity is not being matched by our own local church members. We need about a \$2,000 month to keep the church afloat and pay salaries, house bills and the extra expenses like office supplies etc. We are running about \$500 short of that. Can you dig deeper and trust God to supply what you lack so you can learn more of God’s supply?

I think a giving mentality can be a lifestyle and is what honors the Lord. As Gordon MacDonald reminded us, that was the ethos of the early church – they were stepping up to help their own leaders and the poor, the widows, the orphans, anyone in need in their community. What a model.

And that brings me to story #4. Two weeks ago my friend Mary Doerfer introduced me to a wonderful children’s picture book that is an allegory for us to consider. It’s called the *Quiltmaker’s Gift*. When I read it, it made me ask the Lord: “What can I give to someone today (and each day) that will meet their need? Here’s the story:

“Once there was a quiltmaker who lived in a cabin high in the blue misty mountains. All day long she would sew the most beautiful quilts anyone in her region had ever seen. “The blues seemed to come from the deepest part of the oceans the whites from the northernmost snows, the greens and purples from the abundant wildflowers, the reds, oranges and pinks from the most wonderful sunsets... Many people climbed her mountains with pockets bursting with gold hoping to buy one of her wonderful quilts. But she would not sell them.

I give my quilts to those who are poor or homeless,’ she told them; they are not for the rich.’ On the darkest and coldest nights she would make her way down the mountains and wander the cobblestone streets until she found someone sleeping outside in the cold. Then she would take a newly finished quilt and wrap it around their shivering shoulders, tuck them in tight and tiptoe away.

However there was a greedy, unhappy king who ruled the woman’s area. He even passed a law that he would have two birthdays a year so people could bring him their presents. And the presents kept coming, day after day. All except a quilt from the quiltmaker. She had never brought him a quilt. So, in anger he took all his soldiers with him up the mountain and demanded that she give him a quilt. ‘Oh no’, she said, ‘my quilts are for the poor and needy.’ When the king tried to take a quilt from her forcibly, it suddenly flew out the window, up into the sky and was never seen again. This made the king ever more furious. ‘Alright,’ she said, ‘make presents of everything you own and start to give each beautiful thing away. I will sew a piece onto your quilt with each gift you give away.’ ‘Give away all my beautiful treasures,’ roared the king. I don’t give things

away. I take them.” and with that he ordered his soldiers to capture the woman and put her in a cave with a sleeping bear.

When the bear woke up, he growled and came after the woman. But she only said, ‘No wonder you are so grouchy, you have been sleeping all this time with your head upon a rock. Go and fetch me a big armful of pine needles and I will make you a beautiful pillow on which to rest your head.’ And the bear did. And she did. “No one had ever been so kind to the bear before. So he broke the iron bracelet the soldiers had put on her leg and he asked her to spend the night.” When the soldiers came back to rescue her, they found the woman and the bear happily having a breakfast of berries and honey together.

Still, the king was unhappy. So he decided to give away one gift. He gave a marble away to a little boy and the child was so happy, the king went back to give away more things. As he gave away coats and a carousel and many more things, the villagers began to sing and dance in delight. Soon he started to smile and with each gift he gave, his smile grew broader and broader. “When at last there was no one in the town who had not received something, he decided to go out into the world and give gifts to anyone he found in need, “trading his treasures for smiles around the world.’ Each time he gave a gift away, a sparrow would fly up to the woman’s cabin to tell her and she would sew another piece onto his quilt.

Eventually all his things were gone and the quilt was finished so she went into town to find the king. He was dressed in rags, his shoes were worn thin, but he was smiling and happy. He said, ‘my heart is full to bursting with memories of all the happiness I’ve given and received’... Standing on tiptoe she wrapped the new quilt around him... From that day on the king often came to the quiltmaker’s house in the clouds. By day she sewed the beautiful quilts she would not sell and by night the king took them down to the town. There he searched out the poor and downhearted, never happier than when he was giving something away.” (The Quiltmaker’s gift, story by Jeff Brumbeau, pictures by Gail de Marcken.”

Extravagant giving is both about giving money sacrificially to the church and giving of our time and talents to make others happy. It’s God’s kind of lifestyle – God so loved that He gave. May we do the same. This is how we can share the true meaning of Christmas. 2 Cor. 9:6-7. Amen. 12/15/19 Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson