

## GENEROSITY (Mark 12:38-44)

The Massachusetts Conference Annual Meeting a couple of weeks ago had a timely theme: *Generosity as a Way of Life*. I say it's timely because most churches have their stewardship campaigns in the fall – including us.

I can almost hear the groans. “Ugh, the annual stewardship sermon guilt trip. Why didn't I stay home this morning and do something fun like cleaning out the basement?”

Before you tune me out completely, let me remind you that generosity is not just about money. The theme of the Annual Meeting was broader than that: *Generosity as a Way of Life*. That includes what we do with our money, of course, but it also relates to what we do with our time and our talents.

The keynote speaker at the Annual Meeting was Greg Jones, who is dean of Duke Divinity School. In his address he said almost nothing about money. He saved the money talk for the clergy lunch. I guess he figured we preachers might need some help, but he wasn't going to risk turning off a bunch of laypeople by bringing up a touchy topic like money.

In his keynote address, Greg talked about a couple dimensions of generosity. One of them was what he calls “interpretive charity.” Interpretive charity basically comes down to giving others the benefit of the doubt, taking them seriously, and not rushing to judge them or what they say or do. In other words, it's about seeing people in the best possible light.

I don't know what the opposite of interpretive charity might be – interpretive stinginess, maybe. Many pastors have horror stories about interpretive stinginess rearing its ugly head at a wedding or funeral. Weddings are supposed to be festive, happy celebrations. But once in a while you get families that can hardly stand to be in the same room with one another, even if the room is a church. Uncle Joe isn't speaking to Cousin Sally who's mad at Brother Bill. It's more like mediating multiparty peace talks with a bunch of Afghan warlords than celebrating a happy occasion.

That's one reason some pastors prefer funerals to weddings. People are generally on their best behavior at a funeral. But I've known of funerals where family members didn't attend because of something a third cousin said 25 years ago. And then there's the bickering over the inheritance.

“Be generous.” That's the mantra of one pastor I know. And a wise mantra it is. It's something that could be recited at every wedding or funeral, even the ones where everything is calm and peaceful. When in doubt, be generous. When angry or frustrated, be generous. When your self-interest or pride is being attacked, be generous. When sibling rivalries erupt, when sacrifices need to be made, when there's an opportunity for hospitality, be generous.

Come to think of it, that's not merely good advice at times like weddings and funerals. It's good advice for all of us all the time. I'll try to remember it

myself the next time I'm tempted to respond to rudeness with a tit for tat. Of course, I'm tempted so rarely.....

"Be generous." We might put a plaque with those words over the door to this sanctuary and on the wall of every room where a church meeting is held. How different our meetings might be if we practiced generosity or interpretive charity.

I had a seminary professor who dealt with conflicted churches. He had a rule when he worked with churches like that. He told them: Before you can criticize someone else's proposal, you first have to say three positive things about it. That's interpretive charity at work.

A colleague recently told me that her church has a similar rule. Before you can respond to something that's said in a meeting, you first have to restate what the previous speaker said to his or her satisfaction. That ensures you're really listening and paying attention. That's interpretive charity at work.

I wonder how different our life together would be if we practiced that kind of generosity – if we made that kind of generosity our way of life. We might find our community being transformed.

Of course, there's the other side of generosity – the what-we-do-with-our-money side, the side no one really wants to hear about. But since this is stewardship season, I can't ignore that side, either.

I said at the beginning that Greg Jones didn't say much about money in his keynote address. He did tell a funny story to the clergy, though. A church asked him to come and lead a series of classes on sexuality. He was normally inclined to accept invitations like that, but it didn't take him long to decline this one. He said sexuality was too hot a topic and that he church first needed to learn to deal with less divisive issues. So they decided to do something around stewardship. (He was much younger then and didn't realize that money was at least as ticklish as sex.)

Greg suggested that everyone (including himself) should bring their checkbooks to the first session and they would hand their checkbook to the person on the left so they could compare what they were really doing with their resources. Do I really need to tell you how that went over? That was way too risky.

Money is a taboo subject in most churches. It may even be more taboo than sex. Ironically, though, the Bible and Jesus both seem to be a lot more interested in money than sex. Maybe that's because our checkbooks don't just show how we spend our money; they show what god(s) we actually worship.

For instance, Jesus has something to say about money in the reading we heard this morning. This is a classic stewardship text, which, by some happy chance – or maybe it's on purpose – just happens to pop up in the lectionary right when we need it. The "widow's mite" has found its way into our vocabulary to describe a contribution that may be small but is actually generous because it comes from someone who has little to give.

Generosity in that sense has nothing to do with wealth. If the poor widow is at one extreme, at the other end in every way is Ebenezer Scrooge before the

Christmas ghosts pay him a visit – a tightwad who clutches every penny as if it were his last.

Generosity as a way of life is a thing of the spirit. People who are generous with their time and energy also tend to be generous with their financial resources. And conversely, those who are stingy financially tend to be grudging and miserly in other ways, too. Generosity as a way of life means cultivating our sense of imagination, looking at people and things with a charitable eye – not worrying about how much we give to others, but how much we really need for ourselves. Generosity as a way of life means having an expansive view that sees the world the way God sees it.

One family learned this from their ten-year-old son. Like a lot of families, Mom and Dad made some extra charitable gifts at the end of the year. And they brought their children into the process of deciding where their gifts should go. The summer after they started this practice, their son got a \$20 reward at summer camp. On the way home, he said he wanted to put \$10 in his savings account and give the other \$10 to a homeless shelter the family had given to the previous Christmas. Dad resisted the temptation to tell the his son that the family gave a lot less than 50 percent of their money to charities. He wasn't sure his son would understand why they gave so little.

Winston Churchill said, "You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give." Or in the words of 1 Timothy: "God piles on all the riches we could ever manage – to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If [we] do that, [we'll] build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life" (6:19 *The Message*).

May our generosity, in all its forms, be an expression of our faith-filled and abundant life, the life that God intends for all God's people.