

“FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: GENEROSITY”

James 1:17-25; John 10:7-17

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Today is the third sermon in our series on the fruits of the spirit. If you heard the first two, you may begin to see a pattern emerge. I hope this pattern will continue through the series not just because it will make my preparation easier, but also because it reveals some basic truths that undergird our spiritual journeys and help us understand what it means to be human.

Before talking specifically about generosity, let me be explicit about this pattern. In the first place, the fruits of the spirit are interconnected. The deepest joys are often accompanied by a great sense of peace. Love can be seen in acts of gentleness. Patience is easier with those for whom we have an abiding love. So when we focus on one of the fruits, we are still talking about all of them. The good news about this is that when we find ourselves struggling with one (like patience for example), we can still cultivate it through a different fruit that feels more natural to us.

In the second place, the fruits of the spirit are intuitive. Before we even begin to study them, we already “know” something about them. We don’t just learn about them from our pastors and Sunday School teachers, but we experience them in our lives through the actions of others. Some of them form a major part of our individual character.

In the third place, they are not exclusively Christian. They belong to human experience. When we see them expressed in people of other faiths or no faith, we should be reminded that all people are children of God. The fruits of the spirit are the evidence for God’s presence, reminders that to be human is to be made in the image of God. So, as Christians we see in Jesus a person in whom the fruits of the spirit supremely dwell. And we see this as a mark of divinity, but also as the expression of what it means to be fully human.

In the gospel of John, we see generosity exhibited in the person of Jesus. In chapter ten, we read about the good shepherd who performs the most generous act of “laying down his life for the sheep. We read about a shepherd who wants to bring other sheep into the fold. We read about a person whose purpose in life is to bring abundance to others.

This conforms well to our own experience of generosity. I think about the pastor who prepared gift bags for every member of his congregation on a special occasion. These bags included home-made goodies. I think about the food pantry director who hosted a picnic for the workers, most of whom were also clients. It never occurred to him that they would have been happy with just hamburgers and hot dogs. He served up food most people would reserve for family and their closest friends. I think about our friends in Perico, Cuba whose generous welcome and hospitality was evident throughout our stay.

I see parents working jobs they dislike to earn money for their children's education, people giving up their day off to help a friend with a project, and experienced birders helping a novice identify a bird. Someone pointed out to me last week that 10 percent of the income for this year's budget comes from our endowments. Without the generosity of some of our saints who have died, the session would have presented a very different message at the annual meeting. Most of you don't really need instruction in generosity.

I don't believe though, that as a society, we are a very generous people. The mortgage interest tax deduction saved people over a billion dollars in taxes any given year. Elimination of that would have provided sufficient funds to reduce homelessness, provide more affordable housing, and practically eliminate evictions from inability to pay rent. Many are quick to ask whether small businesses can afford to pay an adequate minimum wage, but slow to think about the person being asked to live on that wage. Instead we judge these people for being poor parents who don't spend enough time with their children, monitoring their homework, providing extra enrichment opportunities, etc.

Ears are closed to the people who declare bankruptcy because of high medical bills that resulted from lack of adequate health insurance. Ears are closed to possibilities of sending people to treatment for addictions instead of prison. Ears are closed to the continuing inequities that advantage the haves over the have-nots.

It seems to me that the mark of a truly generous society would be a good faith effort to reduce, if not eliminate, poverty. Most, if not all of us, want to do this. We volunteer our personal time and give money to address the needs of the poor. I've experienced your generosity, so I'm not looking to judge anyone, but I think we could do better. And the way to do that is to think about the things that close down generosity.

James Bryan Smith, in his book [The Good and Beautiful Community](#), talks about three "false narratives" in our culture that undermine generosity: judgment, scarcity, and entitlement.

The first is captured in the cultural proverb, "God helps those who help themselves." Smith reminds us that this does not come from the Bible. The biblical story tells quite a different tale. From cover to cover, it is a story of God helping those with a need. A few may have been worthy of God's assistance, but most were not. Most in fact found themselves in circumstances they could do nothing about. God freed the Hebrew slaves, rescued the tribes of Israel from their enemies, and saved Daniel from the lions. Jesus healed ten lepers though only one returned to give thanks. He gave sight to the blind, made the lame to walk, exorcised the demon that plagued the daughter of the Syrophenician woman, and raised Lazarus from the dead

But we live in a culture that focuses on merit, not grace. We assume people are in prison because they did something wrong, not because they couldn't afford a lawyer or lacked money for bail or were persuaded to plea to a lesser charge to reduce their sentence. We make up theories about the homeless, about the dysfunctions of single parent families,

or about the unemployed. Our culture believes that if you just work hard enough you'll succeed and we point the finger of blame at those who don't. But we don't know their story and we don't acknowledge all the help and advantages that we had. Judgment undercuts the feet of generosity.

The belief in scarcity is the second thing that circumscribes the spirit of generosity. Sometimes the scarcity is real, sometimes imaginary, and sometimes manufactured. Did we really need to buy all that toilet paper when the pandemic first hit? Technology is structured to become obsolete in a matter of years. Just how real were the gasoline shortages of the seventies? Are there limits to the number of people that the planet can sustain or only limits to the lifestyle we'd like to maintain?

Climate scientists tell us that human life will become unsustainable if we do not curb our greed for convenience. Environmentalists remind us that the great diversity of life is declining through our poor stewardship of the earth. Our hoarding of resources is destroying life, not creating it.

Jesus taught us to pray for "daily bread." We want to build bigger barns. Jesus' way leads to a sense of abundance. The thirst for more leads to a sense of poverty.

The key to cultivating generosity is to foster a belief in the abundant nature of creation. Wealth is intended for sharing. Only this will build a healthy human community. Hoarding sacrifices the lives of the many for the welfare of a few. It is not sustainable.

Entitlement, a third myth that undermines generosity, is the belief that I earned my wealth and have a right to use it as I please. This is not to say that we shouldn't be proud of our achievements, but to acknowledge that no one got to where they are without help. Someone made sure we were fed, clothed, and sheltered when we were young. Someone educated us, gave us our first job, recognized our talents, and rewarded us for it. So many people stand behind the heat I feel in my home, the food on my table, the bed I sleep in, and the internet that connects us to one another these days. We are nothing without the community that sustains us.

For society to become generous it would need to tell itself a different story. It would need to understand its purpose as providing for the needs of all instead of the accumulation of wealth for a few. It would need to operate on the principle of abundance, that there was enough wealth to supply the need. And it would need to accept responsibility for the welfare of others.

I suppose I've painted a rather ungenerous description of society, but as with individuals, I do believe that communities are capable and do in fact perform generous acts. Kalamazoo continues to work to make the arts accessible to everyone. City council continues to discuss ways to provide for the needs of the homeless. The federal and state government is trying to send relief during this pandemic and sending the message that we should act with concern for the safety of others. We do educate our children and do provide medical treatment for many people. It's not at all that we don't experience

generosity within communities. But we could do better both as individuals and as a society. We need to do better. It feels a little like there are five thousand people and only two fish and twelve loaves of bread. But, of course, Jesus showed us that the people could be fed, that it would be enough, and an abundance left over. Amen.

Resources:

Smith, James Bryan. The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL 2010.