

## **Defined By Generosity**

Oct. 17, 2010

Genesis 28: 18-22. Psalm 24 I Timothy 6:17-19.

Seventeen years ago, this month, the new church building for Tansley United Church in north Burlington, was dedicated. It was an extraordinary day. Thanks to Jane Wamsley, the music was spectacular – including the world premiere of a great piece of music for various instruments, piano, organ and four choirs.

One of the most memorable moments was when one of our key leaders let me know that as he took up the offering, a woman slipped him a bag, said it was her offering, but didn't want to put it on the offering plate. It was an old plastic Eaton's bag – grey and maroon. In it was 222 pennies. She said was glad and grateful for this new church in the neighbourhood. To this day, I'm 99% sure I know who made this gift. Not a regular in the congregation, but a person who contended with physical and mental health issues, surviving on a shoe-string – a disability pension. Her generosity took my breath away, as I knew that stash of pennies could have been a loaf of bread – quarts of milk – a pound of ground beef.

Another snapshot: John is the friend of my good friend Charles. Charles is a generous, compassionate person. But Charles gets annoyed that when ever he does anything with John, because John does his level best to get Charles to pay for everything: lunch, coffee, dinner – a six pack of beer – tickets to a Tigers game etc.

Now, John has a very good pension, and lived frugally while raising his family. His wife worked outside the home. They both have good pensions. John saved \$850,000 in his years of working. Eventually his wife and kids got fed up with his treating them the way he treated Charles – never being generous.

You see, John was scarred as a young boy in Holland in World War II. Dislocation, scarcity and fear, scarred him deeply, and he never got past it – despite being a person of strong Christian faith.

While these two stories may seem like extreme examples, most of us will find ourselves living somewhere between these two examples.

Friends, here's my deepest conviction: God created us with the willingness to give—to God and to others.

This design is part of our makeup. We actually have the need to be generous.

Yet there are two voices that “war” against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep or hoard what we have.

Fear of what might happen to us, along with a misplaced idea about the true source of our security, keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have.

The truth is that hoarding offers us no real security in this world.

Our culture tells us that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions and the accumulation pleasurable experiences.

So we find ourselves thinking, “Well, if I give, then there won't be enough left for me.”

But we are those who follow a different path: When we give our lives to Christ, and inviting him to be Lord of the whole of our lives, and when we allow God's Spirit to be at work in us, we find that our fears begin to dissipate. Our aim in life shifts from seeking personal pleasure to pleasing God and care for others.

Yes, we may still wrestle with the voices from time to time, that tell us to hoard, or that tells us that our own pleasure and accumulation always come first – now!

But eventually we are able to silence them more readily and effectively the more we trust God – and the more we grow in Christ. And the more we grow in Christ, realizing that our lives belong to him, the more generous we become.

Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth.

We find more joy in doing things for other people and for God, than we ever did in doing things for ourselves.

In the very act of giving ourselves away, we find life.

Life is a gift, and everything belongs to God.

We have shared Psalm 24's great proclamation: "*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.*"

From the early days of the Old Testament, God's people observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had to God. A gift offered to God was the first fruits or the tithe, and it equalled one-tenth of one's flocks or crops or income.

Abraham was the first to give a tithe or tenth. As we heard, Jacob did as well: (Genesis 28: 18-22.)

As Christians who live under the new covenant, we are not bound by the Law of Moses; we may look to it as a guide. Yet many Christians agree the tithe is a good guideline for our lives, and one that is pleasing to God.

Though tithing can be a struggle, it is possible at virtually every income level. If you cannot tithe right away, take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can give 2 percent or 5 percent or 7 percent.

God understands where you are, and God will help you to make the adjustments necessary for you to become more and more generous.

Tithing is a floor, not a ceiling.

God may call us to grow beyond the tithe. I have a friend who is a triple-tither – 30 per cent -- because he can -- because he loves to -- because he lives below his means.

(I can't get him to move his membership here.)

We should strive to set aside an additional percentage of our income as offerings for other things that are important to us, such as mission projects, church building funds, medical and non-profit organizations.

Have you ever wondered what your giving means to God? I can suggest what it might mean to you, but what do you think our giving means to God? How does our giving affect God?

From the earliest biblical times, the primary way that people worshipped God, was by building an altar and offering the fruit of their labours upon it to God.

Often they would burn the sacrifice of an animal, or some grain as a way of expressing their gratitude, devotion, and their desire to honour God. The scent of the offering was said to be pleasing to God.

It wasn't that God loved the smell of burnt meat and grain. Rather, God saw that people were giving a gift that expressed their love, and their faith, and the desire to please and honour God. And this moved God's heart.

This moved God's heart!

When given in this spirit, our offerings bless the Lord.

Let me suggest that when we are generous -- to God and to our families, friends, neighbours, and others who are in need -- our hearts are filled with joy.

Our hearts are enlarged by the very act of giving. When we give generously, we become more generous.

Many Christians have it wrong. They say that if you give, then God will give more back to you.

But that is not how it works. We do not give to God so that we can get something in return.

The amazing thing is that when we give to God and to others, the blessings just seem to come back to us.

Of course, there is no guarantee that if you tithe you will never lose your job or never have other bad things happen to you.

Nevertheless, when we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives.

Friends, we have been making a stewardship journey together this last few weeks. We have lived into the themes of Enough: Discovering joy through simplicity and generosity. We have looked at how we can become entangled in consumption. Last week we looked deeply at the question of contentment.

Next Sunday we have the opportunity to present our Estimate of Giving Cards for 2011 in worship. I invite you to be thoughtful and prayerful, and to treat this as an act of worship. (We will share a delightful lunch together afterwards.)

Your bulletin this morning contains an goldenrod insert -- a "Personal Goals & Commitment" worksheet for you to take home to work at, think about, discuss, and consider prayerfully.

Lastly, I want to bring us back to something that happened a few years ago. You may have read about a female humpback whale which had become entangled in a spider web of crab traps and lines off San Francisco.

This 45 to 50 foot whale – estimated to weigh 50 tons was on the humpbacks' usual migratory route between the Northern California coast and Baja California when it became entangled in the nylon ropes that link crab pots.

About 20 crab-pot ropes, which are 240 feet long with weights every 60 feet, were wrapped around her.

Rope was wrapped at least four times around the tail, the back and the left front flipper, and there was a line in the whale's mouth.

The crab pot lines were cinched so tight that the rope was digging into the animal's blubber and leaving visible cuts. At least 12 crab traps, weighing 90 pounds each, hung off the whale, the divers said.

The combined weight was pulling the whale downward, forcing it to struggle mightily to keep its blow-hole out of the water.

A fisherman spotted her just east of the Farallon Islands (outside the Golden Gate) and radioed an environmental group for help.

Within a few hours, the rescue team arrived and determined that she was so bad off, the only way to save her was to dive in and untangle her.

Four divers spent about an hour cutting the ropes with a special curved knife. The whale floated passively in the water the whole time, giving off a strange kind of vibration.

When she was free, the divers say she swam in what seemed like joyous circles. She then came back to each and every diver, one at a time, and nudged them, pushed them gently around as she was thanking them.

Some said it was the most incredibly beautiful experience of their lives. The guy who cut the rope out of her mouth said her eyes were following him the whole time, and he will never be the same.

Friends, may you, and all those you love, be so blessed and fortunate to be surrounded by people who will help you get untangled from the things that are binding you. And, may you always know the joy of giving and receiving gratitude – may you know the joy of giving and receiving generously.

Let us pray...

Oh God, we thank you that you have given us life, that you sustain us through your Spirit and that you gave Jesus Christ for us. We thank you for the abundance that we have in our lives. And we pray that you would help us. Help us, O Lord, to honour you with our giving. Help us to care for the poor and those who are in need. Help us to recognize that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We offer ourselves to you. Guide us when we prepare our commitment cards. Help us, oh Lord, to do your will. Lead us, we pray. In your holy name, Amen.