

The Art of Giving

E7-19, Feb. 24, 2019
Lk 6:27-38

The Rev. Dr. Chris Hagen
Lake Nokomis L. Ch., Mpls

Giving is a difficult thing.

I mean pure generosity,
sincere, true giving is *difficult*.

Giving with *conditions* is not so hard, but it's not *true* giving.

Giving with *expectation* is not so hard, but it also is not *true* giving.
Such deeds, while well-intentioned, are types of contracts
or at least an exchange of goods and services.

Giving with conditions or expectations is a contract.

And handing some money to the guy on the corner,
with the comment or the hope of "don't spend it on booze,"
is a weak bribe to keep him from drinking.

Dropping a couple of dollars in a jar at the store for the soccer club
is a *good thing*, I agree,

but do you expect back a smile and a "thank you?"

How would you feel if there were no thanks or smile?

A true gift would *not expect it*.

Last week I gave my wife a bunch of roses on Valentines Day.

I *wanted* to do it.

I wanted to make her happy.

It was a gesture of how passionately in love with her I still am after all these years.

She appreciated them appropriately and returned a kiss.

It was a good thing!

Yet, a true gift would have been roses without expectation of affection or kiss.

Such exchanges,

buying Girl Scout cookies because scouting is good and the children are cute,
shoveling out the neighbor's driveway because they are nice neighbors,
donating used clothes because I don't need them anymore and can use some closet space,
giving money to World Hunger because people need it,
a birthday card,

all are very good,

all show kind hearts,

all are Christ-like deeds in a selfish world.

Keep showing your heart these ways!

But *pure* giving is more difficult,

giving without expectation,

giving without further thought,

giving, not to feel good or hope for thanks,

but giving solely because that is who you are,

such pure giving is difficult.

That is the kind of generosity Jesus is calling for

in this reading from The Gospel According to Luke.

Giving with no strings attached,

no expectation on how the gift will be used,

no thought of the gift after it is given.

Pure giving is about the giver, not about the gift or about the recipient.

Love, even when enemies hate and curse and abuse,

because that is who you are,

a person who will not spite.

Love, even when someone strikes you or robs you of your coat,

let it go, harbor no ill-will.

It is an art.

Giving, generosity of this nature is an art form
 that needs practice, some talent, inspiration, and much dedication.
 Yet, *imagine* a life lived so generously,
 imagine what it would be like to love *without expectation*.
 Not that you would be cold because you gave away all your clothes,
 but letting go of concern whether what you did was wise,
 letting go of dwelling on whether the other person was appreciative,
 letting go of wondering if you will need that money for something later.
 Giving and forgetting is an art form.
 Giving and forgetting about it is a spiritual skill.

Thirty-eight years ago I arrived at Luther Seminary
 for my second year of training to be a pastor.
 I arrived on campus for my second year, but had no money.
 I had just come from a low-paying summer job that mostly provided living expenses.
 I arrived with just \$24 to my name,
 \$24 to cover tuition, housing, food, text books, supplies.
 The financial officer was not happy.

I had few options.
 God had called me to ministry, I was clear on that.
 I had no idea how this could happen, that was clear too.
 I had no job waiting me,
 no place to sleep that night,
 nothing more to eat since breakfast,
 and no funds to even buy notepaper and a pen.

Have *you* ever experienced hopelessness,
 the feeling of having no options, no future,
 the despair of a dream that will not be yours?

I arrived on campus for my second year of seminary
 with nothing but the vague notion that I had to show up.

The financial officer was not happy with me.

The rest of that morning and afternoon
 I sat on a bench outside the seminary building wondering what were my options.
 I sat on a bench with no future and prayed, not sure God was even listening.

Late that afternoon I was called back in.
 The financial officer *had gone out of his way* to cobble together some resources.
 I was given a job in the library.
 I was given a seminary grant for low-income students.

And then he introduced me to a men's group
 at *St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Stewart, Minnesota*.

A dozen men at a small, rural southern Minnesota church
 had been meeting for prayer and Bible study,
 and were led to put up money for students going to seminary,
 their calling to provide future pastors for churches somewhere.

The men's group of St. Paul's Lutheran Church
 gave me a *no-interest loan* with *no collateral* and *no expectation* of paying it back,
 solely for the purpose of making sure I could become a pastor.

It was *pure gift* from strangers to stranger,
 done only out of their spirit of generosity and gratitude to God.

Here I am, your pastor this day.

Their gift 4 decades ago
 made it possible for me to serve you and congregations
 in Chicago, Delaware, Baltimore, Pennsylvania and Minnesota.

More so, those men became my cheerleaders as I continued in seminary.
 They gave me opportunity to supply preach in their church.
 They encouraged me with letters.
 They let me know that I had people behind me.
 Now, when you *experience* such generosity from others,
 it does something inside.
 Those men were a true God-send.
 Thanking them was not enough.
 I now was acutely aware of *the generosity of our God*.
 There was no expectation of me,
 but such generosity fosters *further* generosity.
 Not only did I pay back that loan within a few years following ordination,
 but I paid back *even more*
 so that I could be a part of those men loaning to other future pastors.

Experiencing such generosity without expectation
 showed me how to live generously.
 And living generously opens opportunities I would not otherwise have.
 Generosity opens opportunities unavailable any other way.

For several years I had the privilege and honor of friendship with a homeless family.
 Poverty has since taken its toll on them,
 Joseph is now deceased for lack of good medical care,
 Liz is in Chicago evading arrest warrants here in Minneapolis,
 and their son is being raised by a grandmother.
Poverty continues to be persistent evil and America's shame.
Poverty is America's paramount sin.

For several years Joseph and Liz had let me in on their life.
 I can tell you stories that will make your hair rise!
 But also they had shown me how *generosity begets generosity*.
 When cash is given at a street corner to a person carrying a cardboard sign
 that money may go to beer, we can never be sure,
 it also may go a couple of other people you don't even see,
 it may be shared with a homeless friend who did not get charity that day,
 it may be used as payment for needed bike part crucial for transportation,
 it may buy infant formula for some other mother on the street,
 it may be spent on a bus token
 that assures a warm place to spend the night when all the shelters are full.
 There is an intricate shadow economy in the homeless world
 outside the conventional capitalist system
 that is based on giving and receiving out of sheer generosity.
 We can learn much about Jesus from our homeless neighbors.

Loving enemies,
 refusing to return violence for violence,
 bless, speak well of anyone who slanders,
 share what you have,
 all are expressions of Godly generosity,
 all derive from a generous spirit.

Mostly we have the pleasure, and God is certainly pleased,
 with giving gifts, enjoying helping, receiving thankful smiles,
 and they are surely good!
 Sharing and giving, thanking and honoring, are all good.
 Then there is the art of giving without expectation of "thank you,"
 without hope it is not squandered,

giving without strings attached.
 It makes no sense in our contractual world.
 At the time of Jesus, in the Roman culture of the time,
 and in our own time still,
 such giving makes little sense.
 It appears naïve.
 It seems a sign of weakness, of sentimentality.
 It appears as wasting hard-earned money.
 Strength in a world of contracts and accumulating
 is above emotional reaction to hardship and above other's misfortunes.
 Just see the attitude today of America first and what's mine is mine.
 The gods of Romans in Jesus' time had little care for humans
 and the gods only bestowed blessing when humans would praise them.
 The commercial god of America
 protects those well-off,
 considers the poor a drain on the rest of us,
 segregates and isolates to create enclaves of wealth,
 and we are on the bring of disaster that has historically befallen so stratified societies.

Hear again verse 36,
 "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."
 The Greek word for mercy here
 is about being sympathetic and grieving another's plight,
 sympathetic to the point of wanting to help and make right.
 Roman demi-gods and America's semi-god stand aloof of others' misfortunes.
 But our God Almighty, strength above strength,
 would emotionally react to suffering to the point of grieving our human condition,
 the exact antithesis of any lesser Roman god!¹
 Acting out of God's self and God's compassion,
 God gives without regard or reward or recognition.
 Merciful, *bearing with* another's plight, in this together *with us*,
 God gives what we need.
 God *joins* our human condition to share in our sufferings and struggles.
 Then Jesus *tells us* to be this way merciful.

Giving without regard or reward or recognition,
 we find that same mercy, that same blessing and gift,
 somehow coming in return
 a good measure, packed down like brown sugar,
 shaken together to fill all crannies and get as much in as possible,
 and then *some more running over* just because.
 We will see gratitude beget generosity again and again.
 Our God is generous to sinner and saint,
 to ingrate and thankful,
 to worthy and not.
 God blesses and provides for Christian and those not,
 God's gives all we are and all we have.
 We can never out-give God.
 We will *always* receive whenever we give generously.
 Amen.

¹ James 5:11.