

Sermon
John 15:1-10
Stewardship Sunday • Sunday, December 13, 2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

I took a leap of faith about a month ago and replaced the 3rd Sunday in Advent with Stewardship Sunday. This wreaked havoc with the Bible Study groups this week, because the texts appointed for today, apply to the third Sunday in Advent and I had replaced these Sunday texts with scripture that addresses stewardship. Oh, the power that we pastors can wield!

The word, *Stewardship*, along with *Evangelism*, have become words we don't generally care for – and in some circles, both have taken on negative connotations. I'll be using the word, stewardship, a lot in this sermon, but can we pledge that afterwards, at least in *this* community, with one another, for the time being, when we want to say, *Stewardship*, can we try to use the words *Abundance* or *Generosity*, instead?

If Jesus had lived in the 21st Century, he might have used the following as a sort of mission statement, "I have come so that my joy might be in you, and that your joy might be complete. And where there is generosity, there is joy."

One of the most important things to remember about generosity is that it is a fruit of the spirit – and we just heard the list of the fruits of the spirit that Paul later wrote about in his letter to the church in Galatia. Generosity really isn't a virtue or an admirable character trait that we can readily develop in ourselves. Generosity is not even something that God wants *from* us. Rather, generosity something that God wants *for* us. Because we can find great joy in generosity and God wants our lives to be full of this kind of joy.

Every type of fruit first begins as a seed. God has placed the seeds of generosity within each of our hearts. However, to grow and produce, these seeds need to be nurtured. And although we have the *potential* to become generous, we are not *born* generous. If you've had the good fortune of being around a toddler when they're just beginning to speak, you know that some of the first words they learn are: "NO!" and "MINE!" We all grow out of that toddler stage, but we actually have to LEARN to be generous.

Generosity is something that grows within us just like faith, and the seeds of generosity, the fruit of generosity, continue to ripen throughout our entire lives.

How do we encourage the growth of these seeds that God has placed within each one of our hearts? How do we cultivate that potential?

The first thing we need to focus on is the soil. Every gardener can tell you that to produce anything of quality, you need to prepare the soil. And so, the seeds of generosity grow best in the good soil of abundance-thinking, rather than the fallow soil of scarcity thinking.

The quality of the soil in our congregation is shaped by how we talk with one another, and by how we pray. Whenever we talk about deficit budgets and declining pledges, and the need to cut back, we are creating unproductive soil. And nothing grows well in uncultivated soil. Sounding the alarm that we are behind in our giving, or behind in meeting the budget, does not create generosity in our church community. Instead, harm is done to the tiny fragile seeds because the alarm changes our focus from faithfulness to finance. This type of talk creates the impression that we are using all of you to support the church budget rather than empowering you to do God's work.

So if we want to create good soil, we need to compost all year long. Right? We need to lift up and celebrate all the good things that are happening here, in our congregation, day in and day out. One really great way to compost is to, invite someone from our congregation, or someone from an organization that we support, to share a story about what we're doing is affecting their life, or how our work with their organization is helping them to thrive and grow – and to celebrate how we are making a difference.

This kind of talk encourages an abundant life mentality instead of a survival mode mentality.

And here's another example about what that means.

Have you ever heard this type of talk in a congregation you have belonged to?

"Oh, it's the same 20% who do all the work around here!

We just can't get enough volunteers!"

Well, that's one way to talk about this very common characteristic of church life.

But here's another way to talk about it: "Thank God for the 20%! Thank God that in every congregation, there they are and the Spirit manages to raise up these 20% who are willing to serve as leaders. God always seems to provide the 20% and to me, this is so amazing and inspiring. Whenever we plan something as a congregation...whenever you arrive, you can find them already working...the beloved 20%!

And it is amazing to see what God can do with 20%.

Another way to encourage good, rich soil, it to be open and encouraging of new ideas. But sometimes, when a new idea comes up we might hear, "well that's a good idea, but we can't do that now." Or "we are already spread so thin that there's no way we can take on something new right now – we won't be able to get the volunteers." Here's the real soil killer: "we already tried that a few years ago and it didn't work."

So as people of God, whenever a new idea comes up, no matter how hair-brained it might seem, we have to be willing to learn to say, "that's a really good idea." Or if you can't say that, then "you know, that's a really interesting idea." We need to think about this. We need to spend some time thinking about how we might be able to do something with this idea. What would it take to give that a try? (Let's try...turn to your neighbor...or say it back to me...)

One of the things we as a church need more than money is inspired ideas. Vision. A new way of looking at things.

The seeds of generosity will sprout in the soil of abundant thinking. But they will *flourish* in the soil of gratitude.

It's incredible to see how much people are able to grow in their giving – not just their financial giving – but any kind of giving, when they are affirmed, and thanked for what they're doing – and not just by their pastor.

We're generally pretty good about openly thanking people for sharing their time and talents, aren't we? But when it comes to talking about money? Ugh! Mum's the word.

There's this hush-hush attitude around money and people's financial giving that is really not good for a climate of generosity. I know Angela just sent out a note to thank folks for helping with the potatoes at Thanksgiving. Some of the best things that we do are sending a personal note to thank individuals for their service.

But when it comes to monetary gifts, a generic note is usually sent, acknowledging a pledge but that's about as good as it gets – except for at Gloria Dei. Long ago, a system was set up by Connie, Nadine, whomever, to let the pastor know about any special gift that may have been made. And I always write a thank you note. But in many congregations, the pastor is never privy to significant financial gifts to the congregation, so there often is no follow up at all. Can you believe it? No follow up. So the pastor doesn't say thank you for the gift because the pastor doesn't even know about it. In our efforts to make sure that we don't show partiality to our generous financial supporters, we often don't even acknowledge their gifts, let alone cultivate them and help them grow.

So there are two things that we have to get over.

#1. The secrecy around financial giving to the work of God in our community.

#2. The idea that Stewardship is about raising money.

Stewardship is not about raising money.

Stewardship is about the management of everything God has entrusted to our care.

Money is one of those things entrusted to us and it is powerful. And that's where generosity come in. Faithful management is really about cultivating a deep awareness of the really intimate connection between generosity and spiritual growth.

Generosity is a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work within us.

Generosity involves a transformation of our hearts and our minds.

Generosity is a spiritual issue.

If we *don't* talk about money, it's almost impossible to cultivate the fruit of generosity in our lives and in others. Some people have been really good at making money. Sometimes they inherit it, but some are just really good at it. It's one of their gifts. And often, they're very generous in supporting worthy causes. Showing gratitude is a way to affirm these gifts.

So the seeds of generosity grow best in the soil of abundance and gratitude.

Sunlight is the second element that seeds require to grow. Sunlight is what draws the life out of the seeds. And the thing that brings the seeds to light is a compelling vision. In Proverbs, we read this statement: "Where there is no vision, a people perish." But I really think that where there is no vision, a parish perishes. Really, it's true.

A clearly articulated vision is absolutely essential to cultivating the fruit of generosity. Now I know that crafting a vision takes a lot of time and energy and prayer and discussion – and meetings. It takes a lot of meetings. On Zoom. But there's just no way to harvest generosity without that vision, a clear sense of what God is calling us to do in our community. And by vision, I'm not talking about a mission statement that's created almost as a one-and-done. Our mission statement, or tagline, may help *shape* our vision, but our vision should be much more dynamic. Our vision changes year by year, it changes as our congregation changes, it changes as our neighborhood changes, it changes as the community's needs change and as new people come into our congregation with really incredible gifts and passions for a certain ministry. The vision of this congregation is something that needs to be examined and rearticulated regularly.

To begin refining our vision we need to ask, "What does God want to do in and through our congregation?" I know that question sounds a little presumptuous, as if we know what God wants us to do. But it *is* about that. That is what we're seeking. Where do we feel the Spirit leading us? Where *do* we feel called to go? And then through prayer and conversation, we'll begin to discern what would enable us to actually accomplish this type of vision.

Another way to get at it is, "what are the needs in the community that we feel uniquely gifted to meet?"

Or "What is it that you're really excited about?"

Or "Where do we feel that God is leading Gloria Dei at this time in our life together?"

Once the Holy Spirit has had a chance to work in the hearts of us, then it's time for us to share these thoughts and invite your input and participation into the visioning process. And we can do that at our Annual Meeting in January.

That's when we'll talk about how we will use the gifts we've received to accomplish our vision together. How is our giving this year going to help us make our vision a reality? It's generally true that people tend to give more generously to specific events or causes. To provide for a vision.

The third essential thing that fruit needs in order to flourish is water.

Fruit won't make it if it's watered only once a year.

It's the same with the fruit of generosity. It's not going to flourish if we only talk about generosity at our annual stewardship appeal – or the meeting set aside to pass the budget.

The fruit of generosity needs regular watering. And the way you water that fruit is to provide all sorts of opportunities throughout the year for people to actually experience the joy of giving. Not just talking about it, but actually experiencing it.

So we need to plan all sorts of different kinds of transformational experiences for different ages, and also, because we have the wonderful opportunity of many different ages in our churches, intergenerational events so that people are working together on giving. Giving of ourselves, living for something bigger than just us. Realizing that we can actually make a difference. *That* is transformational. Offering opportunities such as one-day work projects at church, a week-long mission trip for teenagers and youth, opportunities for young and not so young to work at the Devereaux Center making waffles, or partnering with a church in a very different context than Gloria Dei's and actually sharing ministry and worship and meals with them – when the pandemic is over, of course.

This is how we can discover the joy of generosity. As regular watering helps plants grow, these types of activities help generosity to grow. So does inviting our members to follow up by speaking during worship about how their experiences at these events, and what these forms of service have meant to them. These forms of service create excellent growing conditions for the fruit of generosity and they could share how they have been transformed by them.

Another really important aspect of growing fruit is pruning. No one likes to prune, because sometimes you have to cut off a bud you were really attached to but pruning still needs to be done. And a tool for pruning the fruit of generosity is the word of God. God's word is full of pruning examples of how discipleship is rooted in our giving. And we need to remember that, as every gardener knows, it's really important to prune at the proper time, right?

And the best time to talk about generosity and the spiritual dimension of our discipleship, our relationship with money, is *not* when the church is asking for money. It's when we're *not* asking for money. We need to be talking about abundance and generosity throughout the year. The annual stewardship campaign is not the time to talk about money, it's the time to talk about our vision for the year. It's the time to explain and celebrate how we've accomplished things in this past year. And what it is we're feeling called to accomplish in the next year. That should be the focus of our annual meeting.

During the rest of the year, we need to be deliberate about regularly pruning the branches. Preaching and teaching and encouraging one another so that we inspire one another to be generous in our day to day lives and not just during the annual fundraising that usually precedes putting together a budget.

Each of us spends money, saves money, worries about money, and makes decisions about money every single day, and so I and the leaders of this congregation should frequently remind each of us that we are all called to relate to money as a child of God, so that our relationship with money is informed by our faith.

Jesus talked about money more than any other topic in Scripture, except for the Kingdom of God. And I think the reason he did this is because if we don't learn to master money, money will master us. We all need help when it comes to dealing with the power that money can have in our lives. Our world is crazy busy, cultivating the fruit of greed, so we need to be equally vigilant in cultivating the fruit of generosity, instead.

We, as a church, need to talk about a life that is rich in the currency of God's Kingdom. The fruits of the Spirit.

And we need to support each other in living a life that is ordered by a different set of values than consumerism and materialism. It's not easy living counter-culturally.

Over time, regular pruning through reading and hearing biblical texts about our relationship with money will lead us into spiritual maturity. And when it comes to money, spiritual maturity, to me, is choosing to live with less in order that you can make a greater impact for good in the world. That is truly counter-cultural. It isn't just giving your fair share, it's actually creatively trying to figure out how you can make a greater impact by living differently, yourself. And that is what Paul calls life, indeed.

Our money is intended to be a very powerful tool in bringing renewal to the world, for deepening and extending God's Kingdom in our sphere of influence. And if we really think about each of us and our lives combined into one ministry, we have a pretty large sphere of influence together, don't we? Cultivating the fruit of generosity is actually one of the most life-giving things that we can do for ourselves and for those in our lives.

And finally, I want to say something about MiracleGro. You know MiracleGro, that fertilizer you put on your plants to yield more blossoms, and if they're fruit, more fruit. When it comes to cultivating the fruit of generosity, what passes as MiracleGro in the church is its generous leaders.

If the Church Council and the pastor are "all in," and then if they say, "Here's what we feel called to do in this congregation, here's why we're so passionate about it, and here's how we are going to support it," well, get ready for a bumper crop. We can fund anything we can dream if we want to.

If we are really serious about cultivating generosity in this congregation, one of the most effective things we can do as leaders in an annual stewardship appeal is to share how we make decisions about how much we are going to give to the work of our church. If we could talk to each other about how we do this, I have no doubt that pledging would go up. I really don't know how to explain how this works, that's why one Synod rep I know calls it MiracleGro.

It's a miracle, but it has something to do with the willingness of our leaders making themselves vulnerable, to be authentic, and to share how they are growing in their own spiritual journey, in their own relationship with money, their own discipleship, their own desire to be a generous giver. A generous life is very inspiring.

If we had time this morning and I were to ask any of you how you learned to be generous and you shared your own stories of generosity, I have no doubt we would all be teary-eyed. Because we would be inspired by your stories. And each of us has a story to tell.

When we are generous, the world takes notice. Generous people inspire more people to be generous. And to everyone's amazement and joy, there is an abundance of fruit that is produced in our congregations. And here's the amazing thing. It's not just the fruit of generosity, but it's the fruit of joy, of love and peace, patience and kindness,

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Because the amazing thing is that when one fruit is cultivated, the others grow, too. One branch, one vine, bears all that fruit. So where's the fruit? It's on the vine.

I am reminded of these beautiful words of Jesus: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

Cultivating the fruit of generosity is about staying firmly attached to that life-giving vine. And helping each other to do the same.

Amen.