

Family Matters...Being the Family of God 2: “Practicing Extravagant Generosity”

They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do. 2 Corinthians 8: 2-5

Last Sunday morning following our 10:30 service I was handed a sealed envelop with my name on it from a woman in our congregation. She remarked that it was from her husband, who had to work last Sunday, she didn't know what it was about, but she was asked to give it to me. I stuck it in my pocket, and only after all the wonderful chaos had cleared out last week, did I sit down and read it. This is what it said. (Read Bob's letter.)

Yes, we are blessed. What a remarkable example of Radical Hospitality ... AND... Extravagant Generosity. But do you want to know what I really think about this amazing story...I don't think it's an isolated incident. I believe there are many of you who through the years of your life in this family, and because of this family; have come to understand, appreciate, and are even now being blessed with multiple opportunities to serve and to practice Extravagant Generosity, and Radical Hospitality, just like Bob and Kim. I could tell story after story, but I want to tell you something more. More foundational, more theological, more practical about how we as a new church in this new era God has laid at our door step; will Practice Extravagant Generosity.

If you were here last week you heard me declare my belief that this is indeed a new day at First UMC. We are being blessed by God in ways beyond what we deserve; and we must respond. I laid out some significant challenges for us to consider as we Practice Radical Hospitality. I can't wait to hear your stories of how God has opened doors for you to engage the friends for whom you have been praying.

In the next 5 weeks I'll continue to lay out the business that will become the DNA of our new church, our new family. Today we must speak of the Practice of Extravagant Generosity.

The Apostle Paul has so aptly reminded us with the example of the Macedonian Christians; who were being tested by many troubles, who were very poor, who begged Paul for the chance to give, who did more than Paul had hoped for. These Christians whose joy in Jesus overflowed in rich...some might (considering their circumstances) say Extravagant Generosity. I want to explore with you what that will mean in "practical" (remember we are practicing these principles) ways for our church. Here is #1.

1. WE WILL ALLOW PEOPLE TO GROW INTO THE GRACE OF GIVING

The Christian life is a process, a continual, life-long process of becoming a faithful follower of Jesus. Yes, I know it often involves an instantaneous, sometimes even dramatic beginning point or experience for some people; but all people who want to follow Jesus are expected, even commanded to grow. Thus, I believe our Practice of Extravagant Generosity, must allow for people to grow into this practice. Few of us are able to make the mental or fiscal leap from casual, haphazard giving, to faithful, especially Extravagant Giving. But here is the kicker...we must be growing that direction.

Ask yourself these questions: has your income increased over the past 10 years? Has your giving? I was raised in a family that had never been challenged with this truth, and so we gave the same \$5 or \$10 dollars whenever we showed up. That is not faithful discipleship. Our giving, if it's to be a reflection of the character of God, and an act of our worship to God, and a testimony of our gratitude for God...then it has to be more intentional. I'm all for allowing people to grow into the grace of Extravagant Generosity, as long as there is authentic growth.

Here is how Bishop Schnase explains what Extravagantly Generous Churches look like. “Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations thrive because of the extraordinary sharing, willing sacrifice, and joyous giving of their members out of love for God and neighbor. Such churches teach and practice giving that focuses on the abundance of God’s grace and they emphasize the Christian’s need to give rather than on the church’s need for money. In the spirit and manner of Christ, congregations that practice Extravagant Generosity explicitly talk about the place of money, in the Christian’s walk of faith. They view giving as a gift from God and are driven to be generous by a high sense of mission and a keen desire to please God by making a positive difference in the world.”

We will allow people to grow into the grace of giving.

2. WE WILL EXPECT PROPORTIONAL GIVING TO THE TITHE...AND BEYOND

You should follow the same procedure I gave to the churches in Galatia. On the first day of the each week, you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned. I Corinthians 16:1-2

Through the years we’ve talked about joyful giving, cheerful giving, missional giving, even sacrificial giving. Which reminds me; I want to define that again. Sacrificial giving by definition cannot be practiced all the time. You can’t always be giving sacrificially, or you will soon run out of money! That being said; there are clearly times in our life that sacrifices of time, talent and treasure are not only expected, but demanded.

But what I want to draw from this passage is that one little word – portion. Extravagantly Generous Jesus followers are expected to give proportionally, from the money they have earned. My hunch would be that the Good Samaritan was giving sacrificially when he helped the “Ryan” he met along side the road, but that sacrifice was a natural outcome of a disciplined life of proportional giving.

The bible teaches a method of proportional giving called tithing; giving the first 10% of your increase, salary, wages, or produce. That is the beginning standard, we will expect ALL of our followers to ascribe to and work toward.

There is much evidence from Jesus himself, and other examples in the NT, that for those who have much, a tithe is probably not enough! The tithe must be seen as the minimal standard of proportional giving, not the end standard.

It has been such a blessing for me to see and hear, again and again, year after year, stories of how God has honored your efforts to become tithers, and how for many of you, giving more has even more richly blessed you. That will continue to be the expected standard of Extravagant Generosity here at First UMC.

One hundred and 50 years ago, if your great-grandparents were active in the faith, they probably tithed. Why do you think they were able to tithe 150 years ago, but yet we have trouble doing it today? Because they were so much wealthier than we are? The truth is precisely the opposite. We struggle with tithing because our hearts and minds are too powerfully shaped by our affluence. We find it harder to give extravagantly because our society's values shape our perceptions sometimes more than our faith's values do.

People talk about putting God first and having God at the center of their lives, but in actual practice most of a person's major decisions are made without reference to God's will or priorities, and God is really peripheral instead of central. Instead of giving God the leftovers at the end of the month, tithing is a spiritual discipline that puts God first. It's a practical way of saying, "God really is the Lord of our lives, and we do not give into; society's expectations, our possessions, or our appetites." Tithing takes enormous trust in God. Tithing strengthens faith.

3. WE WILL MOVE FROM A SCARCITY MENTALITY TO AN ABUNDANCE REALITY

Our genetic heritage as German, Norwegian, and Scandinavian descendants has been predominated by a "scarcity" mentality.

We spend so much time saving for a rainy day and then worrying when the rain clouds gather; that our whole lives are adversely affected. Much of our life in the church, this church or other churches operates from a “scarcity” mentality. Our country is quite bi-polar when it comes to this. We spend way more than we make, and yet always feel like we never have enough...again, I think this stems from an underlying “scarcity” mentality.

I’m not able to undo genetic DNA, or cultural confusion; but what I’ll offer to you today is that in our present and future church, we’ll work hard to get a firm grasp on the reality that our God is a God of abundance. Not of waste and wantonness, but a God of plenty. The God we serve and love owns the cattle on a thousand hills...AND THE HILLS TOO! God has proven just how extravagant He is by giving us one gift after another, one blessing after another, one provision after another...and the desires of our hearts...and his only Son! Need more proof?

I have two pledges or promises for you. I will provide the best leadership I can to those you elect to be leaders of this church; and continually try and remind them that we will thrive in this new church, with the joy of abundance rather than starve with a fear of scarcity. Times might be tough for us in this country right now...and truth be told; we probably deserve it, and need it! But God has not changed! God still comes to give us life...abundant life.

I also promise to you that I will not use guilt, fear, shame, manipulation or scarcity to try and motivate you to give. We will tell you the truth; about budget shortfalls and excesses; all while nurturing this underlying philosophy of abundance as our spiritual reality.

4. WE WILL LIVE ABOVE OUR CULTURE OF CONSUMERISM AND MATERIALISM

Americans live in an extraordinarily materialistic and consumerist society. We are immersed in a culture that feeds on accumulating and acquiring; it feeds on the appetite for more and bigger, it feeds on and is perpetuated by the myth that self-worth is found in material wealth and that happiness is found in possessing. Dave Ramsey is fond of saying: “Americans buy things they don’t even need, with money they don’t even have, to impress people they don’t even know.”

Illustration: When people with different incomes are asked; “how much more money would it take for you to be happy?” Most respond about 20%. Those making \$10,000 think they’d be happy with \$12,000. Those making \$50,000 think they could be happy if they could just make \$60,000. And those making \$500,000 are convinced that for a mere \$100,000 more, then they’d be happy. But try and think of it this way; people who make 20% less than you do, think they’d be happy to make what you make. So if that amount promises to make them happy, why doesn’t it make you happy? I’m afraid it’s because we have consciously or subconsciously bought or been sucked into the LIE that more is always better! I have a Dr. friend in SD who is fond of saying...”It costs a lot to have money!” He is right.

Giving is an antidote to the cultural value of consumerism; and Extravagant Generosity is the CURE!

5. WE WILL PLANT TREES WHOSE SHADE WE’LL NEVER SEE

We will do our level best to continually invest in projects, plans and ministries that will reach succeeding generations. We’ll continue to give money to missions. We’ll continue to give you ample opportunities to give beyond this local church. We’ll give you an avenue to plant some trees, whose shade you might never enjoy.

There is a great story in Bishop Schnase’s book about a grandfather who had been a member of his church for 40+years. One Sunday his infant grand daughter was being baptized.

There was also another new baby, the daughter of a new family in the church also being baptized. Following the service as the families mingled about at the front of the church taking pictures the young mom from the new-to-the-church family needed to go to her car and retrieve a camera. So this loving grandfather offered to hold her daughter while she attended to her car.

People came to greet the families, and remarked to the stately saintly, grandfather, how beautiful his granddaughter was. He found himself repeatedly stating; "oh this one's not mine, I'm just holding her for a few minutes."

Monday morning the pastor got an anxious phone call from the grandfather asking to see him that day. The pastor feared the worst, that something must have displeased the elder statesman from the church.

The pastor's fears were turned to joy as the grand old man stated his purpose was not to complain, but to ask assistance from the Pastor to help the old man change his will to include the church. When asked why, and what had prompted this change, the grandfather proudly stated: "Yesterday while I held that child of that new church family, I came to realize I was wrong saying she wasn't mine...she is mine, she is one of my family, our family, our church family. I have many more grandchildren than my own. I've made provisions in my will for all my children and grandchildren, but I want you to help me rearrange my will to give a portion for all my other grandchildren in this church. That my friends, is planting trees whose shade the old man may never enjoy.

I wonder if you have ever considered making a legacy gift that will support the things you've loved while on earth...long after you leave earth? There are thousands of worthy recipients, but don't overlook your church as one of the many. We have a permanent Trust fund to receive such funds, and we would love to help you make such an extravagant gift.

Gifts from beyond the grave I call them. I think often of this when we make special purchases from the memorial fund, and when we invest in the lives of young ministers like Cody, Brandon, and others through our Trust Fund interest. Planting trees whose shade we may never enjoy. It's a good thing! It's Extravagant.

Well, there is more to be said, but this is enough for today. Now, please consider this Action Plan:

Figure out exactly what percentage of your annual income you currently give.

Pray for a specific amount that you think God wants you to give.

Plan ways to alter your life (reducing or eliminating debt would be one) to make that giving possible.

Start your Extravagant Generosity...not just with your giving...but with your living!

You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity. 2 Cor. 9:11

Family Matters...Being the Family of God 2: “Practicing Extravagant Generosity”

They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do. 2 Corinthians 8: 2-5

1. WE WILL ALLOW PEOPLE TO _____ INTO THE _____ OF GIVING

2. WE WILL EXPECT _____ GIVING TO THE _____...AND _____

You should follow the same procedure I gave to the churches in Galatia. On the first day of the each week, you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2

3. WE WILL MOVE FROM A _____ MENTALITY TO AN _____ REALITY

4. WE WILL _____ OUR CULTURE OF CONSUMERISM AND MATERIALISM

Giving is an antidote to the cultural value of consumerism; and Extravagant Generosity is the CURE!

5. WE WILL PLANT _____ WHOSE _____ WE'LL NEVER SEE

Family Matters...Being the Family of God 2: “Practicing Extravagant Generosity”

They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do. 2 Corinthians 8: 2-5

STUDY GUIDE

Action Plan:

Figure out exactly what percentage of your annual income you currently give.

Pray for a specific amount that you think God wants you to give.

Plan ways to alter your life (reducing or eliminating debt would be one) to make that giving possible.

Start your Extravagant Generosity...not just with your giving...but with your living!

You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity. 2 Cor. 9:11

1. Share your own definition of Extravagant Generosity
2. Do you agree/disagree that we should allow people to grow into the Grace of Giving? What steps might be necessary for us to help people grow into their giving?
3. Give evidence of the “Scarcity Mentality” as you see it in our country, and churches you know? How does that mentality affect how people live? How can we live under an “Abundance Mentality” and remain faithful to God?
4. How can our earning/spending/saving/giving be ‘counter-cultural’ in your mind? How can that ‘counter-cultural’ life, be a testimony?
5. What about ‘legacy’ giving? Is that important to you? What are some God-honoring ways we can give from beyond the grave?