

"Thankful Giving Comes From Thankful Receiving!"

By Steve Ramer
November 22, 2015
FCMF #1

Scripture

Scripture selections from Luke 6:37-45

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."

Sermon

I'm convinced that our ability to be generous is somehow connected to our willingness to receive the generosity of others. And perhaps more importantly, our willingness to share generously is likely directly proportional to our own perceptions of the level of generosity that others extend to us.

In this morning's scripture, Jesus challenges us to, "give in accordance to what we have received."

Ergo, if we fail to receive the charity of others, giving joyfully may be a more difficult? And when we perceive that others are being hard or stingy with us, then giving generously will also likely be a bit harder? "Perceptions," as we know, for most of us, are usually more important than the actual facts of a given situation.

But perceptions are also relative, relative to the particular individuals and situations involved. Maybe this can help explain why some folks are generous in spite of living in the midst of deprivation, while others, who seem to want for nothing, are stingy and unhappy.

I think Jesus is saying much the same thing in the passages we read - that our ability to both receive and to give generously is directly proportional to our ability to experience generosity as well as our perceptions of God and others

and their relative motivations to give to us generously,
undeservedly and unexpectedly those good and necessary gifts.

But if we change our perceptions, we then feel compelled
to share our new found abundance with those around us.
And it is abundance my friends, abundance that is, most definitely
“pressed down, shaken together and overflowing”
and not scarcity that is the true reality of God’s intention!

I believe that Jesus wants us all to understand this key lesson,
that experiencing abundance is a sure cure for stinginess
and the theories of scarcity that produce it!
But living abundantly is also a learned behavior.

It is not, as some might say, “Name it and claim it!”
No it is more real - cyclical and experiential than that!
Jesus seems to be saying that if you can learn to forgive others
then you too can understand what it means to be forgiven.
And that the best way to experience forgiveness
is to allow God and others to forgive you!
If you experience unconditional love and multiple acts of kindness
from God and others then you will feel compelled to pass it on!

Additionally, as Jesus said in another place,
“Better yet give to those who will never be able to repay you
then you will truly experience God’s generosity!”

Now I am not saying that we simply ignore the facts
that we each face our own particular hardships in life
and that for some, life seems to have dealt more than our share.
But I have also learned, from those far wiser than I,
that I must, at times, suspend these thoughts for a few minutes
and sit in quiet contemplation on what is the good in my life.

But you make it sound so simple Steve ...

Okay, well maybe? ...but I also know from personal experience
that the opposite can also be true.

I too, have more often than not,
responded to the generosity of God and others
with fear, anxiety, mistrust and stinginess.

I have hoarded things rather than trusted in God’s abundance.

I have far too often clung to past insults instead of
offering forgiveness that can lead to new opportunities.

I resist the love of others or flee from God
and thus postpone my own necessary healing.

My refusal to receive or to perceive those good gifts
has also too often choked off the spirit of generosity
that God desires to cultivate with in me.

But Jesus boldly claimed that in spite of all these tendency to failure,
we humans, poor imitators of God that we are,
are actually capable of giving good gifts to one another.

But this still leaves open some troubling questions.
How does this radical transformation happen?
And why is it so difficult to realize this new way of being?

Well one reason, I think, is due to the fact
that our attitudes toward generosity and scarcity
were likely implanted in each of us quite early in our lives.
Like a lot of things we learn about generosity and scarcity
from those closest to us who were our earliest models.

My dad was careful and cautious with money.
“Frugal,” some would say. But for me and my siblings,
we thought he was just, “down right cheap!”

Not unlike most farmers, he would, patch, repair or make do,
long before he’d ever consider buying a new piece
of farm equipment, let alone any household appliance!
And he certainly would never have paid someone
to do what he could do himself.

“Save for a rainy day!” was certainly his mantra.
And though no one really knows what the future might hold,
my dad seemed pretty sure that plenty of bad stuff was in store.

His experience growing up during the Great Depression,
a period of real scarcity and grave uncertainty, clearly informed him!

As a child his family moved many times so that his father
and older brothers could find work to support the family.
These experiences of hardship and scarcity
remained with him the rest of his life.

But don’t get me wrong he was also able to give to others in need.
I know for a fact that he tithed regularly to the church,
because every Sunday, I got to drop our family’s
offering envelope into the crushed red velvet offering bags
that were passed down the pews in our little Mennonite church.

He also gave of his time, plowing a neighbor's field or putting a roof on someone's house when they were too ill. And it seemed as if we never ran out of, "little old ladies" in our community, who needed some kind of home repair.

My mother, on the other hand, responded a bit differently to the hardship and scarcity she had experienced. She too was a teenager during most of the "Great Depression," raised in a larger family (12 kids in mom's vs. 8 in dad's).

Since her father was only a farm hand, they had little and also had to move numerous times so he could find work.

Now she was no spend thrift by any means - what we didn't eat directly from our large garden was "put up," or canned for the winter.

I also don't recall ever having a pair of jeans that didn't have at least 2 or 3 patches on them before they ended up in dad's shop as grease rags.

But she was far more consistently and I would add, joyfully generous than dad. If she heard that someone was in need, her response was immediate.

Sometimes this was at the consternation of my father since it would typically go beyond the mere, casseroles, clothing and home repairs.

And even though there were distinctions made in that small rural community between those who were "deserving" and those who were not, mom seemed determined to go out of her way to find both kinds of folks to help out.

So why were they so different?
After all their respective formative years were remarkably similar. Both were raised in Mennonite families and learned the same values. Perhaps the difference was in the different way that their respective families perceived the world around them?

Mom's family was boisterous, always joking and laughing even during the most painful times in their lives. When her extended family gathered it was nearly impossible, as they say, "to get in a word in edgewise!" But the humor was never at another's expense,

they laughed with each other as a source of encouragement.

Being able to talk honestly about past hardships
and then to laugh at them seems to me to be a healthy way
to both acknowledge the past but to also let it go.
And by letting go we can then embrace the future with the hope.
Hope that does not deny that difficult days may lie ahead
but hope that is made confident knowing
that we have the resources to make it through.

Without going into too much detail
the Ramer family gatherings were not as much fun.
The humor and conversations were more strained.
Potentially embarrassing past events were avoided.
I can still vividly recall the many hurt feelings
and the resulting strained relationships that occurred
after my grandma's death as they settled her meager estate.

Even though my parent's respective lives were remarkably similar,
the way in which their families reacted to their respective
"life and times" was not at all the same.

Now I know this is a bit too extreme, but for one family
the world out there was scary, unforgiving and not very generous.
Thus it was more difficult for them to see the world or even God
as abundant, when the reality was only hardship and scarcity?

This kind of world view can also make taking risks more difficult,
especially those risks which are often necessary
to cultivating a spirit radical generosity.
Such risk taking is so easily and quickly
erased by the potential of failure.

The fear of failure is so unnecessarily unforgiving!
But to laugh at failure is so necessarily liberating.

If I can learn to take myself a bit less seriously,
I can then cut myself some slack when I fail!
Similarly then, if I can learn to take others a little less seriously
I too then can cut them a bit more slack the next time they fail.

To give and to forgive others generously is very risky business!
We may experience rejection or others may take advantage of us
or I could be perceived as delusional or weak?

But ask yourself, "Do you really want to live in a world,
mostly of our own creation, that is full of fear and scarcity?"
But more dire and ominous is the possibility,

“do we want to risk teaching our children to live this way?”
Or would we rather risk believing that with God’s abundance
we can welcome and embrace the stranger,
cultivating hope rather than fear,
shalom rather than anxiety and ultimately joyous generosity
rather than soul and society destroying scroogery?!

Yes we will face many challenges in our futures.
And we will certainly even fail, and at times miserably!
Our past experiences and earliest lessons will slip back in and take over.
Fear and anxiety will sap our courage to be wildly generous.

But do know this, in good times and in difficult times,
during happy times or sad times -
God is cultivating in us a good tree that
can consistently produce good fruit!

But in order for this to happen, we must ask for
and accept joyfully the generosity of God and others.
And never resist the impulse to give generously to others!

For this is how we ultimately heal, this is the antidote
for all the potential anxiety, fear and bitterness in life.

Be thankful in your giving and in your receiving.
Joyfully open your eyes and your hearts
to the generosity and abundance that surrounds us all!
And do not let anything or anyone stop you
from knowing that God desires you
to have all that which is only good and have it in;
“good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over”
and dumped into your lap!

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