

Generosity as Worship
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Acts 2:44-47
November 1, 2009

It is appropriate that as we begin this month of focus on gratitude and generosity, we should start on All Saints Day and on communion Sunday. How fortunate we are to be benefactors of the generosity of those saints of this church who have gone before us. If it were not for their offering of time, prayer, presence, gifts and service this church wouldn't be here today and we might not know each other or have the opportunity to worship and to serve together and continue and build on the tradition that is Oconee Street. For over 130 years this church has been a testimony to the faithfulness of God and of God's people, and for that we give thanks this morning.

We also give thanks today, as the choir sang, for this table set by God. There is no better way to envision generosity than to see this table and to meditate on how in the bread and in the cup we are sharing in the outpouring of God's abundant love for us and for the world. Some have noted that feasting is the Bible's visual aid for understanding God's abundance. Certainly eating and food figure prominently throughout the Bible – from the children of Israel receiving manna, quail, and water in the wilderness, to Jesus sharing a last meal with his friends, even with those friends who would later abandon and betray him.

So we come this morning in thanksgiving for God's abundant generosity towards us. Thanksgiving is one of the main ingredients of worship. People from various faith traditions gather to worship in differing styles and differing understandings, but central to the varieties of worship is the intention to express reverence for God and to express feelings of joyful gratitude.¹ It is my hope that during this month we will find that intentional giving can become a transformational form of worship that will lead us to a closer relationship with God and with one another.

This isn't new – it's as old as the Bible – Chris read from Deuteronomy, that after bringing the first fruits of the harvest that God has given, “You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down. . . Then you, with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.” In Acts, as we just heard, Luke writes that the first Christians held all things in common, distributed goods to those in need, and spent much time in the temple and at home praising God and having the goodwill of the people.

Other faith traditions as well hold up generosity as a path to worship and as a means of grace. The Talmud states, “Charity is equal in importance to all other commandments combined.” The Koran says “You shall never be truly righteous until you give in alms what you dearly cherish. The alms you give are known to God.” In Buddhism it is written, “The Buddha said: ‘When you see someone practicing the Way of giving, aid him joyously, and you will obtain vast and great blessings.’”²

Giving, generosity in all of its forms, both financial and otherwise, can become an act of worship through its power to remind us of the gift of life, that even though it has its ups and downs, its struggles and heartaches as well as its victories, it is pure gift from God to us.

¹ Lauren Tyler Wright, *Giving – the Sacred Art: Creating a Lifestyle of Generosity* (Woodstock, VT, Skylight Paths, 2008), 2.

² Wright, 3.

I was reminded of that on Thursday as I stood in line at the post office at Beechwood waiting to buy stamps for the letter that I hope you received on Friday or Saturday. I was in a hurry; I had other things on my list to accomplish that day. The line was long, only two clerks were working the desk when there are spaces for five! And they seemed so slow and so uninterested in what they were doing. One person had a big package to mail and it seemed to take forever to weigh it, and affix the postage, and give her a receipt. Standing there at the back of the line, fidgeting as I waited, I heard a sound coming from behind me. It was slow, repetitive, annoying. Bam – pause – bam – pause. What was it – it sounded like someone methodically, slowly hammering – there was a person setting up some kind of display closer to the front door. When would he ever be through with that hammering? Finally, I turned around to see what in the world was causing this noise.

An elderly woman, bent over and using a walker, was moving slowly, very slowly towards the back of the line. It was her walker that made the noise. Pick it up – bam, put it down – take a step. Over and over again, slowly she came. It's a very long and narrow post office in case you've not been in there, with the customer service desk at the very back of it. It was interminable. Finally she stood behind me, breathing heavily. And I suddenly was very aware of how fortunate I am – I could walk across that lobby without giving it a second thought – every step was not a production for me, but second nature. I could stand in that line as long as it took; my back is straight – if I'd stand up straight! And so, all I knew to do was to offer her my place in line. “You can go ahead of me,” I said. Big deal – still four more people ahead of her some with ominously large packages.

But then something wonderful happened. The young woman at the head of the line, looked back and motioned – Here, go ahead of me too, she said. And nobody in between objected. So she made her way slowly – bam-pause-bam to the desk to mail some letters. Only to find when she got there that she'd left them in the cab waiting for her outside. She was going to have to go back outside – that huge distance to the street that I'd never noticed before, and then traverse it again to get back to the desk. We all stood there paralyzed -- it was too painful to watch. Now I'm kind of a shy person – you might not know that about me; it's a little intimidating to speak to strangers, especially in front of a lot of other strangers. But something made me get out of line, because nobody else was moving, go up to her and ask if I could go and get her package for her. I was so incredibly thankful that I was able to do that – to walk out to the cab, get her mail, and walk back in – all in a relatively short time! She was thankful – but I was more thankful because in that moment I remembered what God had given me and then God enabled me to pass it on. Life is a gift.

It was a brief moment – but it was worship. For that brief time I was able to experience gratitude and be joyful – no longer frustrated, irritated, impatient. Thankful for what I had – health, mobility, and actually plenty of time to intentionally give my space to someone else!

Jesus in his last meal with his disciples, said “do this in remembrance of me.” Remember what? – remember that he gave – remember that he gave everything he had. He gave his passion, his energy, his very life. I believe that when we give, even in a very small way, like our space in line at the post office or the grocery store, if we become aware and present to what is going on, we have the opportunity to become more Christ-like – the word Christian means “little Christ.” Giving is an act of spiritual formation. To be like Christ is to give and to give intentionally.

I hope you all picked up a gratitude journal when you came in. If you didn't, then please get one as you leave. This month I hope we will first become aware of our daily blessings, and then to become generous with others out of our gratitude for what we have been given. The only way to do that is to start taking notes because so much happens during the day, it's easy to forget. Did you sleep well last night? Write it down? Did you see a beautiful autumn tree, write it down. Did someone smile at you, or laugh with you: Write it down. Nothing is too small if

you notice it and are thankful for it. At the end of the day, think about your list, meditate on it, pray over it, and ask God to make it a catalyst in your life for living a life of generosity and thanksgiving.

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