

A LOVE CALLED GENEROSITY

Mark 12: 41-44; 2 Corinthians 9: 6-12

It was my first job as a minister. I was an assistant at a large downtown church in Montreal. Like many of us do here at Armour Heights, people at this church would stay after the service to listen to the organ postlude. After greeting people at the back, I made my way back up to the front. I noticed an elderly woman sitting by herself in the front pew. Even after the postlude was finished, she continued to sit there just looking upwards in what seemed to me a prayerful state of serenity. I went and sat down beside her. After a few moments she began to speak. She told me that when she was a little girl at that same downtown church, people had to pay money to rent their pew. That's the way the church ensured revenue was received. And the closer to the front, the higher the rent. The front pews were expensive. Her family were poor. The pews at the very back were for people who couldn't pay much if anything. That's where her family had to sit: at the back. Now that anyone could sit anywhere, she felt it such a privilege to be able to sit right at the front.

How things have changed, no? Not only do we not charge a fee for reserving a pew, but back pews are more often the popular ones in most churches. I wonder if charging a fee would make a difference... hmm...

Seriously, though, such a practice, common in many churches, was not only unfair to those financially disadvantaged. It preaches a bad theology. It declared that people are valued (the Reformation/biblical word is "justified") for their money. They are given privileges accordingly and acknowledged by where they sit. The world may work that way. You get the privileges you can pay for. But the church?

Even if we know that the church, like any charitable institution, needs money to pay the bills, should we not as the church also teach about the spiritual meaning of giving? It may be generous to give, but what kind of generosity is good generosity? And if there are different kinds of generosity, what kind can really transform our hearts, not just our budgets? Let's take a closer look at our scripture readings for some revelatory insight and inspiration.

1) Our gospel reading gives us a snapshot of something Jesus observes and something he then uses as an important teaching moment on the theme of generosity. It's holy week. Jesus, like many Jewish pilgrims, have made their way to Jerusalem. The temple is full of

people going in and out, offering prayers and sacrifices as part of their worship. Giving money is also part of it, just like it is for us in our worship service.

But Jesus also sees a poor widow among the crowd of worshippers. While some people are making a bit of a show of what they're putting into the collection box, the widow's contribution is negligible in comparison. Even though the temple can't be maintained in all its grand opulence by the contributions of poor widows alone, there's something else at play here, far more important spiritually speaking.

Is giving simply a dollar amount, or is it more about proportions? Jesus declares that simply giving out of our abundance will not have the kind of spiritual impact for us that giving which challenges our budget does. The more we are challenged in our giving, the more spiritual impact it has. The widow is giving a huge amount in proportion to what she has. The wealthy may give a much larger dollar amount, but none of it will affect their lavish lifestyle or challenge them to rethink their spending priorities. Giving will not transform them inside, only relieve their consciences, perhaps, or make them feel good about themselves. In a world where giving money can make you look good, external appearances and public recognition is often a greater motivation to giving than inner transformation.

Even though in the real world of bills, expenses and budgets, the amount of money matters, in the spiritual world where inner transformation is far more important than outward appearances, proportions matter more than amounts. What impact does your giving make in your inner spiritual life? What proportion of your income do you give?

James Doty was the founder and director of the Center of Compassion & Altruism Research at Stanford University. Years earlier he had made a fortune as a medical technology entrepreneur. He pledged \$30 million dollars worth of stock to charity. That's a huge amount. But his net worth at the time was over \$75 million, and so, even though he had made a very generous donation, he was still a millionaire the next day living in his mansion. But then, the stock market crashed. He lost everything and discovered he was bankrupt. All he had left was the stock he had pledged to charity. His lawyers told him that he could get out of his charitable contributions and that everyone would understand that his circumstances had changed. But this is what Jim said in response: "One of the persistent myths in our society, is that money will make you happy. Growing up poor, I thought money would give me everything I did not have: control, power, love. When I finally had all the money I had ever dreamed of, I discovered that it had not made me happy. And when I lost it all, all my false friends disappeared." Jim decided to go through with his contribution. Can you believe it? Here's how he explained his decision: "I came to realize that the only way money can bring happiness is to give it away."

Wow! That's radical. Obviously, Jim didn't go hungry and he's doing just fine for himself. But he also had to make some changes in his lifestyle without all those millions. And that's when giving can make an impactful difference as a spiritual discipline, when it costs us something. The question for each of us is: what amount of giving will have a real spiritual impact for us personally?

2) And this brings us to some deeper issues still. Our second reading is from a letter the apostle Paul is writing to Christians in Corinth who are well off. One of the big projects the apostle was working on was getting Christians from wealthier congregations, often gentile congregations, to donate money to poorer congregations, especially the Jewish mother church in Jerusalem. Paul's goal was not just giving for charity's sake. No. He felt that giving with the right spirit would build a beautiful bridge of love across cultural differences among Christians. Those who received financial support would feel grateful, and those who gave the financial support would experience spiritual abundance... if they gave in the right spirit.

In the apostle's words: "the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your own mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work... You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God... for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with thanksgivings to God."

The apostle is declaring that giving generously, and with a spirit of cheerfulness, will lead to an experience of abundance far greater in value than anything we will ever give materially. Our experience of abundance will be internal, and this will lead to the kind of feeling of abundance that will change the way we experience external abundance as well. As we are being transformed through our giving, we experience the kind of fullness all the money in the world can never provide. Isn't that something? But can we believe it's true, especially if we are anxious about money and giving it away?

Let me end with another story. Mazen Khalaf is a lucky man. He survived bombing, years in a refugee camp and the culture shock of coming to a totally new country – Canada. But coming to Canada from Syria, and with his wife and children too, is a gift beyond anything. Gift though it is, life in Canada is also a challenge. While going to school, learning the language and adapting his skills, Khalaf is also trying to support his family working minimum wage at a gas station. Money is tight.

But one day, recently, Khalaf was faced with a customer whose payment card wouldn't work after they had already filled up their tank. The protocol would be to tell the customer to figure out a solution. Instead, Khalaf paid the bill out of his own pocket. Can you believe it? Understandably, the customer was shocked. He asked Khalaf why he did it. This is what Khalaf had to say: "People helped me come to Canada. I'd like to help people, too." He did the very same thing for a woman another day. Both customers paid him back, with the man giving him a tip as well. But Khalaf didn't expect a payback. His satisfaction was being given an opportunity to help someone else in need. By having an opportunity to be generous to someone else in a tangible way, Khalaf came to experience an inner abundance far greater than any money he had to give up. Even though he's still got a long way to go in learning English, taking classes to upgrade his skills for a Canadian job market, and supporting his family as best he can, Khalaf is a fulfilled and happy man. Giving is a gift that keeps on giving back.

Now, even though Khalaf finds his spiritual inspiration for generosity from his Muslim faith, his practical actions and his spiritual experience of abundance are very much the inspiration the apostle Paul wants to inculcate in the Corinthian congregation. But what about you and me as Christians of this congregation today? If our spiritual experience of abundance is lacklustre, is our problem and challenge one of proportions? Is the giving we do making enough of an impact on our finances so that it means something for us? Is our giving contributing in a meaningful way to an experience of inner abundance and gratitude in our hearts? Are we experiencing how the focus on materialism so prevalent in our world is being changed in us toward a genuine joy of abundance that comes from giving rather than accumulating?

Let us pray: You give us all we truly need, O God... But you can only give us abundance according to our trust in letting go what we have and surrendering it to your purposes... Fill us with faith in what you can do in us when we let go and give, in Jesus' name... Amen.