

OPENING HYMN

“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”
(ELW 588)

OPENING PRAYER

Wonder-filled God, out of nothing you created us and all we have—our time and seasons of life, our varied perspectives and talents, and the material blessings of our earthly home. Like all your creation, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Give us confidence in your love and redemption. Help us attend to Scripture and each other. Make us capable and eager to multiply and allocate what you have first given us. For in you is all immensity of time, talent and treasure. We are yours, O Creator, O Christ, O Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

FOCUS VERSES:

“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (ELW)
- Bibles (NRSV)
- scrap paper and pens or pencils
- (optional) a clearly marked offering basket
- (optional, see Leader Guide) each bring an example or symbol of a cheerfully generous gift of time, talent or treasure someone has given you.

Money, stewardship and generosity

Session three

Generosity: There’s a wideness in God’s mercy.

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

INTRODUCTION

In the first session of this three-part Bible study on money, stewardship and generosity, we discussed the good, natural, but also spiritually dangerous charms of gold and treasure in Scripture and in our lives. With Session 2, we explored biblical examples of stewardship, including Jesus’ shockingly urgent call to manage, serve and exercise accountability for all that has been entrusted to us by God. In our third and final session, we’ll now consider God’s generosity and how we can reflect that generosity. Recognizing that we are simultaneously saints and sinners, we’ll also examine some stories of how *not* to live our lives. We will find many examples of God’s just, cheerful, even playful generosity. This session could also have been titled “There’s a *wildness* in God’s generosity,” because divine generosity doesn’t always fit neatly on this world’s accounting spreadsheets!

Speaking of God’s generosity, I have a three-year-old child, K, in my life. K is a worthy member of our family. He loves to eat, especially sweets! While we were out for a walk (giving his parents a much-needed break), he suddenly became hungry—*so* hungry. As we got out his carefully measured snack cup, I couldn’t help noticing that the fruit puffs looked really good.

“Would you...consider...sharing one of those

fruit puffs with me?” I asked. K looked suspicious. Share his snack? He held a fistful of puffs up in the air. He looked at the snacks and he looked at me. And then, a miracle: K hands over not one, but the whole fistful of fruit puffs, with a grin. We both laugh. God loves a cheerful giver, and so does this Oma (Grandma). “Thank you so much, K!” I say. “You are generous! That was delicious.”

Share aloud or reflect:

1. How have you faced change in your relationships?
2. In what ways did changes to yourself or changes to others impact these relationships?

GENEROSITY 101: GLEANING

📖 **Read:** Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; Luke 6:1

In Session 2, we talked about tithing (giving 10 percent or a systematic, proportionate part of one’s income to church or charity) as training in *stewardship*. As we begin our third and final session, I’d argue that gleaning is training in *generosity*. Unlike tithing, where the amount given is a set proportion of one’s resources, gleaning provides an amount that is not so clearly defined.

In the Bible, gleaning involves three actions (or rather, three non-actions). 1.) Plant, but don’t harvest the margins of the fields. (God allows landowners to freedom to decide for themselves the exact width of those margins.) 2.) Don’t pick up every last bit of grain or fruit that falls to the ground. 3.) Make only one sweep through the fields and leave the later ripening fruit and grain for others.

The leftover harvest is there for the taking. It is especially meant for the poor, the foreigners (literally the *alien* or the *stranger*, and not only those with the right kind of visa!), the orphans

(literally *the fatherless*; today we might think of one-income families, or those with no inherited wealth) and the widows (including in today’s world, single people with little family support). These are all people who most likely didn’t own land or other “capital” resources. Gleaning gives them the dignity of gathering food on their own schedule, using their own initiative, and all without anyone asking whether they are truly “deserving.”

Note that “poor” is not narrowly defined. The food on the margins is there for anyone, including the late to lunch, the person lost on the path and the laborer walking home after a long day’s work. I like to think (although scholars debate this) that Jesus and his disciples were gleaning that day when they got in trouble for “working” on the Sabbath. There’s a wideness in God’s mercy that transcends strict property rights and tracking down every last grape.

Admittedly, I’m uncomfortable with that. I like to measure things. I like to optimize. I like clear boundaries. I like to get the most bang for my buck, leverage my time, parcel out my talents. But allowing room for gleaning is something else. Gleaning is messy. It is small. It is local. It opens land and businesses up to people and situations you might otherwise never meet.

I found a startling question about giving in a December 7, 2024, *New York Times* article. “What if charity shouldn’t be optimized?” the article asked. It quoted Amy Schiller, author of *The Price of Humanity: How Philanthropy Went Wrong—and How to Fix It*. According to Schiller, our temptation is to “reduce value to anything that can be quantified, but you very often cannot quantify the things we value the most.” As an example, Schiller lists things with a value that is hard to judge—things like museums, parks and libraries. I would also add things like scarlet and emerald, sky light shining through stained glass windows, and familiar hymns played on a battered fellowship hall piano.

Generosity of *access* might be what sets the

practice of gleaning apart from other kinds of charity. Human beings need straightforward gifts of food and money. Yet humans also need access to the various fields of life: education, beauty, and social and spiritual community.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. How does gleaning differ from, yet complement straightforward charitable giving? Are both kinds of generosity important to life in God's kingdom? How so?
4. The following are some examples of modern-day gleaning. What other kinds of gleaning have you seen or personally experienced? Which of these examples (or other kinds of giving) do you think best reflect God's generosity?
 - *A neighbor leaves armloads of extra produce on the church entrance table.*
 - *A business owner posts a sign on a pile of excess wooden pallets: Free!*
 - *A secondhand store offers entry-level paid employment.*
 - *Public parks have a signup list where families can register at no cost to hold a birthday party.*
 - *Soup kitchens and food co-ops bring together people of all income levels to cook quality meals.*
 - *A local business offers meeting space for self-help groups and young entrepreneurs.*
 - *A church opens its sanctuary doors at certain "off-times." Anyone can come into worship or pray.*
 - *An excellent church preschool leaves room for scholarship students.*

📖 **Read:** Ruth 2:2-3 and 2:15-16

Many (or even most) cultures tend to disfavor in-laws and the in-law relationship, in favor of "blood relations." When we look at the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi through the lens of generosity, we see a woman who is wildly generous with her mother-in-law. Ruth gives up her own home and culture to accompany Naomi back to her homeland in Israel, a place where Ruth is a stranger. Ruth is a beacon of generosity, whereas Naomi is filled with bitterness. (We can understand that. Her husband and sons are dead, and her God is silent.) Ruth, also a widow, is now a stranger in Bethlehem and fits all the categories gleaning was set up for. She's poor. She's an alien. She's without blood relatives. The story almost sounds like something out of a fairy tale as the rich and kindly landowner, Boaz, takes *ahem*—notice of Ruth. She's bold! She's a hard worker! She's generous with her depressed mother-in-law! It's no coincidence that Ruth and Boaz show up again in the New Testament in the first chapter of Matthew, where they are named among the ancestors of Jesus, reflecting God's own generosity not only to the people of Israel, but to all the nations and cultures of the world.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. When have you been generous with an in-law? When has an in-law been generous with you?

THE ENEMY OF GENEROSITY

📖 **Read:** Exodus 5:1-2; 6-9

If generosity means giving gifts and access to materials, over and above what is strictly necessary or conventional, the opposite is to give less than enough. One of the worst villains in life is the stingy boss—someone who doesn't give you the tools to do the work you want to do or are expected to do. Pharaoh is an ultra-example of this. Pharaoh makes

slaves out of the descendants of Joseph. In Pharaoh's eyes, human lives are valuable only for the bricks they can produce. When the Hebrews ask for time off for worship and celebration, he not only denies their request. He also gives them fewer materials to work with, while demanding the same amount of product!

Share aloud or reflect:

6. What kind of generosity has made you feel valued as an employee or as a volunteer? How do such experiences of generosity build up a workplace and a community?

📖 **Read:** Luke 12:15-21; Matthew 6:24

Quick question: What's the biggest denomination in the world?

Answer: *Mammonism!*

That's a joke. Or maybe it isn't. Jesus' "Parable of the Rich Fool" tells of another type of stingy boss: the (small "g") god named Mammon. If you look at various translations of Matthew 6:24, you'll see this word can also be translated as "wealth," "money" or "riches." Some versions of the Bible even capitalize the word Mammon or Money just to show it is a force to be reckoned with. Mammon is the god who wants to get richer and richer at the expense of you and your soul!

I get it, though. As a newly (and mostly) retired person, I find myself checking my retirement accounts waaay more often than necessary or healthy for me. Using it up, or (gulp) giving some of it away means facing the fact that I won't live on this earth forever. I don't need a continuously growing supply of money, clothes, furniture or electronic gadgets. However, others do need those things, more than I want to think about.

One of my oddest experiences as a pastor

was discovering that one of my parishioners, an 84-single person, was building a mansion for one. It was a huge house with four bedrooms, a massive kitchen and three marble-floored bathrooms. Maybe she was building it to bless someone else with it. I hope so. In the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus prods us into laughing at and turning away from our hoarder instincts. The time to be generous is now—in this lifetime! As it's often pointed out, you will never see a U-Haul behind a hearse.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. It's been said that there are fewer instances of demon possession in wealthier churches and cultures because they are already possessed by the demon of Mammon. What do you think? How does the god Mammon attempt to pull and direct your life? The life of your community? Your church?

THOSE WHO WERE GENEROUS WITH JESUS

📖 **Read:** Luke 8:1-3, Luke 8:4-8 and Matthew 13:44-45

The Mary We Forgot (Brazos Press, 2024), a new book about Mary Magdalene, helps us to reclaim the life and witness of this female "apostle to the apostles." The book's author, New Testament scholar Jennifer Powell McNutt, noted in a recent interview (Holy Post Podcast #639, October 16, 2024), that in the first century, one third of all property in the Roman Empire was owned by women. Women could inherit property, and married women could use their wealth independently from their husbands, she said.

We tend to completely skip over the first three verses of Luke 8. If we do read them, we mostly remember those seven demons Mary Magdalene was liberated from! Few of us notice how Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, *and many others*

were the main financial investors in Jesus' ministry.

Perhaps you, like me, hadn't noticed that these verses about women's travel arrangements with Jesus come right before the Parable of the Sower. This seems to be no accident. The Sower is, some would argue, irrationally lavish, spreading seeds far and wide, beyond what a normal farmer would do. While some seeds go to waste, others generate wildly generous returns: 30-, 60- and even 100-fold. Could we say that similarly, Mary Magdalene's, Joanna's and Susanna's investments are still producing, to this day?

We don't know how much money, time, physical effort or respectability Jesus' female supporters had to give up to travel with him and the 12 male disciples. I'm inclined to think it was quite a bit—even if they were of a certain age where there might be less occasion for gossip attached to their travels with Jesus and the male disciples. I see in these women examples of the seemingly irrational generosity highlighted in Jesus' parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price. In one way, these stories make no literal sense. But as reflections of God's generosity, they make lively spiritual sense.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. How have you (or others) made a seemingly irrational investment of time, talent or treasure in a community? Did some of the investment fall on "hard rock" or become "trampled underfoot"? Did some of the investment "pay off" handsomely?

WILD GENEROSITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

📖 **Read:** Acts 2:1-4, 12-13 and Acts 2:43-47

In the second chapter of Acts, we see the first Christian community respond to the news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the wild, wonderful

hope of life beyond the grave. The Holy Spirit has just been massively poured out, so much so that bystanders thought those first Christians were drunk! Filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit, bursting with signs and wonders, these Christians are soon observed spending time together, sharing possessions and enjoying meals with "glad and generous hearts."

This still happens today. In my work in the US and around the world, every lively church I've known participates in the generous sharing of food! In Tanzania, there were second helpings of goat. In Germany, there was plum coffee cake *mit Schlag* (with a mound of whipped cream). In Hong Kong, round tables were heaped with dim sum treats: barbecued pork buns, egg tarts and wait for it... chicken feet! (Sometimes God's people can be *too* generous in their sharing with American foreigners.) In the US, I've found people can forgive other people a lot when they bring a favorite hotdish or a mile-high lemon pie to the church potluck. We modern churchgoers often underestimate the healing powers of gentle (meaning sensitive, not nosy) curiosity, listening hearts and helpful connections made over a church-sponsored coffee hour or brunch. In this space, everybody is not only welcome but warmly invited to a seat at the table prepared with them in mind.

One of my colleagues, Pastor Bruce, led a weekly men's Bible study in which more than 15 men participated, even during winter in rural Wisconsin. Fifteen faithful men! What was Bruce's secret? Beyond his wisdom (He knows a lot about the Bible), beyond the fact that there aren't a lot of competing social activities when temperatures dip below zero degrees with a serious windchill, another key ingredient, I believe, was the hot breakfast he served! Bruce would mix and knead the dough the night before, then show up by 5:30 a.m. with hot, baked rolls ready for the 7 a.m. Breakfast and Bible Study Hour! The men flocked in, and I believe some

women infiltrated the group too. The whole thing was a sign, a wonder and a celebration of generosity of spirit!

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Share some ways that your church community is characterized by “glad and generous hearts.” Can you remember any time when the generosity and joy of your church community might have made outsiders think you were drinking?

JESUS: GOD’S GENEROSITY IN THE FLESH

Read: John 1:16; and 2 Corinthians 9:7-8

We will conclude this study with two short passages on generosity. First, we have beautiful words, often read at Christmas time, from the Gospel of John. These words are part of the Gospel’s poem of praise to God, who gave himself up completely to enter this world on the margins, empty handed, like a poor gleaner. (We find a similar ancient hymn of praise in Philippians 2). We who have received this generous gift of faith and hope now to dare to become little outposts of God’s kingdom, ourselves.


Finally, we read again St. Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians, urging them to be generous in giving practical gifts to those who are in danger of hunger. Instead of haranguing them or shaming them with sermons against hoarding or buying nice robes or wasting money when their siblings in Christ are in need, Paul simply reminds them (and us) of the abundance we received from God. This abundance from God makes us not only generous, but cheerfully generous!

Share aloud or reflect:

10. What part of this study on generosity do you most want to hold on to? What part would you like to put into practice?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of abundance, you have poured out a large measure of earthly blessings: our table is richly furnished, our cup overflows, and we live in safety and security. Teach us to set our hearts on you and not these material blessings. Keep us from becoming captivated by prosperity, and grant us in wisdom to use your blessings to your glory and to the service of humankind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 80)

Optional: Close out this Bible study series on Money, Stewardship and Generosity with a rousing rendition of this hymn: “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ” (ELW 674) 

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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT GENEROSITY

We humans can exhibit both overflowing generosity and a lack of generosity. We are both saints and sinners. It's a relief to be honest about this. We've all known employers who resemble Pharaoh in the Bible. Both tight-fisted and vicious, they refuse time-off requests and tell employees to make do with fewer and fewer resources. We've also known (or we've been) workers and even church volunteers who make life tough for our coworkers by guarding decision-making power and acting miserly with resources.

I, too, can be a hoarder, as I recently discovered, after moving across the country. I realized this after giving away at least half of our possessions, only to find that we still had 21 (count them, 21!) pillows in our downsized home. Jesus' story of the guy who kept building bigger barns for his self-satisfied soul? Yup, that's me, too. It may even be the tendency of many congregations and church folk.

Thanks to God's gracious generosity, however, biblical generosity has so many patterns that we can't include them all in this study. Here's just one example: In Acts 4:32-37, we read about a whole community of generosity, in which a man named Barnabas (a name that means "son of encouragement") sells a field and brings all the proceeds to the church, to be used as the leaders see fit, no strings attached.

Generosity is a circular process. As you prepare to lead this third and final session, think about the

people who are sons (or daughters, or children, or progeny) of encouragement for you. Generosity leads to encouragement; encouragement leads back to generosity. I remember how, when my father died, it was at a time when my kids qualified for free school lunches. For the funeral, our family of five had to drive across the country in our ancient car. Somebody from church anonymously gave me a card with two crisp \$100 bills, "because you might need it." I still get a little weepy thinking about it. I believe I've been a better person and a better pastor because of that long-ago gift.

There are so many ways of being generous. I think of:

- our high-caliber, nationally recognized church organist, who told me, "I'll always be available to play for the Bible study opening. You can just count on me," even though it was not in her job description.
- that elderly gentleman who would bring the most luscious, home-baked cinnamon rolls to our women's Bible study group. When I gushed over them, he'd always respond the same way: "Well, I just hope the ladies like them, then." He waved off any public acknowledgement.
- the generosity of humor in a Facebook friend who posted: "The challenge I'm doing this month is called October, and it's where I just try to get through every day of October." That one still makes me laugh. I've found that humility—admitting I'm not Wonder Woman—can be its own kind of generosity!

There's an old stewardship illustration that says there are three kinds of givers: the flint, the sponge and the honeycomb. To get anything out of a flint, you have to hammer it. And even then, you only get chips and sparks. To get something out of a sponge, you have to squeeze it. The more pressure you use, the more you get. But the honeycomb? The honeycomb overflows with its own sweetness.

We have a God who overflows with generosity. Thank you for your generosity and sweetness as you prepare, lead and participate wholeheartedly in this

Gather Bible study.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

“Show & Tell”

Want to start the meeting with a quick “Show & Tell” icebreaker? Here’s an announcement to use or adapt as part of your advance publicity:

For our upcoming Gather Bible study on the topic of Generosity, you are invited to bring a picture or symbol of a cheerfully generous gift of time, talent or treasure someone has given you. Be ready to describe the cheerful attitude of the giver.

After the opening prayer and hymn, take five minutes to break into groups of three or four, and share what you all have brought. Don’t forget to take pictures (always with permission, of course) to share with your church, synod and the wider Women of the ELCA community.

Special offering: If you have selected a church ministry (WELCA Katie’s Fund, ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran World Relief are excellent choices) or a local charity to give to as part of this Bible study series, remind people to bring a financial gift of any size to this final session. Make sure your collection box or basket is visible. Consider how to cheerfully report and highlight the final tally.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Want to do some further study on the topic of generosity? Check out these resources.

- **BibleProject.com videos**
I often turn to these free videos to enhance my understanding. Sometimes I play them during the sessions I lead. Videos you may want use for this session (again, they’re free!) include: “Mammon/Wealth,” a one-minute video describing Jesus’ use of the word Mammon. View at: bibleproject.com/videos/vocab-insight-mammon-wealth/. “Generosity,” a five-minute video overview of God’s generosity throughout the Bible. Visit: bibleproject.com/videos/generosity/.
- **The Generosity Project:** This ELCA resource

aims to connect and equip “all ages and households for the faith practice of generosity.” The materials include a curriculum for six multi-generational workshops. Each session is based on a Bible story and includes a variety of generosity-building activities. Check it out at elca.org/generosity.

STUDY OPTIONS

Here are some ways to shorten this study or turn it into a special retreat.

HALF DAY RETREAT SERIES:

Consider turning this session on generosity into a half-day retreat that includes worship, discussion, breaks and a generous (get the theme here?) meal. You might conclude the retreat by asking people to share what they found most challenging and what they most enjoyed about the entire three-part series.

SUPER SHORT STUDY: (30 MINUTES)

- Before your meeting, choose readers and mark scriptures to be read.
- Read the focus verse in unison.
- Pray “Opening prayer.”
- Do the “Introduction” (Skip Q.1. Do Q.2.)
- Do “Generosity 101: Gleaning,” up to and including Q.3. Skip the rest of this section.
- Do “Those who were generous with Jesus,” including Q.8.
- Do “Jesus: God’s generosity in the flesh.” Skip Q.10.
- Pray the “Closing prayer.”

A LITTLE LONGER: (45 TO 50 MINUTES)

- Add “The enemy of generosity.”
- Add Q. 6 and Q.7.

LONGER YET (60 TO 90 MINUTES)

- Add the “Opening Hymn.”
- Do the entirety of “Generosity 101: Gleaning” with its discussion questions. 🌿