

BODY – BUILDING
“Generous Hearts – Generous Lives”

“He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity...”

The call – when it came early that morning – wasn’t totally unexpected.

But, we still weren’t ready for it.

(You never are!)

It was the news that Faith’s younger brother Tom, had passed away after an 18-month bout with cancer.

Now, I wish I could say that I was more of a comfort to Faith then. But, my mind immediately went into overdrive trying to figure out “what to do” and “how” we were going to make the 800-mile trek from our home in Cleveland to the family farm in Iowa.

Of course, I contacted the church, where I served as youth pastor and told them what had happened and that we’d be gone for a while.

Then I began trying to figure out if we should fly or load up the car and hoof it on out there as fast as we could.

Flying was the better option – naturally. We could be there that same day!

But, as two “twenty-something’s” -- living paycheck to paycheck in a rented apartment and driving an old Chevy Nova -- we weren’t exactly rolling in the dough and could hardly afford the cost of two tickets.

In fact, back then, our “combined” income – that’s combined -- was less than half of what I make now by myself. And so, driving seemed to be our best...

And, really...

Our only option.

Then, about two hours later the phone rang.

It was the church secretary telling us that John and Doris Port had left two round-trip airline tickets for us at the airport.

I can share their names with you now because I don't believe these two saints are still with us. But, John and Doris were an older couple. Their own kids had long since graduated from youth group – but they still had an active interest in the young people of the church.

And, their gift...

Their generosity...

Made such a difference to us and to our family in our time of need.

I only wish they were still around so I could thank them again and tell them how much it meant to us!

That kind of thing has happened to me so many times!

Like when Faith's father passed and someone showed up on our doorstep with a check to make our travelling burden a little easier.

Or, when I was hospitalized in Washington D.C., and a friend graciously made the trip down with Faith so she wouldn't have to drive alone.

I've been the recipient of so much "generosity" in my life it actually shames me when I think of those times I've hesitated – even briefly – to extend a bit of that same kind of generosity to others.

Dr. Tod Bolsinger, pastor of the San Clemente Presbyterian Church in California, tells of being the recipient of a *Lily Grant* – which are scholarships

awarded to ministers for professional sabbaticals.

Well, Tod had received a *Lily Grant* worth almost \$43,000 dollars!

And, one day he and his wife pulled into a hotel in Park City Utah, for a short stay. The first time, he adds, that he and his wife had been away from their children in over ten years.

At the hotel they were met by a bellhop named Eric, who immediately put them at ease and began attending to their every need.

Bolsinger says:

He took care of my bike... he efficiently and with great warmth saw that our bags made it to our room. When we inquired about catching a shuttle into town for dinner, he volunteered to take us in a hotel van himself – and when we finished our night on the town, all we had to do was call him and he'd pick us up for the return trip.

He was a delightful, earnest, hard-working young guy.

Later that evening as we were riding...back to the hotel from dinner, we found out that Eric was actually a trained massage therapist and that he had only started being a bell hop because he needed to make some extra money. He then told us that he had become engaged earlier that morning.

Here he was, on the day he got engaged, working a job that was way out of his field to make enough money to begin life with his bride-to-be...

At that moment, I had this weird sensation that I have come to know as the voice of the Spirit. I felt a “spiritual nudge,” if you will, to give Eric a \$100 tip for all he had done that day. I had the money in my pocket and all I needed to do was to reach in, grab the folded bills and give it to him.

A little extra “almost astonishing generosity” for a guy who probably wasn't expecting more than a five dollar bill.

But I didn't do it.

Immediately my mind raced with all the reasons why I couldn't give him \$100.

So Eric got a \$5 dollar tip and a big handshake. *And I had missed my chance.* I am sure that he didn't give it a second chance, but I sure did.

Boslinger adds:

For the next five weeks as we traveled, I couldn't get Eric the bell hop out of my mind. Every time I would pray for him and for his bride-to-be, I felt like God had asked me, "So why wouldn't you be as generous with him, as I have been with you?"

Many times over the next five weeks I felt this stab of conviction. When I thought about how much we were receiving – about the generosity of my church back home that had given me this sabbatical – about the *Lily Foundation* – about my supportive friends all around me, I kept thinking: *'Why couldn't I have parted with \$100 when I so clearly felt the Spirit's prompting?'*

'What was making me cling with a closed fist when I should be one of the open-handed big-hearted people through whom God could bless the world?'

'What would it take for me to become a person of astonishing generosity?'

You ever meet a generous person before?

I mean, truly – astonishingly -- generous?

I knew a fella in seminary named Al.

Al was an auto-mechanic who felt the call to pastoral ministry. And so, first Al had to complete college at an age when most people were already well into their careers.

Then, closing in on "40" -- he packed up his entire family and moved them from their comfortable life in Minnesota to a cramped little two-bedroom apartment in Princeton, New Jersey – where he had *another* three years of school ahead of him.

Now, if anybody ever had reason just focus on themselves, it would have been Al.

I mean, this guy had a lot on his plate!

But, Al was one of the most thoughtful and generous people I've ever met!

He didn't have a lot of money!

None of us did!

But, Al's special gift was that he was a highly skilled mechanic and he put that gift to work fixing other student's cars absolutely free!

Wouldn't take a dime!

Al said it was his way of giving back and, not only did Al save me hundreds of dollars in repairs – he saved countless other students -- countless dollars!

And, he always did it with a smile on his face!

In fact, I remember being in his apartment one Friday night when someone broke down on a nearby highway.

A complete stranger! But, when Al got word, he was out the door – quick as a flash to see what he could do to help!

Al clearly had the gift of generosity!

Now, Al's a good example that – at its core -- “generosity” really has nothing to do with money.

We say someone's generous and immediately think of it in terms of dispensing a lot of cash.

But, that's only part of it!

Generosity's a way of life!

It's an attitude of the heart and spirit!

It's as much about giving of yourselves – as giving any resources you might have.

And so, anyone can be generous!

It's about sharing ourselves freely with others – just as Jesus Christ shared Himself freely with us!

Now, our Scripture lesson today is a portrait of the early Church in which we see the Holy Spirit prompting an unusual generosity among the first Christians.

The Scripture says:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had (Acts 4:32).

Now, just so we're clear, it's important to understand we're not talking about an early form of communism here – you know – communal ownership. That's "not" what this Scripture is talking about!

It doesn't say everyone "owned" everything in common!

It says, whatever they did have, they used to help others!

You see, it was their attitude toward their stuff that was key!

It's how they "viewed" what they owned!

The early Church believers saw their resources as "tools" to serve the Living God – mostly by meeting the needs of others.

And, the reason they did this – besides gratitude for what God had done for them – was that they understood the calling of a Christian is to somehow – someway -- reflect the reality of the Kingdom of God on earth.

What I mean, is this...

Jesus once said, "...the Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21).

Now, by that, Jesus wasn't implying that the Kingdom isn't a real place or that it doesn't have a final fulfillment and coming.

Because it does!

But, what He was saying to folks so intent on seeing God's Kingdom as just another quasi social-political entity dotting the landscape – is that God's Kingdom is wherever God's rule takes precedence in people's hearts and lives!

So, God's Kingdom isn't just something out there waiting for us when we finally go to our reward! That's the ultimate fulfillment, of course...

Or, if Jesus returns first!

But, Jesus wants us to understand that His Kingdom is a reality here and now whenever He rules in our hearts and whenever that rule is demonstrated in our lives!

That's why "generosity's" so important!

Because generosity reflects the heart of God!

Generosity runs so counter-cultural to the way we normally think and act...

(You know, I've got to grab all I can get now!)..

That it can't help but provoke the question and get folks to sit up and take notice that there's something profoundly different about these people who call Jesus Lord and say He's still alive today.

I was talking to a man not long ago.

And, the church where he's a member sponsors something called *Christmas International House*, in which he and members of this church, host international students from all over the country who can't afford to travel back home overseas during the Christmas break.

It's a really neat program and apparently the people involved get a great deal of satisfaction helping these foreign students – many of whom are not Christians.

Now, if you're in this program apparently you're not supposed to proselytize – in other words – you're not supposed to try and convert these non-Christian students.

But, there are ways to show the love of Christ other than simply hitting them upside the head with the “4 Spiritual Laws.”

And, this man was telling me how one of the young women – who's Muslim -- really loves cookies and so her host family baked lots and lots of cookies for her to enjoy.

And, when she called home and spoke to her mother, her mother was genuinely dumbfounded, and she asked her daughter, *“Why would they do that?”*

“Why would they go to all that trouble baking you cookies?”

And, the young Muslim girl's reply?

“Because they're Christians, mother. That's what Christians do!”

Well, it's not a full-blown theology – of course.

But, that young woman's on to an important truth!

You see, it's not really about baking cookies for students far away from home.

It's about Christians – people like you and me – giving of ourselves (in whatever ways), because God first gave Himself to us!

Christians are generous because God's been generous to us through Jesus Christ, His Son!

And, Christians don't "wait" for God to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven because we know – at least in part – that the Kingdom is a reality here and now through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit living in us!

As noted scholar, N.T. Wright says:

Jesus summoned His hearers to the real revolution, which would come about through His people reflecting the generous love of God into the world.

And, as Tod Bolsinger says, again...

This is not just a strategy for adding some kindness to the world. It's a strategy for changing the world.

It's not just about making the world a better place, it's about making the world new.

Generosity's not just about making people think we are good, nice and kind – it's about helping people see that God is good, compassionate and responsive to their cries.

It's a central activity of the followers of Christ to reveal God to the world!

For God so loved the world He gave...

(Did you get that?)

He gave...

He gave – His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

That's why generosity's so important!

Because it reflects the heart of God Himself!

In talking about Spiritual Gifts in Romans 12:8, the Apostle Paul says, “...if it is giving to the needs of others, let him given generously...”

Now, this is a great verse, but it’s one of those times where the old King James Version says it much better than the NIV – which we use here.

In the King James, it says, “*He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity...*”

And, this word, “*simplicity*” comes from a Greek word (*ap lo ta ti*) meaning to give with “sincerity”...

With “frankness”...

With no “ulterior motive”...

With no expectation of anything in return!

Just as Jesus did on the cross!

Giving for no other reason than out of His own love for us!

You give of yourself like that...

You give with simplicity – motivated only by love – and you’ll be experiencing the Gift of Generosity!

And, what’s more, you’ll be reflecting the very heart of God Himself...

Demonstrating the reality of His Kingdom here and now!

In his book, *Everybody’s Normal Till You Get To Know Them*, John Ortberg tells of a young man who lived in Paradise, California, named John Gilbert.

When he was five years old, John was diagnosed with Duchenne’s Muscular Dystrophy...

A genetic and progressive and very cruel disease!

John and his family were told that it would eventually destroy every muscle in his body and take his life in about ten years.

Well, John beat the odds – living until he was 25.

But, every year he lost something.

One year it was the ability to run. He couldn't play sports with the other kids.

Another year he could no longer walk straight – so all he could do was watch others play.

Eventually John lost the ability to speak.

Not surprisingly, John says, the toughest years of his life were in Junior High School – a place noted speaker Tony Campolo once described as like “purgatory” – a place between heaven and hell where you are made to go and suffer for your sins.

But, what John experienced there, according to Ortberg, was far worse than what most of us could imagine.

Some students there at his Jr. High, used to take great delight in humiliating John because of his condition and because he had to bring a trained dog to school with him.

He went to a dance once.

It was a disaster and he never went to another.

There was even a bully who used to torture him in the lunch room when the teacher wasn't looking. It became so bad John was afraid to even go to school.

And, no one stood up for him – probably because (as Ortberg notes, they were all just afraid for themselves.

But, there were positive moments in John's life too...

At one point he was named the California State representative for everyone in the state with his condition.

He was flown to the capital and ushered in for a private meeting with the governor.

Later that same night he was a guest at an NFL dinner and auction.

Pro football players greeted him and let him hold their Super Bowl rings.

And, when the auction began, the item that really caught John's eye was a basketball personally autographed by members of the Sacramento Kings.

Well, when John saw that exquisite ball, he got a little carried away!

When the bidding began, he raised his hand.

As soon as his hand went up, he said, his mother pulled it down. In John's words, "*Astronauts never felt as many G's as my wrist did that night.*"

The bidding for that basketball reached astronomical heights – even though it was by far – not nearly the most valuable item being auctioned off that night.

Then, eventually, one man named a figure that shocked the room.

It left everybody speechless...

And, no one else could match his bid.

Well, the man went to the front and collected his prized ball.

But, instead of returning to his seat, the man walked across the room and placed it in the thin, small hands of a little boy who admired it so intently.

He put that basketball in the hands of a boy that would never dribble it...

A boy who would never throw it to a teammate on a fast break...

Never fire up a three-point shot.

But, he put it in the hands of a boy who would cherish it for the rest of his life!

Writing about it later on, John himself said...

It took me a moment to realize what he had done. I remember hearing the gasps all over the room – then thunderous applause – and seeing weepy eyes. To this day I'm amazed...

Have you even been given a gift you could have never gotten for yourself?

Has anyone ever sacrificed a huge amount for you without getting anything in return except... the joy of giving?

Well?

I think we all know the answer to that one.

So, the question is, *“How generous are you going to be in return for all the generosity that’s been shown to you?”*

Because that’s really the only thing you can do with generosity...

Simply sharing yourselves freely with others...

Just as Jesus Christ shared Himself freely with you!

Amen.