



“More Than Enough”

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2 Corinthians 9:7-9

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God doesn't need your money.

That probably seems like a shocking statement to begin a sermon on the practice of giving. Somewhere, the members of the finance committee just spit their coffee across the room. It flies in the face of the way we usually think about giving to the church to say that God doesn't need your money, but it's true. I'll explain more in a few minutes.

Over the past few years, when we've talked about giving – either as one of our five practices or during an annual giving campaign or in the invitation to the offering, we've intentionally linked *generosity* with *gratitude*. A grateful person is more likely to be a generous person. I talked about gratitude as central to the first practice – worship – and I encouraged everyone to pray five times a day, even the simple prayer, “Thank you, God.” Gratitude is an expression of worship, but it also is *the key to generosity*.

Journalist A. J. Jacobs has become widely known for his books on projects of personal experience. You may be familiar with his 2008 work, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, which is both hilarious and thought-provoking. More recently, Jacobs wrote *Thanks a Thousand*, a book based on his quest to thank every single person involved in producing his morning cup of coffee. He started with the barista, which was the simplest task. He traveled to South America to thank the coffee farmers. He also thanked “the logo designer, the botanist, the truck driver who drove the coffee beans,” and so on. By self-admission, he got a little out of control, eventually personally thanking over a thousand people who had a hand in bringing that one cup of coffee to him. Jacobs said of the experience, “It doesn't just take a village to make a cup of coffee. It takes the world.”¹

His project wasn't really about coffee. It was about *gratitude*. And it was about a change of mindset – of moving from a place of self-focus and consumption to a place of greater awareness and appreciation; appreciation for how many people and places and ideas and resources are part of the things we use and touch and experience every day.

One of Jacobs's inspirations was Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast, whose work on gratefulness captured my attention over a decade ago. In a 2013 TED Talk, Steindl-Rast explored the connection between happiness and gratefulness. While many people would expect that it's easy for happy people to be grateful, that's not the way it works. Lots of people have everything they think they would need to make them happy, and yet they're not. At the same time, there are people who've experienced incredible hardship that are amazingly happy. Some of those people just radiate happiness, in spite of their circumstances. Why? Steindl-Rast says that's because of their ability to practice gratitude. After years of research and leadership, he asserts, “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It's gratefulness that makes us happy.”²

For both Jacobs and Steindl-Rast, gratitude begins with attention. You can't be thankful for something you don't notice. How much attention do we pay to the things all around us? I'm often distracted by the thing I'm thinking about, the pings from my smart phone, the items on my calendar, thoughts about dinner or the

¹ A. J. Jacobs. “What's the Power of a Simple Thank-You?” *Ted Radio Hour*. February 19, 2021. Online: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/969148456> (accessed March 9, 2021)

² David Steindl-Rast. “Want to be happy? Be Grateful.” *TEDGlobal 2013*. Online: https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful/transcript#t-63939 (accessed March 9, 2021)

conversation I need to have or the song on the car radio or...you name it. Steindl-Rast says we can counter our general state of inattention by following the simple guidelines we learned as children when crossing the street: *Stop. Look. Go. Stop* being in such a hurry, trying to balance many things at the same time. Get quiet – not just in our surroundings but in our mind. *Look* around and be present in the moment, noticing the things that are all around us, the things we take for granted. Take time to appreciate with all our senses the moment we've been given. Every moment is a gift, the only one like it. But we miss it if we're not paying attention. Then, finally, with our hearts open to the moment, we can *go* – make something of this moment, even if it's just to enjoy it for what it is. We might be able to go further, to leverage that opportunity to do some good for others, too.

Now, being grateful doesn't come naturally to us. Even when we want to, there are times we just don't feel like being grateful. One of the lessons Jacobs says he learned over the course of his gratitude project is that sometimes you have to *fake* it until you *feel* it. Channeling wisdom from Bill W. and Alcoholics Anonymous, Jacobs says it's easier to *act* your way into a new way of *thinking* than it is to *think* your way into a new way of *acting*. (We might even go so far as to refer to that as *Habitology*.)

We seem to be hard-wired in Western society to focus on what we *don't* have, what we might refer to as a *deficit mindset*. With a deficit mindset, we're always looking for that next thing, the latest and greatest whatever it is. Jesus taught, "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15b) How easily we forget. Gratitude is the antidote to a deficit mindset. When we learn to be grateful for what we have, we are less likely to dwell on what we don't have. But it's hard to be grateful if we think we deserve everything.

I'm blessed to serve as the lead pastor of this congregation. I work with incredible people – visionary, committed, generous, and dedicated. We do a lot of good work together. My role provides me with a spacious and comfortable office in an inspiring edifice, a generous salary and benefits, a home in a nice neighborhood, and opportunities to represent our congregation in a variety of settings. Am I in this position because I'm such a wonderful person, because I'm special and I deserve all this? No. I know many people who are more gifted preachers than I am, who study the Bible more intensely, who pray more frequently and more fervently, who attend to the mysteries of God in ways I can't begin to comprehend. There are people with more vision, greater talent, and no less commitment. Whatever privilege I have is a gift, not a right. I have a terrific family – an amazing spouse, three incredible children, loving parents and in-laws. I'm blessed with good health and relative prosperity. I'm grateful for what I have and I try to remember that it is *all* gift, even life itself. But sometimes I forget. I get a little full of myself. I start to think that I'm really something, that I've earned all of this or that I'm somehow entitled to it. In times like that, I need to remember what Paul said in his letter to the Romans: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23-24) When I remember that everything is a gift, I can be more grateful...and maybe a little less of a jerk. And when I am more grateful, I'm more inclined to share whatever gifts I have with others in service to God. That's the connection between gratitude and generosity.

Practicing gratitude compounds over time, leading not only to more *moments* of gratitude, but making us more grateful *people* in the process. Grateful people tend to be more appreciative of what they have, which in turn makes them more likely to share. The more generously we share, the more grateful we feel for what we have. And so the cycle continues.

Giving is what we were born to do. Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives." (CEB) But we have been conditioned to think we live to get stuff; and the more stuff we get, the happier we'll be. Do you know what happens when we get more stuff? We want still more stuff! And when think we might have just about enough stuff, there's newer and better stuff out there for us to want. Gratitude does for us what *stuff* never can – it can bring us the happiness we seek. God, in fact, gave us the example in the most

memorized verse in the entire New Testament, John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that God what? God gave.*

Friends, God wants us to be freed from the cycle of accumulation and consumerism, from putting our trust in our stuff instead of what really matters. When I say that God doesn't need your money, it's because God's purposes don't depend on you or me or how much we give. We can do big things together when we share generously, and we've had some great examples of that in the last few months. But do we think God can't do this without us? God wants us to be generous, but not because God needs our money. God wants us to be generous so we can experience fullness of life. God wants our *material* lives to match our *spiritual* calling. Faith isn't transactional. We don't get ahead by giving more. But by appreciating all we have and learning to share more generously, we can reorder our priorities to align more closely with God's intention for us, to become who we were born to be.

Church of the Saviour's pastors and leadership believe strongly enough in giving to make it one of our five practices of faithful discipleship, grounded in the practices we find in the Bible to guide us. We lift up the biblical standard of a tithe – 10% – as the ideal, but whether or not you attain that ideal, we urge everyone to calculate giving to the church as a percentage of your income rather than a fixed dollar amount. Why? Because when we look at giving as a percentage of income, it's much easier to see where giving falls in our order of priorities.

We also know that giving is more than what we put in the offering plate. Each of the five practices has its own subset of five individual actions, and that's true for *Give* as well. So, in addition to giving a percentage of your income to God's work, we encourage everyone to perform five acts of extravagant generosity each month. What's extravagant generosity? Anything that goes beyond what can be reasonably expected. Buy someone's coffee. Pay for the person in line behind you at the drive through. Send a friend or family member a gift – not because it's a special occasion, but just because. Buy a sandwich for a hungry person instead of just walking by or dropping a dollar into their cup. Leave a really big tip – not like 20%, but like 50 or 60%. Every gesture doesn't have to be huge – don't impoverish yourself in the process. But strive so that every month, you offer five acts of surprising generosity to someone.

The goal isn't increased giving – that's a side benefit. The goal is *transformation*. We want to be transformed into more faithful disciples. The Greek word for transformation is *metanoia*, to have a complete change of heart and mind. We say *transformation*, which is close, but transformation implies something more passive than *metanoia* when it comes discipleship. Transformation is something that happens to us, and doesn't necessarily require agency on our part. A better word is *conversion*. Conversion has come to have a negative association in our society, linked with proselytizing or judgmentalism or strong-arming someone into believing something. But despite the abuses of the concept, conversion is an important part of the Christian experience. We are constantly bombarded by messages that tell us our value is measured by our wealth, that we're defined by the number and quality of our possessions. But *one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions*. We need to convert from the life of consumerism to a life of discipleship. Conversion requires a choice. It won't happen on its own. And it requires a willingness to make that choice over and over, every day – the choice to follow Jesus in everything we do.

By making giving a regular habit, we become the giving people we were born to be, made in God's likeness to carry on Christ's work. Stop. Look. Go. Practice gratitude, even if you have to fake it until you feel it. But know that a grateful life, a generous life, is the life God wants for us. I'll close with this advice from the First Letter to Timothy:

As for those who in the present age are rich (and let me parenthetically add that, by global standards, that's all of us), command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus

storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19, NRSV)

Let's pray: God of the rainbow, God of the cross, God of the empty tomb, you are incredibly generous to us. Even though we might not have everything we want, we have all that we need and we have it in abundance. Help us to be people who appreciate you and your gifts to us. Make us more grateful people, more generous people. Help us to let go of what our world tells us we should hold tightly. And help us to reach toward your example and toward others, so we may take hold of the life that really is life. Amen.