

Defined by Generosity

Proverbs 11:24-25

Proverbs 22:9

1 Timothy 6:17-19

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Today we conclude our series on “Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity.” The first Sunday of this series, October 29th, I introduced you to Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. He has been our guide these last three weeks. That first Sunday we talked about how Jesus did not come to bring us dream houses or dream church buildings. Jesus came to bring us joy; the joy that comes as we find our way back to “the life that is really life” (1 Timothy 6:19). This is the abundant life God wants for us. That first Sunday, we prayed that God would heal our desires, help us hold our possessions loosely, and teach us simplicity and joy.

Next, we learned how we don’t wait for joy to drop in our laps’ we can cultivate joy. Getting more money doesn’t bring joy. Joy comes from living our life’s purpose (which is to bless others). Money is a tool to accomplish our life’s purpose. To use money well and wisely takes planning. On November 5th we learned six financial planning principles that help us to use money well. The estimate of giving card was introduced: a tool the church uses to plan it’s ministry in the year ahead and invite all of us together to put God first by thinking about our gift to the church in the coming year. No matter what your income level, you can fill out that card in a way that leads to joy.

Last week contentment was our theme. We confessed we all suffer from restless heart syndrome (that tendency to want more, more, more of whatever we think we need to be happy). Yet God is the only true source of contentment. Finding a life of contentment starts with putting God first: in our time, in our giving. Money is a powerful tool in creating a God-centered life. We try to live the first of our six financial principles: we give to God first, we don’t give what’s left over when we pay all our other bills. We “pay our tithes and offerings first.”

Today we focus on generosity. Like joy and contentment, generosity can be cultivated. We **can** grow in generosity. Here’s why: all human beings are made in the image of God. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. God is the owner of everything. “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;” (Psalm 24:1) You can’t out give God. Everything we have is a gift – even our ability to make money. We are created in God’s image, we are able to be generous. In fact we are made for generosity.

Adam Hamilton writes how he once read the whole Bible in order to find every instance of worship. He learned that in its most basic form, worship is making an offering to God. In the scripture the primary way people worshipped God was not through music or listening to sermons but through “building an altar and offering the fruit of one’s labors upon it to God.” (p. 115) In ancient Israel, offerings of grain and animals were placed on the altar. In the era of the temple in Jerusalem, the animals sacrificed were used to feed the priests, who from the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi had not been given any land in Canaan as the others tribes, but instead the Levites depended on support from temple bureaucracy. Animals were sacrificed and scripture says said the odor of these sacrifices was pleasing to God. The point is not that God liked meat! It was the giving from the heart – the giving of what mattered -- that pleased God.

The first Sunday of this series I told the children the story of Jesus praising the poor widow who gave two coins to the temple treasury. Hers was a greater gift than the rich men who put in much more money, because hers was a gift from the heart. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:21) When you want to find out what matters to a person, look at what they spend money on. God does not need meat any more than God needs our money. God wants our love, as seen in our worship. God wants us to give from the heart.

To help us see the kind of giving that pleases God – giving from the heart – I’d like to tell you a story from Adam Hamilton’s book “Enough”. Here’s what he writes: “Eight or nine years ago, our family took a camping trip to the Grand Tetons. We arrived on my birthday and set up our little pop-up camper. After we were settled, we told each of our daughters that they could have \$20 spending money for the three days we would be in and around Jackson Hole. We then went to the gift shop before heading out on a walk around a small lake. We had no sooner walked into the gift shop than Rebecca started looking at t ball caps. She found one, tried it on and said “Dad, what do you think of this hat?” I said “Becca, it’s really cool. But all you have is \$20, and that hat will take all of your money. Why don’t you wait and make your money last for the next few days.” But she said “Dad, you told me it was my money and could get whatever I want. And I really want this hat!” As hard as I tried to talk her out of it, and to convince her that she would have other opportunities to buy a copy in town, she would have no part of waiting. Finally, exasperated, I said “Okay Becca – but this is it. You’re not getting any more money the next three days. I gave her \$20 and she bought the hat. We went for a walk around the lake, and then came back to watch the sun set from a park bench. That’s when Becca handed me the hat and said “Daddy, I bought this for you. I love you. Happy Birthday.” I sat on the bench took her in my arms and started to cry. That hat is among my most treasured possessions, my most often worn hat to this day because every time I wear it I think of Becca’s sacrifice for me. All these years later it still touches me to think about how my little girl gave up all her spending money because she wanted to tell her daddy that she loved him.” When we give to God in the way this child gave to her loving parent, God is pleased.

Another example of giving from the heart is closer to home. It's about a five year old boy from this congregation who knows the meaning of Acts 20:35 "we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." ' His name is Berkley Philipp. Berkley saw the pictures on TV of the children at St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis TN. He wanted to help these kids. So he showed up as this mother's vintage clothing store "Seek Boutique" on the second floor of the square downtown (over Corner Drug) with his box of temporary tattoos. And he started his "Tats for Tots" program. \$2 will buy you a temporary tattoo. \$1 of each sale goes to St. Jude's Hospital. Painless tattoos to help kids in pain. He's done it more than four Saturdays now. And he's now moving on to raise funds for the American Family Children's Hospital in Madison. Why would a five year old take time for this kind of project? For the same reason any of us would choose to be generous. Because God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. And we are made in the image of God. And when we love God and our neighbors, we can't help but find ways to be generous. I have my pink bunny tattoo from Berkley today. He'll be around after church if any child or adult would like a "tat for tots" to support the American Family Children's Hospital. It will cost you only \$2.

Last week I shared my personal story about learning to put God at the center of my life. Choices about money were an essential part of that journey. I told you all how much I give to God through the ministry of the church and why I tithe -- give ten percent of what I learn back to God through the ministry of the church. Three weeks ago, I told you Adam Hamilton would be our guide on this journey to joy, simplicity and contentment. This is a journey you must make - no one can do it for you. For all of us, the story of our growing in generosity is still unfolding. This week ahead is when we fill out and prepare to return our estimate of giving cards for 2018. If for some reason you did not get a letter and an estimate of giving card in the mail, you can pick one up in fellowship hall today. I hope you are thinking about what you will put on your estimate of giving card and that you'll return the card.

Here's why we encourage you to do that. Let me be clear: it is not because the church needs your money. The church doesn't need your money: that's not why you give - we give because we are living out who we were created to be: generous people made in the image of God the greatest giver of all. Don't fill out this card if you are only doing it because you think the church needs your money. The church does not depend on any one person's gift more than another's. Even if you are the biggest giver in this church you don't matter more than one who gives the least. This is not a matter of cash in the bank. Do you remember the story of the church I told you about three weeks ago? The one in Massachusetts that had a beautiful building, with an organ in fine repair and new carpet. But few people and no sense of mission/purpose? As that story reminds us, a church can have lots of money in the bank and have little joy and contentment. Churches and people can find their way back to joy if it is lost. It happens when we find ways to put God first in our lives and live Jesus great commandment to love God and love others. It's not the amount of money received on a pledge Sunday that makes a church strong and vital.

It's all of the members and friends together, giving from the heart that makes a vital, healthy church which manifests the kingdom of God in our midst. The stories of Rebecca Hamilton, Berkley Philipp and the widow with the two little coins remind us the kind of generosity that pleases God most is when we give from the heart. And that's something all of us can do.

So here's the good news: We already have been given everything we need for joy, contentment and the wise use of money. We already have been everything you need to fill out 2018 estimate of giving cards. There is a journey to joy that only you can take. Today's bulletin insert helps you begin today. Fill this out. Put it somewhere safe so you can refer to it in the year ahead. And then watch as the joy, simplicity contentment come into your life more and more.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Material for this sermon comes from "Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity" by Adam Hamilton (Abingdon 2012)