

Go All In: Living by Faith

Mark 12:41-44

October 6, 2019

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Let us pray:

Almighty and gracious God, it is truly a spectacular day to be in your presence. Every day that we awake, we are refreshed from the night that is past and look forward to the vision for what you have in store for us throughout the day. Help us O God, to deeply trust in you and your extravagance today and every day. You have truly given us more than we could ever ask or imagine. Open us once again to your will and your mercy today and fill us with your grace. We pray this in the matchless and mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

In my travels across our denomination, I have had the opportunity to visit many churches. One of those churches is the Church of the resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. They are a High Expectation Church. They share their expectations and share them openly with the congregation - it drives what they do and how they deliver their message to not only visitors but also members who have been with them since they began nearly 28 years ago.

I have heard the lead pastor say several times that they are very open about four very specific expectations. First: they expect you to attend worship every week unless you are sick or out of town. Even if they are out of town, they want them to make it a point to worship. Secondly, they expect their members to give. They teach giving as a percentage of your income moving toward a tithe. Thirdly: they expect their members participate in small groups or life groups and at least one more ministry throughout the week other than worship. And finally, they call them to a high accountability to service.

I like the language of a high expectation culture because it provides focus and intentionality about how we live out our faith and our trust in God. I am thankful for you and your presence here this morning, and I would even borrow that phrase from Paul when he said, "I give thanks for you every time I remember you in my prayers." It is great to be in worship with you today. I am praying for high expectations this entire month of October as we consider our faith and trust in God and the way that we live that out in our generosity. I would pray for you to make worship a priority all the time, but I especially pray that you will make it a priority in the coming weeks as we explore an important subject in our lives and that is generosity.

I see this series as an opportunity to deepen our relationship with God even further.

Many of you received a devotional last year and we hope that you dive back into it again - Practicing Extravagant Generosity - and if you don't have a copy - we hope that you will pick one up. My wife, Tracy and I have been reading it together and using it as an opportunity to step up in our conversations about faith and it has been a rich time for us and I pray it can be for you as well.

One of the purposes for us throughout this series is to share a simple message about who we are and where we are going as a church. Bishop Schnase begins with something very important. He says, "Giving helps us become what God wants us to be." It is our hope in this series to lead us into conversations about the heart and about our spiritual walk. In our spiritual walk with Christ - giving isn't so much about managing or controlling, but our generosity. So it is that our focus will lead us to hear about generosity and shift from an understanding of being stewards of God's gifts.

Moving from stewardship to generosity allows us to focus less on the transactional, move away from the budgetary, further and further away from the feeling of obligation to a position of the heart. So you can think about it this way - move away from your hands to your hearts.

I like the word generosity, because for me it focuses on the spiritual qualities of a giver. Generosity focuses on you and me and how it is that we respond to a generous God, Generosity is about us, and has very little to do with Ingomar's need for your money.

Scripture reminds us over and over again just how much God loves us. In the beginning when God created, he created all things to be in relationship with us and wanted us to have good things. From the moment that humanity was placed into the garden, God was providing. God continues to provide for us and we witness that moment of thanksgiving throughout the psalms. We also know very well and are reminded that God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus.

We are loved by God very deeply. **Generous people respond to the love of God.** We experience and offer ourselves unconditionally to God. Sometimes expressing that love for God comes at a great expense.

You have heard me talk quite a lot about one of the places in this world that is very special to me. I have been blessed over the past few years to travel to Zimbabwe in southern Africa as part of an ongoing relationship with the people of the Zimbabwe Annual Conferences. Our regional body of the United Methodist church has a relationship with the Zimbabwe churches that has its spiritual foundations in "partnership." The word for that partnership is Chabadza - which is a shona word for "coming along side."

At one point in the history of Zimbabwe, the country was often referred to as the "Breadbasket of Africa." The climate and the rich soil provided much of the African Continent's needs for food. However, due to climate changes, drought and even the

political turmoil, Zimbabwe has fallen on hard times and is finding it hard to move forward politically and economically.

Because of that turmoil, Zimbabweans do not have much. There is a very stark difference between those who are part of a ruling class and those who are not. And yet, anytime that we visited, our hosts poured out generously into us and extravagantly provided an outpouring.

One of the conversations we often shared in our debriefings together as a team was this uncomfortable feeling we might have because our hosts will often pour out so much of themselves toward us, they give and they feed, and they give and feed even more. The youth on our trips would often lament, "How can they give us so much when they don't have much to eat for themselves." They were forced to wrestle with the idea that they were eating really really well, and their hosts would often be back in kitchen eating only Sadza and greens.

The only way that we could explain it was to share how much they loved God and their belief that your presence among them was about thanking God for a relationship with him first and foremost. Secondly, it was about relationship with each of us.

I have witnessed the generous spirit of God's people in Zimbabwe. I have witnessed and experienced that generosity is a lifestyle where giving comes from a relationship without any expectation of reward. **Generosity is about our relationship with God.**

In our devotional time this week, Tracy and I talked about some of the barriers that we might feel or experience when we think about begin generous. She noted that fear is often one of those motivating factors, fear of not being able to provide enough, fear of the future, fear of not being able to pay for band trips and instrument lessons, fear of college tuition payments, fear of providing a home in the future. Fear is powerful force.

But conversations about generosity move us away from fear and more toward a discipline of trust. It is about trusting God more than we trust our stuff. **Living by faith requires giving by faith.**

Proverbs 3 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, submit to him and he will make your paths straight."

This story of the Widows Mite is all about that submission and that trust. As Jesus and his disciples were standing around the temple treasury, he notices something simple and yet profound. Large sums of money were being put into the treasury and people were beginning to notice. And yet there was one who gave something most observers would have considered small - but Jesus notices and calls it to the attention of the disciples. He says something profound and show them that most people were giving out of their surplus or what was left over - but the woman was giving all that she had.

In many ways, it was pointing straight to the heart of the woman who gave. He was pointing out her character and her spiritual willingness to give everything to God. Giving everything requires a huge leap of faith. She was doing it out of relationship.

There are many reasons to give, but the widow gave out of another motivation - and that was her relationship with God.

Think about this - just 7 short verses before this story in the Gospel of Mark is the story of the Greatest Commandment. Jesus is pressed about how to live and his response was simple and at the same time confrontational - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all of your strength."

First and foremost in our spiritual walk is our love for God. Our love of God is manifest and made real and practical when we trust in God, trust that he will do what he says he will do, go where he promises, and give to us beyond our own comprehension. Our trust and love of God is a commitment to love him more than any worldly possession or object that we have.

One of the activities I love at camp and even in retreat settings is a trust fall. If you are unfamiliar with a trust fall, a willing participant is invited onto a platform that is several feet off of the ground.

Below that volunteer is a group of people that stand face to face with their hands outstretched in a bit of a zipper pattern. The volunteer stands with his/her back to the group below, crosses their hands across their chest and begins with a set of commands, just to see those who are below are really ready and are willing to catch that person as they fall straight back.

It goes something like this - "Catchers ready" READY; "permission to fall," PERMISSION GRANTED, "Falling," FALL AWAY. And you let go.

Falling backwards off of a platform into the arms of others with whom you are in relationship takes trust. You have to let go of control, you have to let go of the notion that you will protect yourself and give than over to others, and you dismiss the notion that you are now the one that controls your future.

The reason for a trust fall is to illustrate something very powerful, what it feels like from a physical perspective to trust.

Living by faith and growing in our relationship with Giving and generosity is also a very tangible opportunity to know what it means to trust. Giving and generosity allows us to spiritual consider what it means to trust God with what we've been given and give up control of our lives to him. It means giving up some of that fear that we might have lingering very close to our hearts about what it means to provide and have security and do the things that we want to do. It's about giving up control.

To trust is to have a firm belief in the reliability and the truth, ability and strength of God. Trust is having an assurance in things that we cannot see and having the hope and confidence in that which He provides for us.

Throughout this series on generosity, we want all of us to consider where we are on our spiritual journey and a giving path. Without judgement or belief that this act of giving is a transaction that we must participate in, we are asking all of us to first know where we are in our spiritual journey of giving, and consider taking the next step in that journey.

For all of us, giving is an act of faith and trust in the one who created us. Today, our invitation is simple - if you have not given from a position of generosity before, we invite you to consider giving for the very first time. This for some of you is a huge leap of faith. It can literally feel like you are letting go of control and falling without a full understanding of what the outcome might be. But there is a trust in God that the Lord will provide for you in your faithfulness and your generosity.

Giving for others of you may be about taking another step on the spiritual journey. For all of us, regardless of where we are in a giving path, we can be converted in our spiritual walk and experience a shift in how we act and think. Our prayer can be simple, "Lord, where would you want me to be in my giving as I trust in you."

Every time I give from a position of generosity, I am saying, I've giving up control God, and I am trusting in You. I give to You because I love You so much.

In just a few moments, we are going to be sharing in the act of Holy Communion. Communion is a reminder of God's love for us. It is a time and a place for us to be reminded over and over that God wants to continue to be in relationship with us and He wants us to trust in Him.

Communion is ultimately a reminder that God did something amazing and spectacular - He gave us His son. And in dying and being raised to new life, He is proving over and over again that He still loves us. He proves His love for us.

Communion for me is a constant reminder of just why I give - because God first gave to us. It's about being in relationship with Him.

For that love and for that gift, I offer myself trusting in Him who gives abundantly more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Our next steps today are for you to consider giving for the first time regularly out of trust. I invite all of you to pray as a family, "Lord, where would you want me to be in my giving." And finally, consider what it means to trust in your small group or family today.

Let us pray: