

Does Generosity Define Us?

Ephesians 3:14-21

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This November at Good Shepherd our focus is on *Growing in Generosity*. I talked last week about a study from the Barna Institute which found that 83% of U.S. adults are looking to grow in their generosity, but they're not sure where to begin. In response to this, we at Good Shepherd lift up our time, talents, and treasures – as we've been doing for many years – as a great place to begin.

So, friends, where does generosity show up in your life in a way that feels important to you? A few years ago, my nephew Eli wrote a paper for a middle school project. He entitled it: "My Story of Generosity." Eli said that a few years before he'd started saving up his money. He really wanted a \$100 bill. When he got it, quick as could be, he started saving up for another \$100 bill.

Eli wrote: "One day I went to church instead of Sunday School. I saw my mom and dad give an offering. I knew they passed an offering plate at Sunday School too. I didn't know what to do with the money I'd saved. Seeing my parents give an offering inspired me to be as generous as they were. So, the next Sunday I brought my money to Sunday School without telling my parents and I gave it all to the offering. The teachers didn't notice what I'd done. And I didn't feel it was necessary to tell my parents."

Eli continued: "Two weeks later my dad asked me where my \$100 bills were. I told him that I'd given the money to church. My mom asked me why I had decided to give my money away. I said that I had everything I needed, and I knew there were other people that needed help. Being generous is very important to me. I like to give things away because it makes me feel good. If there was no giving in the world, it would be a much less joyful place to live."

Well said, Eli! I can only imagine how touched – and maybe surprised – your parents were to hear your story. Isn't there something deep inside us that comes to life when we hear stories of generosity. And for all you parents and grandparents out there, you probably can't help but wonder if you've set an example of generosity too. And if you have, thank you. Hopefully something in you came alive in the process and it made you feel good.

In 1952, British Bible translator, J.B. Phillips, wrote a book with a provocative title: *Your God is Too Small*. He said: “The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs.” I think Phillips was onto something. He suggested: “The challenge for us is finding a God who is big enough to embrace the whole world and close enough to fill up our own hearts.”

So, what do you think – is your God too small? Without knowing it, have we substituted a puny god for the great and gracious God revealed in the history of Israel and in the life and teachings of Jesus. Too often this substitute god we’ve fashioned is limited, narrow, and tame; boxed in by our preconceptions. I’m afraid this god can be stingy with mercy and have only enough love for “our kind of people” –our nation or tribe or race. And this can lead to stagnation.

No doubt, there are many roads that can lead to stagnation. It can result in what Gregg Lavoy calls “the common cold of the soul.” Lavoy describes it like this:

Abilities and gifts that never get cultivated
Until weeks become months
And months turn into years
And one day you’re looking back at a life of
Deep, honest conversations you never had;
Great, bold prayers you never prayed;
Exhilarating risks you never took;
Lives you never touched.
And you’re sitting in a recliner with a shriveled soul,
And forgotten dreams.
And you realize there was a world of desperate need, and a great God
calling you to be part of something bigger than yourself—

Friends, does any of this ring true for you? If so, Paul has a prayer for you in Ephesians. The prayer comes out of Paul’s dream for the congregation he started in Ephesus. Paul’s hope is that they might be a church *sold out* to God and *on fire* for mission.

As Paul writes the letter, I can picture him down on his knees in prayer. He prays that God will give the new believers in Ephesus an inner strength through the Holy Spirit—*because* this work is going to be tough. Paul prays that Christ will dwell in their hearts through faith—*because* this mission is going to take

lots of trust. Paul prays that they will be rooted and grounded in love—because it can be so very hard to get along with people. Paul is confident that help is coming, so confident that he breaks into a doxology: “Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

This doxology sounds like generosity to me – being part of something bigger than ourselves. Over the years, Good Shepherd has had a number of such promptings. I’ve heard of a few: Thanksgiving Day meals for the community; a hamburger stand at Kernel Days; Christmas caroling in the neighborhoods and at care facilities; the church auction; feeding the hungry by starting a food shelf and also filling up Jesus Food packets; picking up trash in highway ditches; preschool programs like Headstart and Little Tykes; moving much of Sunday Schol to Wednesday night. Some of these efforts have led to further things and the efforts are still ongoing.

The Message translation describes them like this: “God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine, or guess, or request in your wildest dreams. God does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, God’s Spirit deeply and gently within us.”

Here’s what often happens: God lays it on somebody’s heart to get up out of the recliner and do something for someone. Suddenly stagnation starts slipping away, hearts get moved, and generosity begins to materialize. People start praying like Paul: for inner strength through the Holy Spirit, for Christ to dwell in their hearts through faith, to be rooted and grounded in love. All of a sudden, a ministry comes to life and begins to grow.

So friends, here’s the question: what part could you play in such an effort? Hopefully whatever God lays on your heart. A young man named Johnny was working at a grocery store. One day he came to hear Barbara Glanz, a motivational speaker hired by the company. Barbara talked about how people can make a difference. She described how every interaction with another human being is a chance to bless that person’s life.

A month later, Barbara got a phone call from a 17-year-old named Johnny. Johnny told her he’d been to her session. He said: “Barbara, I like what you talked about, but I didn’t think I could do anything special for our customers. You see, I have Down’s Syndrome, and I’m just a bagger. But one day I got an

idea. I decided that every night when I came home from work, I would find a “thought for the day” for the next shift. It would be something positive, some reminder of how good it was to be alive.

So, every night Johnny’s dad helped him enter his inspirational saying six times on a computer page. Then Johnny would print fifty copies. He took scissors and carefully cut three hundred copies and signed his name to each of them.

Johnny put the stack of notes next to him while he worked. Each time he finished bagging someone’s groceries, he would put his saying on top of the last bag. Then he would stop what he was doing, look the person in the eye, and say, “I’ve put a saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day.”

A month later, the store manager called Barbara. He said, “You won’t believe what’s happened here. I was making my rounds, and when I got up to the cashiers, the line at Johnny’s checkout out was three times longer than anyone else’s. It went all the way down the frozen food aisle.” When the manager tried to open up more lines, he couldn’t get any of the customers to budge. They said, “That’s okay. We’ll wait. We want to be in Johnny’s line.” Johnny was obviously doing more than filling up grocery bags; he was filling up lives with encouragement and hope.

Clearly, as much as our bodies need to be fed, our souls need it even more. People need words and actions that move them. When they get them from someone like Johnny, they’re reminded of the beauty of one person forgetting his limitations and seeking to make his life a blessing to somebody else.

Friends, here’s what I think: you could be like Johnny the bagger. All it takes is a little idea and a lot of heart. You could make something happen wherever you are. It may require you to pray some bold prayers and to step out of your comfort zone. But if you make the effort, you can be part of something bigger than yourself.

How big is your God? *God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever ask or imagine.* Sometimes God does this through people like Eli or Johnny. And sometimes God does this through people like you and me. Being generous with our time, talents, and treasures makes our hearts come alive. And we end up spreading joy to more people than we can possibly know. Amen.