

## Extravagant Generosity

Luke 21:1-4

Last week, we discussed the practice of Risk Taking of Mission and Service. WE looked at the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:35-39 as Jesus describes the importance of being in service to others as an expression of our mission and God's love to our neighbors. Our theme centered around the idea of Risk-taking mission and service to others. This week's scripture is Luke 21:1-4 and our theme is Extravagant Generosity. Discussing finances can be a difficult topic for many because of how personal and vulnerable one can feel talking about what they are able to give. This stems from a society that is built on value and determining that value based on worth. Hear this community, your wealth does not define your worth or your commitment to this church or community. Extravagant Generosity is not about the amount one gives, but instead, Extravagant Generosity is about the intent behind the giving and how this develops a healthy habit of giving to others.

During my childhood, my family grew up in poverty. This was due to my mother and father divorce when I was around the age of eight. When my mother left my father, she had no college degree to fall back on and no job experience due to her being a stay-at-home mom and raising my two younger sisters and I. My mother was the foundation of our family and somehow always found a way to ensure our basic needs were met. To be honest, it was the coming together of family resources and community resources that helped my family through this trying time. My church community was an important support group for us as we moved from our home state of Florida to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in Northeast, Tennessee. Both family and church were important to us because of their practice of Extravagant Generosity.

One of the greatest gifts I have received was a pair of dress shoes. As I told part of my story at the beginning of today, my family didn't have much in terms of money and when I got to high school, I needed a pair of dress shoes to attend more formal events in high school. A member of the congregation heard this need from my mother and showed up the next Sunday with a pair of dress shoes for me. It was such a simple, but profound, meaningful gift from a member of our church. I was so thankful for this gift that I wore those shoes until the soles of the shoes cracked and broke. The intent behind this gift is what really mattered, not the cost, the brand name, or the design of the shoe. Generosity is not about value, but it is about intent.

What is Extravagant Generosity? When we look to our scripture lesson, Luke 21:1-4, it says this, "<sup>1</sup> He [Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury, <sup>2</sup>he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; <sup>4</sup>for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on'" (Luke 21:1-4). Where is this story located at the point of Jesus' story in the Gospel of Luke? Jesus and his disciples have already made it to Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-44). They journey to the Temple to pay their respects when Jesus discovers the profiteering taking place at the Temple and in frustration, Jesus drives the religious leaders out of the Temple (Luke 19:45-48). Believe it or not, the chief priests, scribes, and religious leaders did not take too kindly to Jesus driving them away and begin challenging

Jesus' authority (Luke 20:1-8 & 20-40). Jesus pushes back and challenges their authority by pointing out their corruption and haughty behavior (Luke 20:41-47). This is where we get to our lesson for today as Jesus continues to teach at the Temple.

As Jesus is teaching, he looks up and sees the poor widow giving her two copper coins. Jesus acknowledges her sacrifice and her commitment to her faith. The poor widow gives out of a place of generosity, but the rich folks give out of a place of abundance because they have the capacity to give more. It is important to note they were donating to the treasury. The treasury was a place where people freely gave their gifts to the Temple (New Bible Commentary Revised p. 919). Jesus calls out the rich folks not because of their willingness to give or the amount given, but he criticizes them because of the way they give by flashing their wealth and making a spectacle of their giving. Jesus also commends the poor widow because of the faith she places in God to take care of her needs as she donates a significant amount given her lack of steady income (Matthew Henry's Commentary p. 1490). Let me be clear that our generosity should never exceed what we can give, nor should it hinder us from being able to secure our basic needs. I would like to think the poor widow also gave because she believed in the mission of the Temple and the services they provided her spiritually.

From the book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Bishop Robert Schnase (Shhnasee) shares a couple vital quotes to this idea of Extravagant Generosity of our faith. He says, "People who give generously to the church do so because they genuinely desire to make a positive difference for the purposes of Christ and because they want to align their lives with higher purposes. They give in response to the Spirit's urging and feel a soul-sustaining satisfaction in the sense of meaning and connection that comes with generosity" (Schnase p. 107). He continues, "As people grow in relationship to Christ, they grow also in the practice of Extravagant Generosity, offering more of themselves for the purposes of Christ and providing the resources that strengthen ministry and that help the church touch the lives of more and more people in the same way their own lives have been transformed by God" (Schnase p. 108). This last quote is particularly relevant to an experience I had growing up in the church.

We need to look no further than our own tradition of Methodism to develop an understanding of what Extravagant Generosity is. To early Methodists and John Wesley, generosity was an intentional aspect of their discipleship and necessary to their work in the church (Schnase p.111) Wesley once said, "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can" ("The Use of Money" 1744). Extravagant Generosity is an expression of grace and responsibility to our Beloved Community (Schnase p.112). According to Wesley, this practice of generosity was a way the giver could open oneself to the grace of God and was an illumination of the love of Jesus Christ (Schnase p.112). There are several examples in scripture of Extravagant Generosity throughout the gospel and throughout the Old Testament.

Giving by what you are able is never more relevant than today. In the election cycle of 2020, we have heard multiple campaigns from many different political perspectives ask for small dollar donations to contribute to their campaigns. Folks give because they believe in the vision and the mission of the candidate they are supporting. In the day and age of Covid-19, the practice of giving generously has never been more important. Unemployment numbers are soaring as

financial security for many falls out from beneath their feet. More people need each other more than ever now. Our sense and identity as a collective body must be fostered, and we can do this by practicing Extravagant Generosity. Your small dollar donations may lead you to question, “Is my small contribution even worth it?” If we look at today’s scripture, then, according to Jesus, yes, your contribution, whatever it may be, matters.

Your contributions of Extravagant Generosity keep this building open and the monthly expenses paid. Your contributions reimburse the church when we give gas cards and grocery cards to individuals and families in need who seek financial help in our community. Your contributions fund community events like our Roast Beef dinner, Rally Day, and Fall Auction. They help those during the holidays through our special contributions to Angel Tree and other Special Sundays throughout the calendar year. Just as Jesus acknowledged the poor widow’s contribution of two copper coins, barely worth a penny, Jesus acknowledges your generosity when you give whatever you can give. This isn’t about giving to the institution for the sake of staying open or staying relevant, but it is about giving to serve the needs of our community for both our church and our extended community. It is about building the Kingdom of God not only through our “Risk-taking Mission and Service” but through our Extravagant Generosity.

\*\*\*\*\*

My challenge for you today is this. When you go home this afternoon, pray and ask for guidance from God to see how you are practicing Extravagant Generosity. If the answer is yes, then make a list of the contributions you have made to see how you have practiced discipleship and place that list somewhere visible in your home as a reminder of why you practice your faith through Extravagant Generosity. If the answer is no, then consider the reasons you may not have given. Don’t simply commit to giving but go to prayer and discern with God how you can begin practicing Extravagant Generosity. Regardless of your answer to this question, please remember this, always give what you are financially able. Even if it is just a couple of dollars, the Gospel of Luke reminds us that your generosity is enough.