

Kate Cudlipp: Generosity

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

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Generosity

The Gospel Lesson: Luke 12: 13-21

In the gospel lesson, someone asks Jesus to be the arbiter of an inheritance dispute. The passage of two thousand years does not change some things. I am sure that many of us have heard of families bitterly divided over how to distribute the estate of a deceased relative. To deal with these disputes, then as now, there were elaborate rules for passing property from one generation to another.

The petitioner in the Luke passage saw Jesus as a religious teacher, one of whose jobs it was to interpret the complicated inheritance laws. Jesus surprised the asker by refusing to take on the role of judge. Instead, Jesus warned the person to be on guard against all forms of greed, saying, "...one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Jesus' response ran counter to the prevailing views of the culture. Laws governing the rights to property had been developed over hundreds of years and were regarded as God-given. It was doubtless the case, then as now, that people believed that society could not function in the absence of those detailed rules. In a real sense that belief is justified: we do need detailed rules and laws to govern us because the reign of God is not yet accomplished, the law of God is not yet written in our hearts.

Rather than simply accept the status quo, however, Jesus used the occasion to turn the listeners' attention to the greater

values at stake in the request. To bring his point home, he told the story of the rich fool. The abundant harvest, the new food bins, Jesus pointed out, will mean nothing to the landowner who is to die the very night he or she thought life was set on a secure and easy path.

Note in the parable that Jesus was not speaking against abundant harvests or larger barns. Rather, the story makes clear that the landowner's plans involved only the landowner's own interests. The landowner consulted no one, celebrated with no one and made no plans to share the bounty with others. Jesus was saying that in choosing this self-centered response to abundance, in choosing greed rather than generosity, the landowner chose death, not life.

What is Generosity?

So just what is generosity? The word has been a key part of my prayer life for a while now. I find myself praying for a more generous spirit after confessing how closed I am to the needs of others. I feel rather like the landowner: I make plans primarily with myself and perhaps a few close others in mind and then realize my life is pinched and small.

Generosity is about material possessions – and so much more. It is about being free with time, with praise and encouragement, and with emotional and physical energy. It is about being generous in accepting generosity from others – not always having to do it ourselves. It is about seeing a need or longing in others and moving to meet them in that place of need or longing. At its best, Generosity is to know that what goes out from me is not lost to me but enriches the entire web of life, of which I am a part.

What Obstructs Generosity?

Most of the time, I do not live with that knowledge. What gets in my way? What gets in our way, for I suspect that I am not

alone in struggling with my ungenerous nature?

A major element in the struggle is a sense of scarcity – there is not enough time or money, recognition or energy for everyone to have what they need. "The money I give to Seekers may mean I won't have enough for my retirement or my children's education. The time I spend on Seekers' projects or gatherings is time lost for other things about which I care. There's just not enough..."

Another enemy of generosity is a worldly sense of "fairness." In the parable in Matthew of the laborers in the vineyard, we see this "fairness" enemy clearly. Some workers toiled all day; others worked only one hour, but they all received the same wage. When the laborers who had worked the longest complained, the employer asked, "Are you envious and resentful because I am generous?"

My father used to shake his head when that lesson came up in the Episcopal lectionary. "I'll never agree with that one," he would say. His need for fairness outweighed any consideration of the generosity of the employer.

This question of fairness comes up in Seekers, too. A lot of our willingness to give of our wealth and ourselves to this community comes from our knowledge that the rest are also making a serious commitment. If we once start to believe that our contributions are greater than those of other members, we start to wonder if we should pull back – or insist that the rest match our commitment.

I do not pretend to have answers to the scarcity and fairness questions I have just raised. I hold them up because I think they are ongoing obstacles to the generosity Jesus – and God – call us to share. I think they are worth our ongoing engagement—in community and in our lives – if we wish to help open the way for God's reign.

Ways to Engage the Barriers

One way to engage the questions is to acknowledge that while we cannot will ourselves to be generous; we can try to be open to receive the gift of generosity. We work toward this openness through prayer and practice.

In prayer we seek to understand what our truest longings are, what it is that makes our hearts sing and our souls rejoice – what it is that truly sustains us. In prayer, we reflect on our lives, looking at our actions and reactions to see whether they resonate with our souls' delight – or are at war with it. Prayer and practice work together. They are interwoven, and as we live our lives more and more truly, the dividing line between prayer and practice dims until "our lives become prayer."

Until then, we can do much, and practice much, to open ourselves to receiving the gift of a generous spirit:

One of the most important things we can do is to look for people who are living and acting as our hearts tell us we long to. We can look for people, as Margreta suggested in her [July sermon](#), to trust and listen to – models to follow.

In community, there are many models. First, in a Christian community there is the person of Jesus. In Jesus we see ultimate generosity, which is so much more than the indiscriminate giving away of one's goods. There is so much to it that we need to engage again and again with the scriptural stories in order, as Pat put it in the [sermon last week](#), "to be willing to see where Jesus points, to see Jesus in all the people who incarnate wonderful and dangerous truth."

In community, we find people who incarnate wonderful – and sometimes dangerous – truth about generosity. Each of us may model some aspect of generosity for others, though if you are like me, you may find that hard to believe about yourself.

Here is one example:

At one of the sessions of the four-week Shadow class that just ended, I was struck by what a member said about her open-handed attitude toward spending money. She acknowledged that her attitude is causing her to examine the difference between her "needs" and her "wants," but then she added, "I like the freedom with which I view money because I think it makes me able to be generous. I do not begrudge having to spend it, and this rolls over into buying things for others, making occasions special. I don't count the pennies, don't do a lot of evaluating about whether this is worth it monetarily because I know what another person's response will be – *that* makes it worth it!"

Hearing that attitude expressed touched something in me. I wanted to be freer in my giving to others. I wanted to be more attuned to others so that I could give gifts that surprise and uplift. The other person's story helped me realize, again, that I long to be more generous-spirited.

Of course, models of generosity abound outside Seeker, too. The AIDS Ride was a good place to experience that, once we got beyond the hype of the promoters and encountered real people. Many of you have heard Deborah tell of coming to a long, difficult hill and wondering if she was going to be able to ride to the top. A strong rider came up, saw her struggling and rode with her to the top, encouraging her the entire way. He wished her well and rode away. That was generosity – of time and spirit.

Members of the crew on the AIDS Ride were also, to a person, as far as I could tell, models of generosity. Our own Sherri and Glen were exemplars of crew people who devoted four days to taking care of the riders in a variety of ways. They were there because they wanted to give.

One last example will show that even those of us who long for

a more generous spirit can at times offer what we seek. In an e-mail to a friend in Alaska, I mentioned that I was preparing a sermon on "Generosity." I did not expect a response; we just generally keep in touch about what is going on in our lives. Nevertheless, I got a response. She wrote, "Your recent comment to me [in another e-mail] about loving the idea of me working with veterinarians was a generous act – because it was an 'out loud' (via computer!), supportive gesture to a thought of mine. Most people do not go to the trouble of doing that due to ... what? ... self-absorption, stress, not wanting to get involved ... whatever."

Whatever. There are lots of "whatever's" that keep us hoarding what we have rather than doling it out like there is no tomorrow. Moreover, one day, as the parable says, there will be no tomorrow. Jesus asked, "To whom, then, will all your accumulated wealth go?"

Jesus' deeper challenge in the gospel story *is* to realize that each day is the last day. Each day we *are* called to choose between life and death, between accumulating and letting go, between generosity and greed. Each day we *will* fail to make all the right choices. Moreover, each day, through grace, we *are* offered the choices again because of God's undying love for us and because of God's hope in us. Amen.