

3 Pentecost 2003
"An Act of Generosity"
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

I'd like to tell you a little about my dad. There's a lot I could say about him...but there's one thing that has always stood out to me. He is a very generous guy. He faces the world with intelligence and shrewdness, but also always with an open hand. **He's always been eager to share his life with me** and to do whatever he can to facilitate my well-being, advancement and vision of life.

He hasn't just done this for my family, but he's also been generous to his friends, and to the Church. In fact, soon after becoming a Christian in his mid-forties, he began tithing his considerable income to his church and offering his time and talent to various projects in the parish and organizations outside the parish.

When I think of generosity, I think of my dad. Who do you think of? I'm sure all of us can recall people who have blessed our lives by their generosity, giving of themselves for our benefit. Perhaps these people serve as models for your own generosity.

Well, our readings this morning invite us to consider some more examples. They offer us some very practical examples and principles of generosity that - if we take them to heart – **will enable us to live more generous lives**, to share ourselves with others in ways that really make a difference to them AND to us.

Turning first to our OT reading, **God commands the people of Israel to be generous.** He tells them to "Open you hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." Isn't that a beautiful image of generosity: opening one's hand. Offering what God has given you to others, sharing the gift, not grasping, not clutching or hoarding, but reaching out to others. As Deuteronomy says, "not hard-hearted or tight fisted."

This law and the profound teaching contained in it is the centerpiece of biblical welfare. It is the foundation of the humanitarian tradition that in history is unique to the people of Israel, and through them to Christians and Muslims. It's a vision that leads God's people to "give liberally" – to BE liberal – **"to meet the need whatever it may be."** The image here is the open hand rather than the tight fist toward the people around you.

In our Gospel reading we see Jesus living this law. When a prominent man in the community comes begging Jesus to heal his terribly ill and soon to be dead daughter, Jesus comes. He shares his power to heal and restore life, a small act of generosity he's uniquely suited to give.

He opens his hands and takes that little girl's hand in his and raises her from that bed of sickness and death. This is what Deuteronomy described, "open your

hand, **willingly giving enough to meet the need** whatever it may be.” That’s exactly what Jesus did in that room with the girl and her family.

Then there’s our Epistle reading in which we find Paul urging the parishioners of the church in Corinth to join him in an act of generosity. He’s raising money from Gentile churches around the world to relieve the church in Palestine, which was suffering from a great famine.

He’s writing your basic fundraising letter, seeking to inspire the Corinthians to get on board and kick in some cash to help their brothers and sisters in Palestine. In other words, he wants them to practice generosity, to fulfill the command in Deuteronomy, “giving enough to meet the need.” To inspire them **he points to two examples of generosity in action.**

First, there are the churches in Macedonia. Paul reports that they have enthusiastically embraced the idea and though they are quite poor and under difficult circumstances themselves, they have been more than generous. They have “overflowed in a wealth of generosity...begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” They’re INTO IT!

And they put their money where their mouth is. Paul tells how they gave “according to their means and even BEYOND their means.” Let’s take a look at that for a minute. **What does it mean to give according to your means?** When they made their pledges, people in Macedonia gave *a proportion* of their wealth and income. If I had to guess, when Paul says, “They gave according to their means,” he’s talking about the tithe.

The tithe is the ancient standard of giving for the people of God. The word, “tithe” is a word from Old English that means “a tenth” or 10% - as in **one for God, nine for me**. It’s practiced all through the Bible and, I believe here in Macedonia, too.

These people, as poor as they are, are tithing their wealth and income in order to help others and build up the church. But they didn’t stop there. Paul says they gave according to their means, and even BEYOND their means.” They exceeded the tithe to cover the special needs of the situation. And it’s not like Paul had to drag it out of them. They were “begging for the privilege of sharing.”

I know people like that...and some of them are here at St Peter’s. **You have discovered the joy of generosity** like these folks in Macedonia and want to give as much as you can because of the fun and freedom you experience in it. You’ve experienced the truth of the promise in Deuteronomy. “Give liberally...and God will bless you in all your work.”

My guess is that many of you though aren’t quite there yet. For you, giving money to God, to the Church, to the ministry of St Peter’s isn’t high on your list of

joys in life. You give willingly...and moderately. You give as much as you feel you can afford, without making a dent in your financial situation. So you round it off at a comfortable \$1000 or \$1500 a year and are glad for it at tax time.

That's the way folks in Corinth approached their financial stewardship.

They lived in one of the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan cities in the Empire and yet when it came to using their many gifts to benefit others, **they were underachievers**. So Paul is coaxing them to reach out to others, to discover the joy of generosity, the joy of giving that has caught fire up in Macedonia.

And to do that Paul points to another example of generosity, the SUPREME example, which he calls, "the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus didn't just give 10%. He kicked in the other 90% as well. He gave it all FOR US. Paul defines that generous act: "though he was rich he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." **He's THAT generous.**

Do you see the exchange taking place? Christ gave away everything he had. He became poor that we might become rich. Christ came from heaven to earth so that we might come from earth to heaven. He emptied himself that we might be filled. God became one with us that we might become one with God. He died that we might live. **He "gave enough to meet the need whatever it may be."**

Christ's act of generosity stands at the core of our generosity as Christians.

Because he gave himself to us we are able to give to others. And as we do that, we imitate Christ and allow our character to be formed in his image.

Here at St Peter's we are Building Christians for Service. Our willingness to give, and the joy we discover when we do, is at the core of that service. As we are building Christians our goal is growth. As I pray and work as your priest I want **each one of you to grow and learn to generously give yourself** to God and to each other, just like the Christians in Macedonia did, just like Jesus did, so.

That's a major focus of the work of the Stewardship Committee and our Adult Ed programs. In fact, just about everything here at St Peter's is oriented toward teaching, encouraging and inspiring us to face each other and the world with an open hand rather than a closed fist, to "give liberally...to meet the need, whatever it may be."

And I can't wait to see the result as we more and more "overflow in a wealth of generosity." It's going to be GLORIOUS! AMEN