

Living Generously
2 Corinthians 9
Melissa Earley Northbrook UMC
April 10, 2011

:

When world-famous business tycoon Aristotle Onassis died, *Times* magazine ended his obituary on a harsh note: “He left little legacy—no monuments, no great acts of achievement other than a succession of business deals. All that remains is the memory of a vital, tough, self-made millionaire who clearly believed that living well was the best revenge.” He did leave an estimated fortune of more than half a billion dollars. But he left no legacy. Commenting on this devastating epitaph, columnist James P. Shannon wrote, “To leave no estate is not shameful. To leave no legacy is tragic. Recall the awful words of Christ after the suicide of Judas Iscariot, “It were better for him if he had not been born.”ⁱ

Our scripture passage today emphasizes that what we have been given is for us to share. *And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.* I think we know this, right? We **want** to live generously. We agree with what Winston Churchill said “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.”ⁱⁱ We know this instinctually. We don’t want to be Onassis who at the end of the day did not leave a legacy. So what gets in the way?

In his book, *Enough*, Adam Hamilton says that the voice of fear in our head and heart keeps us from being generous. That voice gives us two messages: The first message is that if you give there may not be enough left over for you. We are afraid that if we are generous, there won’t be enough left for us – to pay the bills, to care for our children, to pay for their college education, to take care of ourselves in our retirement. We somehow believe that if we just had

more money we would feel secure and unafraid. Just a little more money would mean we could stop worrying about money.

We saw the lie of that last week. Remember the man due to inherit a vast sum who said he wouldn't feel secure until he had a billion dollars in the bank?

A man gave millions to establish a university in Texas. Several years later he lost almost everything. Someone asked if he regretted giving all he had to the university. He said, "Regret it? Look, that school is the only lasting thing I've done with my money. Had I not given for the school, I would have lost that money too, and there would be nothing to show for it."ⁱⁱⁱ

The other lie we hear in our heads and in our hearts is that "If you give, you won't have enough to buy the stuff that you need to make you happy." The average person thinks 20% more money than they currently have is the perfect amount. Then they would be happy. Do the math in your head. How much income is 20% less than you currently make? People who make that think that they will be happy with what you make. When we chase money to make us happy we chase a receding goal.

God offers a different way, a new relationship with money that isn't fraught with unhappiness and anxiety, a chasing after the wind. God's way is to live with a sense of enough. It is to no longer worry about money, but to use money wisely for our life purposes. It is being content in all circumstances. The way we do this is to live generously.

Giving some of our money away, challenges our relationship to money. When we give money away we are proclaiming that having more will not make us content. When we give money away we trust God to provide for us and no longer depend only ourselves. When we give money away we decide to love more and worry less.

When we give money away we acknowledge that what we have is not ours alone, but that we are stewards of what has been given to us. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was clear on this point. In one sermon he said of a figure who thought he could do as he wished with his own property, the fruits of his labor: “My fruits! They are as much thine as the clouds that fly over thy head! As much as the winds that blow around thee.”^{iv} In the sermon *The danger of increasing riches*: “Nay, may I not do what I will with my own? Here lies the ground of your mistake. It is not your own. It cannot be, unless you are Lord of heaven and earth.” To a correspondent: “As to yourself, you are not the proprietor of anything; no, not of one shilling in the world. You are only a steward of what another entrusts you with, to be laid out, not according to your will, but his.”

The traditional teaching about giving is the tithe – 10%. In Genesis 28:20-22 it says, “Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 22and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.’ The tradition continued through-out the Old Testament . Though we are no longer bound by the law of Moses, many Christians still find the 10% guide a helpful one.

10% is a lot of money. Peter Marshall, chaplain of the US senate, met with a man who struggled to tithe. He told Marshall he used to tithe but now that he is earning \$500,000 he just can’t afford to give \$50,000 away. So Marshall suggested they pray about it and Marshall prayed: Heavenly Father, I pray that you would reduce this man’s salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe.”^v

You may not be ready to give 10%. But maybe 5% or 3% is possible right now. That's fine. Start where you can start. But by starting you begin to transform your relationship to money and that is amazing.

And that's why I care about our giving. As the pastor of the church and the one responsible for ordering the life of the church, I care about the bottom line of the budget. That matters to me. I want us to be able to pay our bills and our staff and care for the needs of our building. But I believe that the church's ministry will not be stopped by having less money. We might have to make tough choices in lean times just like families and individuals do. But the ministry of Christ will not be stopped.

I care about your giving because it is a spiritual issue that I believe impacts the rest of your life. I believe and have experienced that when you make a commitment to giving a percentage of your income you can be more spiritually healthy than when you don't. When you make (and keep) a commitment to give before you have spent you are giving what we call "first fruits." Not leftovers.

The importance of the tithe is that it is a percentage and that it is first fruits. Thinking about giving as a percentage helps us be as generous in prosperity as we are in lean times and to know we are being generous in lean times even if the amount in the envelope or on the check goes down. And when you give first fruits you adjust the rest of your spending around that new priority.

By setting aside a percentage and giving it first you are making some important decisions upfront about your money. You are setting priorities and making your first priority be someone else. By doing that you are saying you trust God with your future and that you trust God for your happiness. You take yourself off the hamster wheel of work, earn, spend, work, earn,

spend. You find contentment in enough. Tithing is a spiritual discipline that puts God first. It's a practical way of saying, "God really is Lord over our lives, and we not give into society's expectations, our possessions, or our appetites." vi

Here's how the tithe works. Let's say that these 10 apples represent your income. God asks that you set aside 1 for God's work. That gives you 9 more to pay the mortgage and taxes, save for retirement, go out to eat and take vacations. Let's say that it's been a really hard year and you decide to take a vacation. You don't really have enough but you decide to splurge anyway so you take a bit out of the 10th apple set aside for God's work. You can't stay off the Starbucks or decide you have to have all the channels on cable, so you take another bite. Your car breaks down and you don't have any savings – another bite. Instead of buying a used car with saved money you decide to buy a new one and go into debt. The interest payments come out of the apple. Pretty soon all you have left is the core. And that's what you are offering to God.

God gave us the apples in the first place. We have the apples to enjoy and use, but not to waste. And God gave so that we would give.

Here's the other thing -- it's tough to be generous in other ways if you aren't working at being generous with your money. Can you offer hospitality to strangers if you're stingy? That stranger may need something from you. Being generous opens our hearts. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan? That person not only stopped along the road to offer aid. He also provided a room at an inn and then promised to come back and cover the bill for medical care. I think that if that person weren't willing to get involved financially he would never have crossed the street to help. Can you offer forgiveness if you haven't practiced giving in other ways?

Opening our hands can open our hearts. I think it's hard for our hearts to be open if our fists are closed.

Yesterday the children were here for a morning of making Easter eggs and playing games. They also baked cookies. When the parents were picking them up the kids were given their cookies. One little boy asked his dad if he wanted a piece of his cookie. And the dad said maybe later. So the little boy broke off a piece of his cookie and set it aside on his plate so that his dad could have that piece later. That's first fruits and proportional giving. May we be so generous with what we have.

ⁱ Donald Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry*, p. 114, Abingdon Press, Nashville

ⁱⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Enough*

ⁱⁱⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Enough*

^{iv} Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*

All page 100

Abingdon Press, Nashville

^v Adam Hamilton

^{vi} Bishop Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, p. 150: