

Preaching on Generosity

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Spoiler alert: if you're interested in reading this article because it is going to provide for you the outline of your stewardship sermon this year, you may be disappointed. My task in this article is to write about "Preaching on Generosity," and, after twenty-three years of parish ministry and fourteen years of additional service as a seminary president, I am persuaded that, theologically speaking, the topic of generosity covers far more territory than the often-dreaded Annual Stewardship Sermon. Moreover, I believe that preaching on generosity is a practice that should be going on across the year and in every liturgical season. Preaching that Annual Stewardship Sermon, on the other hand, just like planning a stewardship season, more often than not turns around matters of technique, while preaching and cultivating generosity touches something far more purposeful, and utterly central, regarding the practice of faithful discipleship.

Most of us preachers are aware of the technique and spend much time studying up on the latest developments in that technique. The technique has to do with how we can "package" stewardship this year (as opposed to how we did that last year or the year before). I was at a dinner party a few years ago—a party thrown by one of the trustees of the seminary I serve, to introduce me to some of her friends in one of the larger, wealthier churches in our constituency. A guest sitting across the dining table from me asked me a disarming question: "What's your pick-up line?" Immediately, the room fell silent. "What?" I asked, a little incredulously. "Well," he said, "you're a guy who goes around asking people for money for your seminary, and I'm curious as to how you start that conversation. For instance," he went on, "when you're standing in line at a bakery ordering a bagel or a croissant or a loaf of bread, one pick-up line you might use would be to say to the guy behind the counter, 'I serve a man who once provided enough bread to feed five thousand people, and I'd like to introduce you to him.' That's what I'm talking about, so what's *your* pick-up line?"

I honestly don't remember how I answered that question. I do remember being offended by it. He was reducing the sacred element of relationship regarding what I do—and what perhaps you do, too, in your own settings—to a rather cheesy technique, as if a conversation about generosity starts with a "pick-up line."

The need for such technique is rooted, I believe, in anxiety at the root of how we often compartmentalize our lives—much the way the ancient Greeks did. For the Greeks, all of the important dimensions of life were divided up into neat dualisms by which they distinguished the world of the sacred from the world of the profane. They developed many such dualisms, these Greeks: heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, soul and body, eternity and mortality, and so on. The Greeks have had a greater impact upon our own thinking and practice than we can imagine. And we, too, have added to their list church and society, faith and politics, spirituality and activism. Something about such dualistic thinking has led many church people to conclude that money is one of those slimy, earthly things that doesn't really have an appropriate place in the higher affairs of faith but is seen more as a necessary evil.

But I don't buy those assumptions about money—that it's grimy and sleazy and necessarily evil. In a culture such as ours, after all, money is the primary way we assign value. It is important, therefore, for preachers to build a rhetorical universe—not just on Stewardship Sunday but across the years—large enough for disciples to inhabit regularly. Such a universe—day by day and year by year—enables us to consider, in the management of our money and our time, the value which we are assigning to the Church of Jesus Christ. After all, far from some awkward Greek dualism, it is impossible for biblical faith not to inform our politics, for our spirituality not to inform our activism, for our piety not to inform our ethics, and for our convictions about the importance of the Church and its ministry not to inform the way we spend our money.

Where do we start, though, when it comes to building this large rhetorical universe? We start, not just with the handful-or-two of proof-texts which we most often gravitate toward on Stewardship Sunday. Rather we start with what the whole of scripture has to teach us about generosity.

I think, for example, of what Mark the gospel-writer was working on in his image of the growing seed. In chapter 4 of Mark's gospel, "[Jesus]...said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'¹ The "seed parables" in this section of Mark 4 are parables of encouragement for Mark's readers. When Mark wrote his gospel, he had in mind a church that needed an encouraging word. Maybe they suffered from a lack of numerical strength; maybe they needed leaders; maybe they felt ignored or persecuted by their context (does any of that sound familiar, by the way?). Maybe they were about ready to pack it all in, because by themselves they just couldn't summon the imagination or energy required to get them beyond their despair.

So Mark made sure that they had the chance to read these words of Jesus about seeds growing mysteriously; about hopeless beginnings that yield miraculous results; about a tiny mustard seed which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it "grows up" as Mark says, "and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."²

In the rhetorical universe which Mark was creating, it was important for Mark's church (and now ours) to understand that, whatever it takes to convey generosity, it's not all up to us. Sometimes people come to church seeking a blessing from us pastors, only to discover that the blessing which we might speak is the same blessing that surges up, by the power of God, within them too, to fill their hearts and mouths and to bless someone else. And through such generosity—generosity that comes from a source bigger than ourselves—something not much larger than a mustard seed grows and grows and puts forth branches until a whole community of disciples become a generous tree, and birds of the air make nests in its shade. This is how God fleshes out God's generosity for us, and it happens over and over again.

I'm told that Martin Luther King, Jr. — the man most of us would say is the undisputed father of the Civil Rights movement — never claimed that for himself. I'm told that he bestowed that honor upon his father, Martin Luther King, Sr. And that sometime

before his own death, Daddy King said that the real father of the Civil Rights movement was the African-American preacher who baptized him—a man named Paschal. But the Reverend Mr. Paschal said, before *he* died, that the real father of the Civil Rights movement was a white Georgia legislator named Robert Alston—a man who, long before Civil Rights became a public issue proposed legislation calling for fair and humane treatment of African-American convicts, and was shot and killed for it. But it was Alston who paid for Paschal to go to seminary, and Paschal baptized Daddy King, and Daddy King was the father of Martin Luther King, Jr., and through such a ministry of generosity—the conveying of blessing from one person to another—a mustard seed grew into a tree, and birds of the air made nests in its shade.³

This image of birds making their nests in the shade is an image of Eden restored. This is like unto the kind of rhetorical universe we can create in a community of disciples when we talk—month by month and year by year—about generosity. When people bless each other through the ministry of generosity, it is as if the gates of Eden are opened, and we are allowed back in to live together in oneness. It is as if we remember that we were born to be a blessing and to bless. It is as if there is no moment and no occasion when living in such a way is not appropriate.

I know a man here in this Southwestern part of the United States who has made an astonishing amount of money. He is of an age now when he could easily retire, but he chooses not to. He has been a blessing to many causes, many churches, and many academic institutions, including the one I serve. “I want to keep making money,” he has said, “so that I can give it away.” He is blessed—not just to enrich himself, but more profoundly, to be a blessing.

Could it be that some pastor somewhere had something to do with creating a rhetorical universe of generosity? Could it be that, in his congregation, many people were also so encouraged to be blessings? Such a universe is created week by week, if it is created at all, when people are saturated—through purposeful preaching and liturgy—in the ways of our generous God. In the last congregation I served before coming to Austin, we regularly received new members once a month, and we welcomed them in worship. They would come to the front of the church and be introduced, and then I would issue a charge to them. I would invite them to accept four disciplines—that of regular worship (and if they were away from town over a weekend, I would encourage them to find a church wherever they were in which to worship); of Christian formation (I would tell them that “next to the life of love, the most beautiful thing was a human mind dedicated to the glory of God); of finding two program and/or mission activities in the church in which to participate (one of inhaling the love of God and the other of exhaling the love of God); and of adopting a pattern of regular giving. On that last point, I would stress that it’s not a matter of *having* to give, but rather one of *getting* to give—for them and for all of us who have been given so much. The regular opportunity for me to rehearse this fourfold charge and for the newest congregants to hear it and for the rest of the church to overhear it, became a ritualized act of identity that over time helped shape the congregation’s memory and self-perception.

It is not a matter, after all, of just preaching generosity, but also one of embedding this value within the church’s liturgy. I once preached on “The Benediction” in a church I served on Long Island. It was the last in a long series on various essential parts of the shape of our worship—praise, confession, pardon, scripture, sermon,

song, affirmation, intercession, etc. In this particular sermon, I addressed first the assumption that a lot of Presbyterians (wrongly) have about the benediction—that it is something that only an ordained minister can pronounce. And then I explored what some saw as an outrageous idea—that anyone can bless someone else. What's more, many of my parishioners had formerly been Catholics, and they had deeply-held convictions about the act of blessing being rooted in priestly privilege.

I did not realize it at the time, but I was shaking some old foundations when I said to my congregation, “Now, just for fun here at the end of this sermon, why don't we rehearse some of the grammar of generosity. I'd like to ask you to repeat after me: ‘The Lord bless you.’” “The Lord bless you,” they said in unison. I said, “Now, say these words after me: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you.’” “The Lord bless you and keep you,” they said, a bit like children getting caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

Then I said, “That was good, that little dialogue of benediction! We were each of us born to a ministry of generosity—born to be a blessing and to bless and to receive the blessings of others. It takes a little practice, but soon we learn that there is no moment when benediction is not appropriate, and there is no person, really, unqualified to give a benediction. When you are happy, celebrating with friends, and the air is charged with the generosity of God, don't be afraid to say ‘God bless you.’ And on the darkest day of your life, when the generosity of God is harder to notice, don't be afraid, even then, to say ‘The Lord bless you and keep you;’ for those may just be the words that succeed in lighting a candle just bright enough to see by. When you visit in someone's house, say ‘May God bless you and your family.’ And when you come to church, for God's sake find a way to say to one another some generous word of blessing. There is nothing any of us needs more.”⁴

It is the hope of being blessed, in some way expected or unexpected, that compels people to church. They come, just like birds who make their nests in the shade of a flourishing tree. They come because, somewhere in that marvelous nest that is the Church, they hope to see it feathered with layer upon layer of generosity.

They also come, at least some of them, because they are searching for purposes larger and more compelling than their own. They often remind me of the rich man, in Luke's parable, whose biggest problem (or so he thought) was that he didn't have enough barns in which to store his crops. He addressed his own soul: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But the parable ends with God's judgment: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Then comes the moral: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”⁵ Here is a man whose self-absorption had not yet fully anesthetized himself against some dialogue—feeble though it might have been—with his own soul. Do we not recognize him sitting in our pews?

His fundamental problem is not his wealth or achievement per se. Rather, it is the presumption of ownership with which he approaches everything he has. Concentrating on what he thinks is his bought and paid for; he discovers too late that everything he has—even his own being, even his own soul—is a short-term loan from God. To put it another way, he doesn't know how to tell time. I don't mean how to look at his watch and discern the hour of the day, but how to look at life and distinguish the temporary from the permanent, the transitory from the eternal. Since he doesn't

know how to tell time, he looks at all that he has—all of those things, by the way, that separate him from any sense of living in community with others—and decides that these things are what have ultimate value for him. He doesn't know the time. He doesn't know how late it is.

It is no easy thing, this business of measuring the impact of what we value, of telling time. None of us, by the way, are experts at it. In my years of ministry, I have encountered and been employed by some of our own churchly, tall steeple versions of barns and bigger barns. But for the fact that our churchly barns have steeples on top, it is otherwise the same insidious game. So we preachers also need to be reminded of that truth of the Gospel—that life is measured not in terms of what we own, but in terms of Who owns us.

A while back, I had lunch with a friend who lives in the Northeast. He was a former parishioner and was in Austin on business. He is bright, nationally recognized in his work, a gifted and effective leader, and at the top of his game. Over lunch, I told him that he looked great. He said, "Yeah, I feel great...now." And then he told me about being poised a few years ago to take a six-month sabbatical in order to write a book. And just before that sabbatical was to begin, he went to his physician for a routine check-up. The doctor looked him over, ordered some tests, and finally a few weeks later said, "Cancer." More tests, an operation, recuperation, chemotherapy, so much for the six-month sabbatical. "I'm doing fine now," he told me, "but something like this changes everything." I said, "What's different?" He said, "I had a chance to look at all that I had done and to ask myself the question 'Does any of this make the world a better place?'" He said, "Now I'm trying to live as if time is my ally as I try to do something useful in my life." He said, "The main thing that's different is that I used to think I *owned* my time, and now I know I don't."

I am recalling this conversation because he asked me to share with others that lesson he has learned. So this story is yours, too, to share. Consider it a message from—who knows?—the man in Luke's text with all the barns. Consider it as maybe the chastened awareness of one who had forgotten for a while that the essential question of life is not "Where can I put all my stuff?" but is instead "Who, to begin with, has placed me here in the world on loan?" It's not what we own that matters, but Who owns us—One Who once said that the more you give away in love, the more you are. And not just for the sake of other people, but for your own sake, too—for the sake, finally, of your own soul.

In the narratives of countless disciples such as my lunch companion, we are reminded that the world is filled with living embodiments of generosity. They weren't necessarily like that to begin with, but, after encounters with the One Who owns us, they discovered their faithful destinies.

One of my favorite columnists for the longest time was Roger Rosenblatt. Years ago he collected some of his most cherished essays into a book which he named *The Man in the Water*. That title, in turn, was originally the title of a particularly moving piece he wrote after a commercial jet attempting takeoff from Reagan National Airport in Washington was unable to get airborne because of ice on its wings and plunged instead into the frozen waters of the Potomac River. Rescuers came from everywhere, and television cameras captured dramatic footage of a man clinging with five others to the tail section of the airplane bobbing up and down there in the Potomac. Every time a helicopter lowered a life-line and a flotation ring to him, the man waved it

away and passed it instead to another of the passengers. It happened time after time, until that man—overcome by the cold—finally went under himself.

And then that man captured our imaginations, both because of his selflessness and because of his anonymity. Rosenblatt put into words what a lot of us surely thought about. “At some moment in the water,” he wrote, “he must have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand over the rope and ring to others. He *had* to know it, no matter how gradual the effect of the cold. In his judgment he had no choice. When the helicopter took off with what was to be the last survivor, he watched everything in the world move away from him, and he deliberately let it happen.... Since it was he who lost the fight, we ought to come again to the conclusion that people are powerless in the world. In reality, we believe the reverse, and it takes the act of the man in the water to remind us of our true feelings in this matter.... The odd thing,” Rosenblatt concludes, “is that we do not even believe that the man in the water lost his fight.... He could not make ice storms, or freeze the water until it froze the blood. But he could hand life over to a stranger.... The man in the water pitted himself against an implacable, impersonal enemy; he fought it with charity; and he held it to a standoff. He was the best we can do.”⁶

“He was the best we can do.” This is how we describe Jesus Christ. “The man in the water”—the water of baptism, the water of life, the water that courses through the eons of history and through the lives of all of us; and through the life, certainly, of the Church. “He was the best we can do.” Look for signs of *his* body, present in the midst of *this* body. See him here, in the middle of it all, passing on to us the means of generosity, charging us, in turn, to do the same. For we are not our own; no, we belong instead, always, to the One Who owns us.

Notes

1 Mark 4:26-29

2 Mark 4: 30-32

3 From a conversation with the late Fred Craddock, at a meeting of the Moveable Feast seminar in Atlanta in 1991.

4 Wardlaw, “Encouraging Words,” preached at Setauket Presbyterian Church, Setauket, Long Island, NY; March 10, 1991.

5 Luke 12: 13-21

6 Roger Rosenblatt, *The Man in the Water* (New York: Random House, 1994), 169-170.