

## **GENEROSITY IS GOOD FOR YOU**

**Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.**  
**Grace and Holy Trinity Church**  
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**Pentecost XVII**

We are in the midst of wrapping up a construction project around here...it is taking a bit longer than we wanted. This week, Century Construction, our general contractor, said they were not going to get out of here by the end of October as they had hoped. They will finish as soon as possible, though we don't know exactly when that will be yet.

But life goes on. Day by day, folks come here for counseling, the administrative work of the church continues, the hungry are fed on Fridays at our awesome "Sandwich Kitchen", the sick get prescriptions, plans are made and implemented for youth programs, music programs... groups meet for a variety of purposes. So things are happening, right now, in the midst of construction.

And, we are also thinking about the future and making plans. We are not simply focused on the present situation and getting through. One of the groups that met at the church this past week was the Generosity Committee. They used to call themselves the Stewardship Committee, but they have changed their name. Regardless of the name, this group is always thinking about the future.

It seems there is a fair amount of confusion around the word, "Stewardship." We have certainly used it for more years than I can count, so change is good to help keep things fresh. For me, stewardship means using my time, talent and treasure to further God's work of renewal in the world.

That is still meaningful to me, but at the same time I really like this change to talking about generosity. That one word sums up the kind of people we want to be and the kind of church we want to be.

What is generosity exactly? Well, I learned that the word has a long history. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century it signified a variety of character traits including "gallantry, courage, strength, richness, gentleness, and fairness. In addition to describing these diverse human qualities, "generous" became a word during this period used to describe fertile land, the strength of animal breeds, abundant provisions of food, vibrancy of colors, the strength of liquor, the potency of medicine."<sup>1</sup>

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, generosity is perhaps best defined as the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.<sup>2</sup> Generosity has also been defined as the habit of giving without expecting anything in return.<sup>3</sup>

But you know what, though a generous giver gives freely, abundantly and without expectation of return, there is in fact a benefit. I was reading an online article recently, entitled: "Want to be Happy? Stop Being so Cheap". This was actually not blather, a baseless opinion like so much cable news and internet content... but a report on the scientific research that is being done at Notre Dame University. The findings are the result of a comprehensive five year study of 2000 people from different classes, races and states...a significant sample.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generosity>

<sup>2</sup> <http://generosityresearch.nd.edu>

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generosity>

Here is what the report revealed:

“Start giving your money and time away: New research shows you’ll be happier for it.

- Americans who describe themselves as “very happy” volunteer an average of 5.8 hours per month. Those who are “unhappy”? Just 0.6 hours.
- Other findings include lower depression rates among Americans who donate more than 10 percent of their incomes (41 percent [of tithers] say they rarely or never experience depression versus 32 percent for everyone else.)
- And giving away money isn’t the only way to reap the psychological rewards of generosity: Americans who are very giving in relationships—being emotionally available and hospitable—are much more likely to be in excellent health (48 percent) than those who are not (31 percent).”<sup>4</sup>

I have been the recipient of so much generosity in my lifetime. From my parents, from my wife and family, on the job with the churches I have served. I have experienced generosity in so many other ways starting with God Almighty, who gave and gives me life. My cup runneth over.

I remember a time, when I was about 16, when I tried to be generous myself. I earned money by mowing lawns and doing yard work. And I took \$40 of my earnings, which was a lot of money to me in 1970, put it in an unmarked envelope, and put it in the alms basin one Sunday. I put a note in it, not with my name on it because I wanted it to be anonymous, but the note said, “For the ministers’ discretionary fund” …we had two clergy at the time, so I made sure that I spelled it, “M-I-N-I-S-T-E-R-S…apostrophe” so that they’d know this gift was for both of them. It felt great! I loved it! My experience then and since has certainly borne out the research that is now currently being done at Notre Dame about the positive effects of being generous.

The Generosity Committee was meeting at GHTC this week because it is time for them to ask us all to make a pledge to this church for 2015. Now, you may be thinking, “Here it comes again. I hate being asked for money. I hate talking about it.” That attitude is generated by our anxiety and fear… by our defensiveness and lack of trust and sometimes, by our greed. So let me turn it around for you.

What the Generosity Committee is doing when it asks us for a pledge, is giving us the opportunity to give to others freely and abundantly …to be generous. And scientific research has shown that being generous generates personal happiness. So we are not being asked for money as much as we are being given an opportunity to orient our lives in a very positive way. Surely that is something we should love to do…at least once a year.

Let me be clear: We are generous in response to a generous God, who has created us, who sustains us, who promises to always be with us and we have no right to expect that there will be any return on that investment, on our generosity. God does not owe us a thing. But as the research has shown, God has made us in such a way that when we are generous…we are happy! Our happiness is nothing other than God’s generosity all over again…grace upon grace upon grace. We should be thanking the Generosity Committee for giving us this opportunity!

Now you may say, “Okay. I will be generous, but what has that got to do with pledging?” Certainly you can be generous without pledging. And you can pledge without being generous.

You remember we heard the Ten Commandments this morning as our first reading. People read these erroneously sometimes, and think the point is, “Keep these” says God “And I will bless you.” But in reality, it is exactly the other way around. It begins, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage.” It

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<sup>4</sup> <http://generosityresearch.nd.edu/news/50598-want-to-be-happy-stop-being-so-cheap/>

begins with God's actions, unwarranted and undeserved. It then goes on to say - to respond to what God has done...you should love God...by keeping Sabbath, by not profaning God's name and so on.

You can respond to what God has done by loving your fellow human beings... don't steal, don't murder, don't cheat on your spouse and so on. These commandments give us form and structure, show the way to develop good habits, and help make possible a life of gratitude.

This is what pledging can do as well. Pledging is a way to make generosity a habit, an ingrained part of our character. It gives us the form and structure we need.

We can pledge an amount that is truly generous, that reflects a significant percentage of our anticipated income...if you can't know what your income will be...then pledge simply a percentage, a generous percentage...and let the dollars fall out where they may. Pledging, used in this way, helps build the habit of generosity....empowers us to live, moment by moment, in thanksgiving and joy. Thanks be to God.

So...embrace the opportunity. Generosity is good for you. And I'll leave you with that good news this morning. Next time...I'll talk about what your generosity makes possible through this church.