

20th Sunday after Pentecost (October 30, 2011)

engage!

“Engage In Giving”

Text: [I John 3:14-22](#), [John 6:1-14](#)

By the [Rev. Dr. James A. Harnish](#)

If you remember the Broadway musical “My Fair Lady” you may remember when Eliza Doolittle has had all she can take of words and correct pronunciation. Out of sheer frustration she sings:

Don't talk of stars burning above;
If you're in love, show me!
Show me now!

That’s the word we hear in the scripture lesson this morning, though the writer says it more kindly than Eliza did. **“Little children, let us love, not in word or in speech, but in truth and action.”** And that’s what the world says to everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ. Don’t just talk about God’s love; show me! And show me now!

That’s why the mission of this church is “Making God’s Love Real.” We’re about the business of making the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ a tangible reality in this world. There are, of course, many ways we do that, but the preceding verse makes it clear that the writer was talking about our money and possessions. So, we turn our attention today to the way we make God’s love real as we engage in the spiritual discipline of generosity.

You don’t need to be told that this is the time of year when everyone who benefits from the ministry of this church is challenged to make their commitment of prayers, presence, gifts and service for the year ahead. In fact, I received an email from a person who said they wouldn’t be here this morning because they knew what we would be preaching about. I was tempted to reply, “Take it up with Jesus!”

The fact is that everything we do around here – from paying the electric bills to providing child care in the nurseries -- depends on the commitments we make right now. The ministry staff and most of our lay leadership have already made their commitments. I hope you will join them by picking up your packet in the courtyard or making your commitment on our web site.

But biblically speaking, there’s more going on here than just underwriting the church budget. Jesus stands in the line of the Old Testament prophets in saying that what we do with our money is a

primary expression of our love for God and becomes the means by which God's love is made real in this world.

To frame our thinking, let me remind you of a story in the 6th chapter of John's gospel.

One day a large crowd gathered around Jesus. When he saw the crowd, Jesus asked Philip, **"Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"** Philip did a quick calculation and said it would take six months wages to feed them. That's when Andrew came up with a nameless boy who had a lunch in his backpack. Just five barley loaves and two fish. Andrew admitted that it wasn't much to work with, but Jesus took what the boy had to give, gave thanks for it, and started breaking the bread. They kept on breaking it until everyone in the crowd had their fill. When cleaned up, they had twelve baskets of left-overs.

With that boy in mind, here are some biblical principles about generosity.

Generosity begins with whatever we have to give.

The boy didn't have much, but he gave out of what he had and everyone was amazed at what Jesus did with it.

Sometimes I hear people talk as if they would be more generous if they had more money; as if generosity is something that only applies to folks who have a lot to give. But that's not what the bible teaches. Just look at some of the generous people in the gospel:

- a Bethlehem innkeeper who told Mary and Joseph that the only thing he could offer was a stable as a delivery room;
- a nameless boy with nothing but a few loaves of bread and a couple fish;
- a poor widow who dropped two small coins in the offering.

None of them were rich by the world's standards, but they gave out what they had and God used it in ways that went beyond their wildest imagination. There are rich people in the gospel, too.

- Mysterious magi who brought priceless gifts to the Christ child.
- A corrupt tax collector named Zacchaeus who gave away half of his ill-gotten wealth when he met Jesus.
- Joseph of Arimathaea, who gave his own tomb as a resting place for the crucified Jesus.

- A businesswoman named Lydia who used her wealth to fund Paul's missionary journeys.
- A rich young ruler who came in search of eternal life, but walked away empty-handed because, the gospel says, "he had great riches." Or perhaps his great riches had him.

Rich or poor, the biblical standard of generosity is not the amount we give, but the amount we have left over for ourselves after we give it. Generosity is not measured by the difference the gift makes to the recipient, but the difference it makes in the life of the giver. Paul could not have made it clearer than he did in his fund-raising letter to the folks in Corinth.

"If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need...As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'" (II Corinthians 8:12-15)

Rich or poor, the spiritual discipline of generosity begins with whatever we have to give.

Generosity grows with practice.

The truth is that generosity rarely comes naturally. One of the reasons I believe in original sin is that no one had to teach my grandchildren to be selfish but we have to teach them how to share. Most of the time our natural tendency is to be selfish or greedy, to hold and hoard, to look out for ourselves above everyone else. Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ involves learning the spiritual discipline of generosity.

The biblical pattern is what the Old Testament calls the tithe. It's the practice of giving the first 10% of what we earn back to God for God's work in the world. Those of us who practice that discipline have discovered that the powerful thing about tithing is the difference it makes in the life of the giver. It reorients my priorities by building Christ-like generosity into my daily life. It interrupts my greed and gets in the way of my selfishness. Wherever you are in the journey, I commend it to you as a spiritual discipline that enables us to grow in generosity.

Generosity flows out of gratitude.

This week our Daily Discipleship Journal included that beautiful story of the dinner party that Lazarus threw to celebrate after Jesus raised him from the dead. If anyone had a reason to party, it was Lazarus! There was no surprise there.

The surprise came when Lazarus' sister, Mary, who just a few days before stood weeping beside her brother's tomb, interrupted the party by coming in with what John describes as a full pound of costly perfume called nard. This was not the stuff you buy at Wal-Mart. It was more like Neiman Markus or Sax Fifth Avenue stuff. Judas pointed out that it could have been sold for an amount nearly equal to the yearly wages of a day laborer.

Mary broke open the bottle, used the perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. It was a shocking act of extravagant gratitude for all that Jesus had done for her.

It reminds me of the story of the husband and wife who had a cat. The wife loved that cat; the husband hated it. One day the cat disappeared. The woman was heart-broken. The husband ran a full page advertisement offering \$1,000 for the return of the lost cat. A neighbor asked him, "Isn't that a little extravagant?" The husband replied, "It's not so extravagant when you know what you know."

With apologies to all the cat lovers in the congregation, Mary's act of gratitude doesn't seem quite so extravagant when you know what Mary knew; when you know the Jesus entered in the place of death and brought forth new life.

The point is that generosity flows out of heart-felt gratitude for the extravagant gift of God's goodness and love poured into our lives through Jesus Christ.

When I think about all the lives that have been touched, healed, strengthened across the 112-year history of this church;

when I name the men and women who have been sent out from this church as pastors, missionaries, and Christian leaders in the community and around the world;

when I see the children and youth who are being formed into followers of Christ in the place;

when I experience the difference this church is making in the city of Tampa and around the world;

when I think about the possibilities for this church in the future, I think I feel something of the extravagant gratitude that Mary felt and though I have no priceless perfume, I praise God for the opportunity to give what Marsha and I can to help it fulfill its mission.

Generosity is multiplied by grace.

The miracle in the story, of course, is the way Jesus takes the gift this nameless boy had to give and multiplied it to meet the needs of others. The boy could have kept his bread and fish hidden in his backpack. He could have held it, hoarded it, kept it just the way it was. But he gave it to Jesus, and Jesus multiplied it to meet the deepest needs of the multitude.

The promise is that God will take whatever we have to give and multiply beyond our imagination to meet the needs of a broken, bruised and hurting world. It's what St. Paul meant when he said that "God is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond whatever we ask or think."

So, the challenge comes to every follower of Christ: **"Little children, let us love, not in word or in speech, but in truth and action."** "Show me. Show me now!"