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Extraordinary Generosity

2 Corinthians 9:6-14

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Nancy and I honeymooned in Cancun, Mexico back in the day when there were only two hotels on the beach. And being the hopeless romantic that I am, I bought Nancy seven gifts, one for every day of our honeymoon. Some were small and some were substantial. I was so impressed with myself that I told lots of people what I was doing before we left. I didn't, however, tell them two important pieces of information. First, the idea was actually my mother-in-law's, not mine. Second, at the time we got married I was a student in seminary. Nancy was working and supporting us both. So, in reality, I bought Nancy a bunch of gifts with her money. On the honeymoon Nancy was so impressed with those gifts and my thoughtfulness. But when the VISA bill came a month later, somehow that took the romance right out of it for her! Hold onto that story for a moment.

We're in a worship series entitled "Extraordinary". We're talking about how we respond to God's extraordinary goodness in our lives. And today we're talking about God's extraordinary generosity and our response to it. To get into that we're going to turn to 2 Corinthians, chapter 9. But before I read it let me give you a little background. The early Christians in Jerusalem were struggling with poverty because they were under persecution. The apostle Paul made it his mission to take up a free-will offering from among the churches outside of Jerusalem to support their brothers and sisters. The Church in Corinth, a relatively wealthy community, initially responded with great enthusiasm, making promises of generous participation. Their enthusiasm waned, however, and their collection ground to a halt. Paul planned a trip to Corinth, in part to receive the Corinthian's offering so that he could deliver it to the poor Christians in Jerusalem. When he heard that their efforts had stalled out, he sent messengers with the letter we now know as 2 Corinthians. Paul hoped to encourage the Christians in Corinth to fulfill their commitment. With that introduction, let's read 2 Corinthians 9:6-14.

Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say, "They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever." For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. So two good things will result from this ministry of giving—the needs of the believers in Jerusalem will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God. As a result of your ministry, they will give glory to God. For your generosity to them and to all believers will prove that you are obedient to the Good News of Christ. And they will pray for you with deep affection because of the overflowing grace God has given to you.

This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

I want to suggest to you today that generosity grows at the intersection of three things that Paul mentioned in today's reading: provision, passion and planting. Let's unpack that.

We'll start with PROVISION. From beginning to end, Scripture teaches that everything belongs to God and God is a generous provider. Everything we have is a gift from God. From the air we breathe to the food we eat to the skills we possess – it all comes from God. God entrusts it to us both for our needs and for God's work in the world. This is the essence of stewardship. A steward is a manager, not an owner. A steward manages the resources of another, and we are stewards. We manage God's resources.

Remember all those gifts I bought for Nancy on our honeymoon? I was merely acting as a steward of Nancy's resources. Nancy didn't see it that way, but that's really not unlike what a steward does when a

steward practices generosity. And here's what I learned from that experience...it's really quite easy to be generous with someone else's money! So, we can generously use God's resources to bless others. Since God is an extraordinary provider, we can be extraordinarily generous.

When Paul appealed to the Corinthians to be generous, he reminded them of this fact: And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. (vs. 8) Think about it this way. Imagine that you stumble into my campground after being lost in the desert for a couple of days. You're just dying of thirst and you ask me for a drink of water. I have one bottle of water and so I respond without thinking, "Not so fast sunshine. This is mine and I want it and there isn't enough for the both of us." Because I think of this water as scarce resource, I'm going to guard it, protect it, cling to it. That's what happens when we live with a scarcity mindset. We hold on tightly.

But let's play that scenario differently. Imagine that I have access to a well in that campground, an endless supply of water. Now when you stumble into my campsite and ask me for a drink I respond, "Of course. Have all you want," because I know that there is plenty for both of us. That's what happens when we live with an abundance mindset, trusting, as the apostle Paul said, that God will generously provide all we need so that we can provide for the needs of others. Notice it doesn't say that God will provide for all we WANT, but for all we NEED. To be truly generous we are sometimes challenged to let go of a few of our wants so that the needs of others can be met. That's part of the beautiful web of God's Kingdom economy. It isn't just about me; it's about us, together. As long as we have a scarcity mindset, that there's only so much to go around and if I give to you there will be less for me, we're going to be stingy. But when we believe that God is a generous provider we live with an abundance mindset, and that sets us free to be generous. That's the first circle – provision.

The second circle is passion. That's when we desire to be generous and to pursue it joyfully. You see, ultimately generosity isn't about an amount; it's

about the heart. I love the way the apostle Paul says it in today's lesson, "You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. 'For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.'"

If you were to read all of 2 Corinthians you'd discover that one of the ways that Paul seeks to ignite a passion for generosity in the Corinthians is to tell them about the example of others. In chapter 8 Paul writes, "Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. They even did more than we had hoped..."

That's inspiring, isn't it? That kind of example can put some passion in your heart to be generous. The Spirit of God often uses the examples of others to grow a passion for generosity within us. Do you know someone who has been extraordinarily generous? Perhaps someone who has shown great generosity to you? If you want to grow in generosity, let those examples fan the flames of passion for generosity. And, moms and dads...by far the most important inspiration our kiddos receive is your example of generosity. If we want to raise generous kids, we must live as generous adults. So talk to your kids about generosity and let them see your generosity in action. You are their primary inspiration!

So, generosity grows at the intersection of provision – trusting God as a generous provider so that we live with an abundance mindset, and passion – a heart-felt desire to joyfully give. And the third circle is planting. This is the action step. You can have an abundance mindset and a passion, but if you never actually give anything, you're not being generous. That's like having a big bag of seed but not planting any of it. You might feel a false sense of security with that bag of seed, but if you're not planting any of it, nothing grows.

Maybe that's why Paul used the analogy of farming in his letter to the Corinthians. He wrote, "Remember this – a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop."

Have you ever noticed the similarities between the words generous and generate? That's no coincidence. Generosity is meant to generate something, to grow something. And while all sorts of things grow when we practice generosity, I think the greatest crop is joy. Generosity generates joy - joy in God's heart, in the heart of the recipient and in our hearts. And the more generosity we "plant" the more joy that grows.

Let me give you a simple example. Those who attend the Engage Bible Study here at Prince of Peace support two students at the Doulos Discovery School, one of our partner ministries in the Dominican Republic. Steven and Shair are brothers. Their family is quite poor, but the education that these boys are receiving is not only opening up opportunities for their future, but they are being trained to love their country and commit to serving as leaders in it. Doulos students like Steven and Shair are the future of the Dominican Republic. The generosity of the Engage Bible Study participants, generosity above and beyond their regular offering, is planting hope for two boys and for a nation. I'll be seeing both Steven and Shair next month on a mission trip and I look forward to bringing back stories of how their lives are being changed, thanks to our generosity.

So there you have it. According to Paul generosity grows at the intersection of provision, passion and planting. The question is, where are you in that picture? If you honestly evaluate how you manage God's money does it reveal a scarcity or an abundance mindset? And when you give do you do it with a joyful passion, or with a grudging sense of obligation? And are you planting the seeds of generosity sparingly or abundantly? Those are questions worth reflecting on.

When I think about the ministry we've shared in the past 15 years, there are a lot of things I'm very proud of. We've accomplished a lot. We've made so many positive changes together.

But there is one area of ministry in which we have failed to change. Only 45% of the individuals and families who call Prince of Peace "home" have any record of supporting this ministry financially. And that percentage has not changed in 15 years. Fortunately, that 45% has been incredibly generous and allowed this ministry to thrive. If you are a part of that 45%, thank you. Can you imagine what Prince of Peace could do if everyone who called this place home would practice generosity?

If you're part of the 55% who don't regularly support this ministry...I want to challenge you to start. I know that some people say, "But I give of my time." That's great, but it isn't an either/or. Setting Prince of Peace on solid financial ground is one of the greatest gifts you will give your next lead pastor. So start somewhere. Remember, what matters isn't the amount but the heart.

If everyone in that 55% planted just \$10 a week in generosity, this ministry would have over \$730,000 more to invest into God's work in the world. That would increase our budget by nearly 20% and increase our impact even more.

Even though it wasn't my money, I sure enjoyed giving Nancy those gifts on our honeymoon. When you love, giving is a joy. Love not only fills our hearts, it opens them to others and to meeting their needs. And that makes us all whole and happy at heart.

Let's pray...God of love, in Jesus you set a table of abundance and invite all people to feast. You are an abundant provider. Your love compels you to give, and so we ask that you would shape our hearts for greater love and compels us to greater generosity. May our hearts be a home with a crowded table, with a place by the fire for everyone. We pray this in the welcoming name of Jesus. Amen.