

Today we end a 4-week series called, *Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity*, and we also launch our 2018 Commitment Week. During this week, I invite all of us to prayerfully discern what God is calling us to give in support of our mission and ministry program for next year. Next Sunday, in worship, we'll return our 2018 Commitment Cards. If you know you'll not be here, we ask you to mail or deliver your Card to the office this week.

Our focus today is: "Defined by Generosity." So how 'bout that? Is 'generous' an adjective that defines you? Does your checkbook indicate a life marked by generosity? Would your children, spouse, or friends... would they use this word 'generous' to describe you? How far does your generosity extend beyond your immediate family? Is generous even a label you'd like people to use when describing your legacy? (Or would you prefer 'successful'?) As we reflect on those questions, let's recite these words one more time: "I have enough. Thanks be to God."

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Last Sunday I showed how advertisers work to persuade us that we do not have enough *so that* we might see how much *we need their* product. As we are bombarded by this message: that we don't have enough *until* we possess this or that thing, or house, or car, it begins to register – at a subconscious level – that we don't have enough to be as generous as we'd like to be.

A few years ago I read an article which indicated that, in the days leading up to Christmas, we do spend *very* generously on gift buying... for ourselves NOT but not really for others. Indeed, most people in line for Black Friday, are there to get a good deal for themselves!

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Now, I truly believe God created us with a willingness to give to others. We actually have a need and desire to be generous. It's part of our make-up! And that makes sense! We are created in God's image and likeness to be as generous as God is. But two voices work against our God-given impulse to be generous: 1) the voice of fear, and 2) the voice of self-gratification.

17 years ago, on the heels of the Y2K scare, sociologist Barry Glassner published a bestseller:

The Culture of Fear, where he forcefully demonstrated that while the actual level of risks we now face are historically low, our *perception* of danger has never been higher.

It would be interesting to explore the question of who benefits from this inaccurate perception of danger, but my main concern is asking "What does this exaggerated fear level lead to?" It means that our fear of what *might* happen, along with a misplaced notion about our source of security, keeps us from being as generous as God created us to be. As we imagine the wreckage of our future, the bad that might/could happen, we trade in childhood security blankets for all sorts of other blankets we hoard to feel safe!

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And then there's the voice of self-gratification. This voice tells us: if we give, we might not be able to get what we think we need to be happy. But Proverbs 11:24 suggests a different arithmetic saying, "Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want."

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When we hand our lives over to God; when we invite Jesus to be our Lord, the Holy Spirit begins to work within us. Fear ebbs, and our pursuit of self-gratification is replaced with a desire to please God and care for others. Our standard of giving is no longer "do they deserve it?" but "can we share it?" Yes, we continue to wrestle with the other voices from time to time, but eventually the volume of these deceptive voices diminishes.

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From the early days of the OT, God's people practiced giving a portion of the best of what they had to God. This offering was called the *first fruits or a tithe*, and it equaled one-tenth of one's flocks or crops or income. You can read a few scriptural examples of this in: Gen. 14:20, Gen. 28:18-22 and Lev. 27:30-33.

But, as Christians, we are not bound by the Law of Moses. Even so, we look to the OT as a source and guide. And many Christians know that tithing is a good and fruitful standard. Though it can seem like a big hurdle, I know so many tithers who say the same thing: "At first it seemed impossible. I looked at my income and expenses and there was no way I could give 10 percent."

But when I did it, I always had enough. Now it seems impossible to NOT tithe." I am so thankful for the Pastor who invited me, 30 years ago, to believe that God will always provide enough, and encouraged me to tithe.

As you listen to me say that you are likely thinking of several challenges: "We live in tough economic times." "We live in a high cost of living area." "We are living paycheck to paycheck." "Our adult children rely on our help." So yes, tithing is a challenge... (As I said two Sundays back there are caveats to every principle, including the principle of tithing, but we often apply an exception too easily and too soon.)

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A few years ago an article called *9 Secrets Your Pastor Can't Share in a Sermon* went viral on the Internet. Secret #2 (that I'm not supposed to share in a sermon) was this: "[An] offering is not a tip for a good sermon, nor payment for services rendered. Your stewardship, bringing your tithes and offerings to the community in which you worship, is a spiritual practice that comes right out of scripture. The people Jesus taught and healed lived in grinding poverty. And then there were the taxes, enforced by a brutal occupation army. Remember Matthew the Tax Collector and all those centurions running around? They weren't there for a parade. Yet Jesus presumed the Hebrew practice of tithing."

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I have a clip of the Rev. Adam Hamilton talking about tithing. (Hamilton is of course, the author of our companion book for this series.) ^[Clip]

That's a creative way to reveal what we know happens in our own lives. Though tithing can be a struggle, we need to keep it in context. If you feel you can't tithe right now, but you know that God is calling you to tithe, begin to take steps by giving a percent or 2 more than you gave the year before. Eventually you'll get there, and if experience is any guide, you'll feel great!

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But why? Why tithe? Because the pastor can lift up more than 2000 scriptures like our two readings this morning dealing with money and giving? No. To fund the church budget? No. Because God will bless you if you tithe? No.

It is because of this: When we are generous – to God, to neighbors, to strangers – our hearts are filled with a joy that God designed us to feel! Our living is enlarged by the practice of generous giving. When we give generously we are restored into the image of our generous Creator God.

So whether you currently give 2 or 4 percent, or 20 or 30 percent, if your giving is not from a place of generosity, my advice would be: quit! Quit giving! Just stop, until your giving is rooted in a desire to become the generous person God shaped you to be.

Don't get me wrong! I think God can do amazing things with gifts given by the most ungenerous people, but wow – what God can do with people who are intent on becoming more generous in their living and giving! These people are world changing disciples.

Many Christians have it very wrong. They say, "if you give, then God will give more back to you." Or, they say, "if you don't give, if you don't tithe, God can't or won't bless you." Or, they say, "once you reach a tithe, you've made it..." (But scripturally speaking a tithe is the floor not the ceiling...) So there's no guarantee that if you tithe you'll never lose your job, or bad things won't happen to you. I was tithing 26 years ago when I went through a hideous divorce, lost my home, and struggled for several more years to overcome incredible barriers to maintain a relationship with my oldest son as my ex worked to alienate his affections for me...

So we don't give to God to get something in return. It's an amazing thing that, when we do give generously, blessings often seem to come. So even in the midst of some of the worst times in my life, I've been blessed by God in staggering ways. But that's not why I give, and I don't know how that happens. But there is one thing I do know. Any effort on my part to be *more* generous will never exceed God's generosity towards me.

I have learned this lesson and so I do have enough. More than enough. Thanks be to God.