

"THE WELLSPRINGS OF GENEROSITY"

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In a recent book, two sociologists explore the link between living generous lives and living better lives. The book's name is *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose* by Christian Smith and Hillary Davidson. Basically, generous people are happier, suffer fewer illnesses and injuries, find a greater sense of purpose, and experience less depression. What defines generous for us depends on how much we've been prospered. The authors also show, however, to achieve this better life, we must practice generosity regularly and systematically as a way of life. Random acts of kindness make for great bumper stickers but alone they are not enough to transform the personal landscape of our days.

Their work is based on 2,000 interviews over five years since the Great Recession. "We're trying to understand where generosity comes from, but also what the consequences of generosity are," said Smith in an interview. "We don't argue it is one way. We argue it is circular. The more happy and healthy and directed one is in life, the more generous one is likely to be, although that is not guaranteed."

So the interviewer asked, "If giving is good for you, why aren't more people generous?" Their answer hits the nail squarely on the head of outstanding stewardship sermons I have heard for decades: "Mostly because of what's going on in their heads. They imagine they don't have the money...but they could be more generous. I think people are afraid. They don't realize that it's good for them, that it would benefit them and not just other people. They are afraid that it would be a loss, that if they gave money away or devoted their time, they would be losing something. So part of it is ignorance. Part of it is fear and insecurity. One of the points of the book is to help people step out of their fear and into a better place."

At Bible Study last week, we smiled together at the phrase *give until it hurts*. The feeling is we can give so modestly and so irregularly it is just enough to make us cranky. But pushing through to give more than would naturally occur to us, and to do so more systematically, launching into these deeper waters of giving as a lifelong voyage, deeply satisfies us. I agree with that. I say, if you're giving until it hurts, then trying giving somewhat more, and see if it doesn't feel good. If you are jobless, not in a position to do so, let us know. We'll help you, confidentially.

There is a big difference between a tipping approach to giving and a basic life orientation the writers call generosity. Generosity is encompassing, dabbling is not. You can hear this resonate in Paul's ancient words to Corinth: "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always

having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

Paul uses the analogy of sowing and reaping because for Paul giving is a living, feeding thing---feeding our neighbors, feeding our church, feeding ourselves. You hear him move from true generosity to knowing deep gladness in our giving, the same link our two authors make. Then Paul says one of our favorite things ever said about giving: *God loves a cheerful giver*. Truly, everyone loves a cheerful giver, not just God. We love ourselves more making free, heartfelt offerings that are more than sporadic. Generous giving is key to accessing joy in life.

Of course, I hasten to add, our giving for God ultimately isn't about feeling good. Faith isn't a human potential movement but a divine potential movement. We give generously because living within God's designs is the life we are meant to live. We give generously because Jesus shows us how to be one with God, in right relations, finding life's sweet spot. We give generously because it would hurt if we couldn't, granted the abundant and prosperous lives that God has given to us.

Describing giving finally as self-fulfillment only clouds what generosity is actually about. Another way we confuse giving is describing it as little more than as a *quid pro quo*, a this-for-that, is. Let me explain. One appeal churches make to invite support in this season is what services we render, what you get for your money, what benefits accrue, what a great deal it is. You get Max, the Keyboard Wizard. You get Dan in his Grinch hat at the Christmas Concert, Kate and our nurturing Church School, Justin's wholesome outlet for our youth. *But what, there's more!* Of course, that is all true. Many great services are rendered at our spiritual home. But let's be clear, that is not why we're doing it, not the heart of why we're giving.

Let's go back to the verses I just read from Corinthians, especially the one: “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” Here Paul links having *enough* with knowing life as a blessing, and finding our way to abundant living. That is the road to joy, friends, not self-fulfillment, not a *quid pro quo*. We give because God gives us more than enough, even lavishly. It is only right.

Today's world gives us problems like this. Our economic system is predicated on permanent expansion. We subtly learn no matter how much we have, no matter how good it is, it is never enough. Paul confronts that with a theology of enough. Paul says Christians are people who notice it and declare it as we have enough. You see, as we never have enough, and we are asked to give, we grow fearful, because our giving amounts to losing, just like Smith and Davidson described it.

But if we have enough, if our basic needs are met, if we can see that we have more than we dreamed possible, it frees us up for a whole range of possibilities. First of all, it gives us boldness and confidence, instead of always looking over our shoulder or always having to look over our fence to see what neighbors have.

If we can see that we have enough, it frees us for abundant living. Abundant living means perceiving clearly through eyes of faith what true riches are, where spiritual wealth is, inner treasures that moths can't eat, that rust cannot consume. Do you know how blessed you really are? Don't wait for something horrible to happen to someone else to remind you by virtue of their privation and sadness. Seize the blessing now. Live with us into this promised life of abundance and joy.

As your pastor, coming home every night to a woman like Cecile, visiting the City for jazz or sharing our getaways on vacation, by praising God here with you--baptizing beautiful children, living out our faith as a high adventure--I know I am blessed. Cecile and I resolve not to take for granted this life God has gifted us with. So we two hardly blinked as we increased our giving by 17%. It feels good.

Of course, we two can't increase that much every year. But this is a special year. This is the year at First Congregational we have dreamed of since the Great Recession, since facing through conflict that scattered our flock, reducing our giving. So much has come back together for us since then. This year we finally have the opportunity to resume together the full dimensions of ministry God intends for us. You and I are at the threshold of shaking off those years of testing and doubting. But doors of opportunity don't stay open forever. Such a moment must be seized.

This year we can vindicate many years of praying for a strong comeback by backing up our prayers with our treasure. This year we can lift up a light to the future as our shared life ramps up in exciting ways this autumn, new members find us, we outfit this campus for our ministries, and ponder adding a new pastor.

Twenty-three households have upped their 2014 pledges by nearly \$29,000 for 2015. That \$29,000 in increases and new pledges is for the rest of us to match. If we can pull together—leaders leading and all of us following--you can see how that will create the \$60,000 bump up which has proven so elusive for us recently.

No few were forced to lower pledges in the Great Recession. No few opted to stop pledging altogether amid our troubles. Now is the time to live into the future. The time is past to remain on the sideline. Pledging is essential because it allows us plan responsibly for the future. Without pledging, that is impossible. A pledge is your best guess at what you can do. If you can't keep your pledge, you simply call me or Karen Hansen. No shame, no loss of face. We all know stuff happens.

Just as prayer, Bible study, or Food First offerings are core practices making us who we are, so also generous giving is a core spiritual discipline for all who seek to become children of God's purpose. Generosity doesn't burden us. It gives joy. Today we lift up the challenge to give. Twenty two church homes have already given \$6,000 to match that pool. Next week we celebrate and ingather more pledges, with the chance to make or confirm our pledge as we come forward. Pray and ponder, dream dreams, see visions. For our God is a generous God. Amen.