

“Creatures With The Capacity To Be Generous”

- I. Introduction: “All things come of thee, oh Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” We say these words at our 8:00 AM service when we receive the offering. Our liturgy recognizes that God is incredibly generous to us and invites us to circulate the gifts we are given out into the world, particularly through the church, the Body of Christ. This comprehension of God’s extraordinary generosity to us, coupled with God’s invitation for us to be generous in response, is the focus of this sermon. This is the first in a series of sermons on stewardship that will culminate in an opportunity for all of us to offer our pledges for the 2010 year.

- II. Let’s reflect upon God’s generosity and God’s creation of us as creatures with the capacity to be generous. The most powerful example of this generosity is the gift of life. In this gift, there is an inherent dynamic of reciprocity. Receiving, giving, and receiving again are part of the rhythm of God’s nature and God’s creation. I saw an example of this last week in our adult Sunday School class. The Reverend Corky Carlisle was teaching. Corky had come to help us kick-off our stewardship campaign and good kicker he was! In fact, one of our parishioners told me with a smile that the parishioner felt like giving Corky \$100 for coming and another \$100 if he would promise not to come back. Corky challenged us.

But before I describe what happened in the class, let me give some background that a parishioner, Dana Teagardin, shared with me. I share it with her permission. On her way to church last Sunday, Dana received a text message urgently asking for help on behalf of a family in crisis. The father was unemployed and he and his wife had three young children; their needs had become critical. During Sunday School Corky was trying to make a strong point about giving away what we have. As you might remember he took his own \$100 bill, crumpled it up, and threw it randomly into the class. The \$100 bill bounced off one person’s head into Dana’s lap. Corky told her, “that money is yours. I don’t want it back . . . do with it whatever you will.” The \$100 bill went to the family in need. Was that convergence of events a co-incidence? I don’t think so. Corky gave his money away. Dana gave her money away. God knew where

there was a need and used Corky's and Dana's generosity to meet that need.

Corky was teaching us that the essence of a living faith is the willingness to step out in action, knowing that God will use our offerings where they are needed and take care of us after we give. Our relationship with God allows us to see and experience God's generosity and then to mirror that generosity by giving freely to others. When we hang on to what we are given, grasping it, we not only deny ourselves the opportunity to see how God uses our gifts to help others; we also deny ourselves the opportunity to see how God blesses us when we are generous.

III. A second point about generosity is that it comes from the heart. We are more likely to be generous when we are moved by a deep desire to give. You have probably noticed, and Corky emphasized, that often the most generous people are the people who don't have a lot themselves. I learned long ago that the generosity of the poor often puts many of the rest of us to shame. Some of you have heard me tell of an experience I had while driving a cab in Chicago as a struggling graduate student. The area in which I drove had many wealthy business people, especially during the day, and I would sometimes drive them back and forth to the Northwestern train station. I noticed something striking about most of these people. They were very precise about the tips they gave. Rarely did they give generously, even if that meant they had to keep part of the change I gave them. One day I responded to a radio dispatch to go to a poor area far from Lake Michigan. An elderly man came out of a building carrying his little dog. He was taking his sick dog to the vet. The man was very modestly dressed. When we got to the vet he gave me a tip of \$3 – the tip exceeded the cost of the cab ride. I told him that that was too much, but he insisted that I keep it. I remember feeling very grateful and thinking about how much that \$3.00 meant to him. His generosity came very naturally. He gave freely with an open heart.

IV. The third point about generosity is that it is often shaped and formed in our relationship with others. One last Corky story. At a national stewardship meeting that Leo Beale, Bob Wadley, and I attended earlier this year, Corky was one of the major presenters. He shared with us that his wife was central to his commitment to stewardship. He had been giving 10% of his salary to the church and was somewhat self-righteous about it. His wife asked him if he was tithing on his housing allowance and on his travel reimbursements. To hear him tell it, he told her no – that was ridiculous and he wasn't going to do that. She in turn said OK, you great expert on stewardship, the next time I hear you giving one of your impassioned speeches about

giving, I'm going to raise my hand and tell everyone that you are not tithing on those sources of your income. You can explain that. Corky went on to say that she was absolutely right. He had needed her help to see that. He tithed on his whole income from that time on.

- V. One more point. It is never too late. When I was in the discernment process for the priesthood, Peg and I were members of a small church in Leonia, NJ. We worked across the George Washington Bridge in New York City. We were among the top givers in that small church, but we did not tithe. I was always afraid that if we tithed, we would have a crisis and would not have enough. When I was called as Assistant Rector at St. Thaddeus, the first church I served as an ordained deacon and then priest, Peg and I confronted the question of tithing again during the first stewardship campaign. We had experienced in a very profound way God's generosity in our call to that parish. The call had come literally a few days before we had had to make a decision about a call from another church – a church to which I did not feel called. It was clear to us that God had provided for us abundantly, so we decided to tithe. Peg was still commuting to NYC to work; we did not know what our financial situation would be when she ended her work there. In spite of this uncertainty, we have never regretted the decision to tithe and have continued to do so. We were in our fifties, our income had decreased, and we could easily have said, it's worked out fine for us so far, why should we tithe now?

I'm sure many of you can recall the experience Peg shared in a Stewardship Minute last fall. She tithed from the income of an unexpected special project, specifically designating the gift to landscape the barren ground around the renovated sanctuary at St. Christopher's in Kingsport. God used the money for landscaping to bring the family that dug into the ground and planted the garden to the church. Later, the children and one of the parents were baptized and joined the church. Peg shared with me after the service that only as she witnessed the baptisms did it become clear to her what God really had done with her gift. Peg saw the need for the grounds around the church to be beautiful; she gave for a garden. God knew the hearts of the man and woman who worked to provide the beauty. He used the gift to meet their spiritual needs. Similarly, because of the generosity of the people of Ascension who contributed to the parish discretionary fund without knowing how their gifts would be used, this week alone we were able to help four parish families facing difficult financial challenges.

V. **Conclusion.** When we trust in God's generosity and act on that trust, abundance comes out of scarcity. God wants us to give away what we have with the same abandon and freedom that God gives to us. God created us in God's image: God created us to give, as God gives to us, with abandon and freedom. God also created us to experience the blessings that come with generosity. *Amen.*