***FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: GENEROSITY***

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Texts: Galatians 5:22-23 and Luke 12:13-21, 32-34

Are you a generous person? Perhaps this is not a question you should answer about yourself, but a question that others might better answer for you. As you may recall, a few years ago a wealthy presidential candidate claimed to be very generous, claiming to have given away millions of dollars in donations, until his tax returns were made public and revealed he had made no contributions to any charity. You know what you give of yourself and your resources, and as Jesus reminds us, we are not to give alms and then crow about it. There are anonymous donors and those who work behind the scenes whose generosity is often unrecognized. Yet, we often have a sense of how generous others are with their time and talents if not their treasures. So, let me rephrase the question to remove any inherent conflicts on your part: would others say you are a generous person? Would they say that you share generously your time, talents, and treasures to help others or would they be more likely to describe you as a bit of a miser, loathe to help out in a pinch, and selfish about where you spend what you have to spend? Perception is not always reality, but know that while others may not know the reality of your generosity, God knows – whatever that reality may be.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul suggests that generosity is a fruit of the Spirit, along with the love, kindness, peace, and patience that we heard about over the last several weeks. The list is not a menu from which you are to choose – “*I will be kind and peaceable, but let patience and generosity be someone else’s fruit*.” All of these are evidence of the work of the Spirit in our lives, and if any of them are lacking, it is not because the Spirit has not so inspired us. It is because we struggle with that inspiration or perhaps even resist the Spirit in producing that fruit in our lives.

Generosity is sharing freely what we have without expectation of getting something in return. It is caring about something beyond ourselves and our own selfish desires. There may be generous acts, but *generosity* is itself a way of living, a virtue recognized in every major religion and every civilized society.[[1]](#endnote-1) And where it is lacking, there is often suffering.

In their fascinating book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow quote Brother Gabriel Sagard, writing about his experience with the Wendat Nation, a native North American tribe living here in the 17th century. Brother Sagard concluded that the Wendat’s social arrangements were in many ways superior to those in his native France. He writes of the Wendat:

*“They have no lawsuits and take little pains to acquire the goods of this life, for which we Christians torment ourselves so much, and for our excessive and insatiable greed in acquiring them we are justly and with reason reproved by their quiet life and tranquil dispositions.” The Wendat were particularly offended by the French lack of generosity to one another: “They reciprocate hospitality and give such assistance to one another that the necessities of all are provided for without there being any indigent beggar in their towns and villages; and they considered it a very bad thing when they heard it said that there were in France a great many of these needy beggars, and thought that this was for lack of charity in us, and blamed us for it severely.”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

They well might think the same of us today with our unhoused populations, panhandlers at street corners, long lines at food pantries, and cuts to Medicaid to enable tax cuts which overwhelmingly benefit the richest among us! For the Wendat it was inconceivable that people would hoard resources for themselves while others lived in abject poverty and went hungry day after day. Generosity was in the fabric of their society and lives; it is that same open-hearted generosity of which Paul speaks to the Galatians and Jesus to his disciples. Jesus does not say, “I was hungry and you sold me a biscuit.” He says, “I was hungry, and you ***gave*** me something to eat.” **Giving** is the heart of generosity, just as **taking** is at the heart of greed. “Be on guard against all kinds of greed,” says Jesus, “for one’s life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.” Then he tells them a parable.

The man in the parable is rich; this is not a farmer eking out existence on a plot of land or a tenant trying to scratch out a living in order to pay his rents. This rich man owns the land, and the land he owns produces a bumper crop that will make him richer yet. So good is the harvest that the rich man’s barns cannot hold it all. They are filled to the brim and beyond and still the harvest is rolling in. “What is a rich man to do?” he wonders. “Shall I give the excess to the poor? Share the bounty with my neighbors? Sell the crops at market? No, I have a better idea. I will pull down these barns and build bigger ones to store all my grain and goods. Then my future will be secure and I can sit back and eat, drink, and be merry!” It sounds like a pretty good retirement plan, a responsible business plan designed to satisfy the rich man’s needs and desires in the present and into the future. But notably, his sole focus is on himself. Absent is any gratitude to God for the blessing of the harvest; absent is any responsibility for the use of the crops for the greater good; absent is any concern for his neighbors. The bumper crop is his security to assure that he can live the lifestyle to which he would like to become accustomed, but it proves to be little security at all. “*You fool!*” says God, “*This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared – the plans to hoard your crops and live a life of leisure, the crops you would store for yourself – whose will they be?*” God knows what the rich fool may have forgotten: you can’t take it with you and you know not when your day of departure will arrive. All the barns in the world cannot change that reality.

Yet still folks try to take it with them and to accumulate more and more stuff than they will ever need. The wise writer in Proverbs offers a warning about such greed. “*The miser is in a hurry to get rich, and does not know that loss is sure to come. Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain,*” he writes; “*it takes away the life of its possessors*.” “*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God*,” says Jesus. So it will be for us if we do not heed the words of the proverb and Jesus. Our futures are secured, not through our earthly riches but through the grace of God, and what does God ask of us: love God with all that you are and love your neighbors as yourself. Share what you have. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Perhaps my original question should be rephrased yet again. Instead of asking, “Are you a generous person?” or “Would others say you are a generous person?” perhaps the proper question is, “Are you storing up treasures for yourself or for God?” Or to put it another way: Are you richer in things or in the things of God? At the heart of that question is: What do you treasure?

A few years ago, on a snowy October Saturday morning the smoke alarm went off at our home; when I descended the basement steps to find out what was going on, I found the wall and ceiling ablaze. People pose the hypothetical, “If your house was on fire, what would you grab first?” as a way of asking, “What do you treasure most in your home?” I can now answer that question with some certainty – the first thing you grab is not your wallet or your coin collection or your beloved picture of Aunt Edna; you grab the people you love and get them to safety, because the rest of the stuff is just stuff; the stuff you treasure seems a little less valuable when compared to the people you treasure. “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*,” says Jesus. Where is your heart these days which is another way of asking, what do you treasure?

The Wendat people treasured a quiet life and tranquil dispositions – that is how Brother Sagard described them – and their lives reflected those priorities in their generous lifestyles so that all could prosper. They didn’t treasure treasure – the accumulation of wealth and things – as we too often seem to do. If we love God with all our hearts then there is no room in our hearts for love of treasure, no matter how alluring that treasure may be. Our wealth, however meager or vast it may be, is but a tool for us to use in living as Jesus calls us to live – caring for our neighbors, feeding the hungry and giving drinks to the thirsty – sharing our blessings. Our treasury of time and talents too are tools to make a positive difference in the world so that it may be a little more the way God created it to be. That little voice that nags at you when your good intentions go unfulfilled is the Spirit urging you along and hoping that you just might respond faithfully and generously. But it remains your choice.

You can hoard your time, talents, and treasures for yourself, like the rich fool, or you can share them generously, not for selfish purposes, but for God’s good purposes. Those are your choices, and you make those choices every day. Jesus suggests that you make one other choice that will make those other choices much easier. “*Seek first the Kingdom of God*,” he says, and the Kingdom of God overflows with generosity. Amen

1. Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millenium*, Riverhead Books: New York, 1999, p.113 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. David Graeber & David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux:2021, p.39 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)