

SERMON
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Called to BE the Church (Part 2): “Inviting Generosity”

April 29, 2018

Based on Acts 11:27-30

Sharing. It seems like the most natural thing. After all, we were taught to share in Kindergarten. But even though we learned the importance of sharing so long ago, sometimes we just aren't good at it. There are so many other things we can do with our time and money. We can save, invest, build, hoard. We can choose not to share at all.

In fact, it is amazing, given all the choices we can make with our time and money, that we choose to share at all!

Sharing is a historic, foundational principle of Christianity, a cornerstone of Christian life from the very beginning. And for Christians, the way we share is important.

The apostle Paul could have just advised the early Christian communities to take an individual approach to sharing. Telling them each to share individual acts of generosity. But in addition to individual acts of generosity, he advises them to take a weekly collection to divide proportionally. To the Corinthians, Paul writes in his first letter:

“Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

It sounds familiar. And you know what - Christians have been pooling our resources ever since. For two millennia, we've been sharing.

In the scripture we read today from the book of Acts, and we hear that there was a famine. The Roman historian Josephus confirms that the famine was the result of a series of bad harvests and the province of Judea was particularly hurt by it. So what happens? The disciples pass the plate and everyone gives what they can and they send it to the mother church in Jerusalem to be distributed appropriately.

(pause...)

This is so like us still today. The United Church, and sometimes Canada as a whole, responds time, and time again, to tragedies and disasters. Most recently, The GoFundMe fundraiser for the victims of the Humboldt Broncos bus collision raised more than **\$10.6 million**, making it the largest such campaign in Canadian history. The generosity to share is incredible!

And it is not just when we experience a tragedy. According to a Statistics Canada report in 2010, the average Canadian gave \$446.00 annually to charity. The average donation of those who attend religious services regularly is more than double that figure. There are likely many ways to interpret this statistic, but generally, I think we've been sharing for so long that generosity is bred into us. We expect to give. We understand that generosity and compassion and care for the “least and lost” is what it means to live a Christian life.

It is the Spirit in which we travel on our faith journeys. It is the Spirit that runs through our homes, our workplaces, our hangouts, and that is the heart of our relationships. It is the Spirit that is the centre of our giving of time and treasures at Knox United. It is the Spirit in which we collected faith envelopes off our tree.

Christians give out of a sense of compassion and wanting to do good in the community. But Christian giving goes deeper. The framework of giving for us is deeply theological; it is motivated by more than just feelings of guilt or even compassion. When we call God “creator” and call ourselves “stewards,” we are making the theological claim that God is the owner of all, and the giver of all. As Christians, we recognize that everything we have are gifts from God, and that we hold them and use them to God’s glory and service. That’s why we use the language we do around the plate. It’s not just a collection plate – it’s an “offering” plate. We understand that when we put money into it, we aren’t just collecting for a charity, we’re making an offering to God. We don’t just give to a budget, we give in response to the deep sense that we have been richly blessed. Do you see the difference?

When we use our gifts to act compassionately, we don’t just act compassionately because it’s a warm feeling and a nice thing to do. We behave compassionately because we are disciples of Jesus, we are his “hands and feet” as the scripture goes. In our giving, we aspire to be like him and to make the Kingdom (kin-dom) that he spoke about come into being.

Unlike some charities where the highest level of “gold” donors are invited to banquets, and top givers have power to influence the direction of the organization, the church is strongly committed to the ideal that each one of us gives according to our ability. Some of us can give a lot and some can’t, but everyone who gathers here has equal say on how our resources are allocated for the mission of the church. That’s partly why we hold our donation information in private – because whether you give a lot or give a little, you are -to use scriptural language- “equal partners in the gospel” as it is lived out through our community. In our church, there is no room for capitalist values that give way to power. We genuinely share.

Our financial giving, then, isn’t just about economics. It’s about a Christian philosophy of life. For us as Christians, giving is theological, a spiritual discipline grounded in a radical sense of oneness and equality within a community of faith.

Now, we’ve been talking about financial giving so far, but the same principles and history apply to our giving of talent and time. When we look back to Jesus’ earliest followers and the earliest church members, we see a dazzling array of skills and talents. There were fishermen, seamstresses, business owners, tent makers... In the book of Corinthians, Paul affirms that all of the gifts people have been given--such as prophesying, teaching, and evangelism--are required in order for the body of Christ to function. Whether you are most comfortable behind the scenes (in the kitchen, working outside, quietly taking minutes or planning) or are most at ease front and center on Sunday mornings or at the Council table or leading small groups, - whatever you do, the gift of yourself is crucial. And I want to thank you all for making an offering of yourselves to God.

I also want to thank you for your positive response to our Stewardship campaign. Last week, I invited everyone to prayerfully select an envelope from our faith tree, and many of them were taken. The invite was in response to appreciation and gratefulness for Knox. This week, we have given you response cards in your bulletins. In a moment, I will give you time to fill out that card. My prayer is that your response will be inspired by the mission of the church. In the deepest sense, we are giving so that we can live out our collective mission as Jesus’ disciples. We stand in a 2000-year-old tradition as we do this. As Paul puts it, “We are partners in the Gospel.”

So, let us take a moment to listen and reflect on what the Spirit is saying to you about our scripture today. Take a moment to be still. I invite you to close your eyes.

(pause)

Consider your role as a partner in the Gospel.

Consider all that God has given you, and all the ways in which you have been blessed.

Consider how you can respond to the call to Share with generosity.

If you did not take an envelope from the faith tree last week, or if you wish to take another one, then in a moment I invite you to come forward and prayerfully choose an envelope. Bring it back next week with your offering, adding your envelope number to the front so you get to benefit of a tax deduction.

I also invite you to take time to fill out the Response card in your bulletin, prayerfully thinking about what on-going commitment you can make to share – you can place that card in the offering too or put it in an envelope and bring it to church next week.

The words of the song that Nate is playing is on the screen, so you are welcome to prayerfully join in.

(music)

May wise and generous hearts continue to guide us.

I invite you to take your time: come forward and choose an envelope from the tree, or prayerfully fill out the response card.

(pause)

May we remember that none of us gives to the church just as individuals, but we give as partners in God's mission. We give because we are called to BE the Church.

Amen

(This sermon is adapted from: <http://www.stewardshiptoolkit.ca/loving-our-neighbours>)