

*Defined by Generosity*

Proverbs 11.24-25, 1 Timothy 6.17, Acts 20.35

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Centennial United Methodist Church

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One day when I was little, my brother and I were spending time at my grandparents home. My grandmother was searching everywhere for a 100 dollar bill that she thought was in her wallet. In those days \$100 was a lot more money! After a while she said, "Well, maybe it fell out when I was at the store. I hope whoever finds it really needs it, more than we do." I remember thinking how generous she was. Later, we heard her call out with delight, "I found it! I'm so glad!" My brother said, "I thought you wanted someone to find it who needed it more than we do?"

Like my grandmother's first inclination, we were created to be generous. In fact, we need to be generous to be fully alive. 1 Timothy 6:17 says, "Tell those rich in this world's wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage—to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they'll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life." (MSG)

Like my grandmother we have an inclination to be generous, but it's the follow-through that's most important. Reverend Jack Wylie loved to give and he was great at follow-through. He left a wake of joy and generosity wherever he went. It seemed like he was always giving something away. When he found out that our kids liked science and space exploration he gave them a Plexiglas paperweight from NASA with a model of the space shuttle inside. Jack always generously supported the church and wanted to win one of those sweepstakes so he

could give all the money to the church. When he turned 80, instead of gifts, he asked everyone to give to Heifer Project (to end hunger and poverty). He was generous with his love of God and others. Anytime anyone would preach, at the end of the sermon, Jack would call out, "And the people said---" and the congregation would respond: "Amen!" He did it to praise God and to affirm the preacher. He was someone who was truly defined by joyful generosity.

Who do you know who is defined by generosity? Who is a model of joyful generosity for you? What defines you?

We all have the inclination to give, but there are voices, that freeze our follow-through. The voice of fear and the voice of self-gratification interrupt our generous spirit. 1 Timothy tells us to be careful not to get obsessed with ourselves and our money. The voice of fear shouts that if we give to others we won't have enough for ourselves.

Those fearful, self-focused voices start young. A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw it as a teaching moment: "If Jesus were sitting here, He would say, "Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait." Older brother Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus."

We all know that there comes a point when increasing consumption, putting ourselves first, acquiring more stuff, leads to less and less satisfaction and joy. Don't be frozen in fear. God can lead you to the joy of generosity. Kevin and Ryan's mom taught what she knew was true: Jesus always moves us beyond fear to love. Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:40, "Honestly, every time you gave to someone who was overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me."

When has someone reached out to you in love? Think of a time of crisis in your life.

How were your fears thawed by others' generosity and care? At those difficult times we realize how the generous, compassionate spirit of others makes such a difference. In a surprising way, personal crises and large scale crises like Hurricane Sandy show us what's *really* important. They thaw our fear with love and move us toward the generosity and the abundant life Jesus talked about. Whether we are the *recipients* of generous love or the *one's offering it*, we learn that giving doesn't shrink our life! It multiplies and expands our life!

Stephen Kriss, a teacher, pastor, student and follower of Jesus, saw how giving multiplies



and expands life and increases joy. Last weekend he and other Christians from Philadelphia traveled to New York to help those whose lives were torn apart by Sandy. They were surprised by the *multiplication* of life and joy they found. One

church which transformed its sanctuary into a distribution center received such overflowing



donations that they couldn't receive any more. Everywhere he looked Stephen saw people sharing what they had with others. Even those who have very little, multiplied what they had.

Latino women made soup and sandwiches saying, "We're poor, but we can help too." The Sikh community brought meals out of their temple into the streets.

A boy from the community called out, "Free, good, hot food!" Stephen says, "It was almost like communion." Fourteen-year-old Zach Ralph who came with the group from Pennsylvania

was amazed: "I wasn't surprised by the destruction. I was surprised by people smiling in the midst of it all." ([www.mennoworld.org/blog/2012/11/8/after-hurricane-sandy-resurrection-story](http://www.mennoworld.org/blog/2012/11/8/after-hurricane-sandy-resurrection-story))

Generosity multiplies joy. How do we find our way through the fear to the joy of generosity? Like Stephen and Zach, like the women making soup, we find the way to the joy of generosity by following Jesus. Coty Pinckney talked to his six-year-old son Jonathan about following Jesus by giving part of his allowance away, for God' work. Little Jonathan asked, "Why can't I give it all?" (Childlike Faith, Childlike Giving A sermon on Mark 10:13-31 by Coty Pinckney, Community Bible Church, Williamstown, MA, 3/5/00, <http://tcpiii.tripod.com>)

Jonathan already knew the wisdom of Psalm 24 which says "The earth is the *Lord's* and all that is in it." I wasn't as generous as Jonathan when I was little. When I was first learning to give and to tithe it was helpful for me to remember that everything we have is God's. In Leviticus 25:23 God says, "The land is mine and you are just immigrants and tenants." We are house-sitting for God! God has entrusted you and me with this life and God's resources. None of us ultimately owns anything. Not even one very wealthy man who died. The next week a neighbor asked, "How much did he leave?" A woman answered, "Everything."

Leave a legacy of love and generosity to God and others. Jesus tells us to love God first, offer our best to God and to love neighbors like ourselves. Our Judeo-Christian heritage has a long tradition of offering the first fruits of our labor to God. Middle Eastern, Pacific Island and American cultures all have the tradition of serving guests first. We don't pull out the leftovers to serve to company. Out of care we give them the first serving. We want to love God even more.

The Bible tells us to offer God our first fruit, a tenth of what we receive, what we call a tithe. In Genesis 28:20-22, Jacob, Abraham's grandson, makes a promise to God out of love and gratitude for all that he has been given: 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this

way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear... then the Lord shall be my God... and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.’

The idea of tithing can be challenging for a lot of us. It may not be possible for you to give 10% of your net income right away. God understands how things are with you and will help you make decisions that will free you from fear and move you to greater generosity and joy! Deepening our relationship with God always leads to deeper generosity and greater joy. We move from 2 percent to 4 percent, or from 5 percent to 7. Have a conversation with God about your fears and hesitance. God understands and can help you make the adjustments in your lifestyle that will allow you to be more generous and more joyful. As the Spirit works in us we notice the needs of others and start wondering, "If I don't do something, who will?"

It really is joyful and freeing to make changes in your life so you can be more generous. As Bob and I have increased our giving to tithing and beyond a tithe, we both have more peace and a greater sense of excitement about being part of what God is doing. God wants to do great things through this church, through you, bringing encouragement, hope and love to people in this community. The more we give to God, the more God can do!

We have done well financially at Centennial this last year. *Thank you for* all you have done! You have supported ministry with children in our church and our neighboring school, youth and young adults within the church and those who are homeless, in crisis, or hungry in our community. You've supported five different Bible studies, many small discipleship groups, Vacation Bible School and Sunday School for all ages. We've worshipped, been inspired by beautiful choir music, prayed, washed cars and raked leaves for our neighbors, and much more!

In addition to your faithful giving, one of the reasons we have done well financially these past 12 months is because Pastor Bobby's compensation was significantly less than we expected. 2013 will be a greater challenge with increased costs and fully funding our staff salaries. I hope you'll prayerfully consider taking a step up in your giving. It will have a far-reaching impact, more than you can imagine.

Millard Fuller was very successful in business, but estranged from his wife. She saw how trapped he was in his constant pursuit of material wealth. He followed her to New York to try to convince her to come home. Millard recalls: "We were in a taxi right after Linda and I had a very tearful session. We'd gone to Radio City Music Hall and they showed the movie *Never Too Late*. The message was that it's never too late to change anything. I had a sensation of light in that taxi. It was not anything spooky. All I can say is it just came into my head: Give your money away, make yourself poor again and throw yourself on God's mercy. I turned to Linda and said, 'I believe that God just gave me the idea to give all our money away; give everything away.' "She said, 'I agree. Let's do it.'" People tried to talk them out of it. They told them no. Miller said, "I believe that God is calling us to do this" (From Michael G. Maudlin, "God's Contractor," *Christianity Today*, June 14, 1999, 46). They used the money to form Habitat for Humanity, which since 1976 has repaired or built more than 400,000 homes and helped more than two million people worldwide (From 2010 statistics, [www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)). That's a far-reaching impact!

Let *your life* have a far reaching impact. Consider all God has given you. Our tithes and offerings are a tangible sign of our gratitude and our love of God and others. Don't ever let fear define you! Be defined by your generosity! And God will multiply your joy! And the people said!... Amen!