

July 27– What is A Disciple?

One Who is Generous

Mark 10:17-31

As we progress on our journey of discovery concerning what is a disciple we come to the touchy subject of generosity. We don't like to talk about giving. It makes us feel uncomfortable. One of the topics Jesus talked about most was money and wealth. He talked about the corrosive influence of money and we might add the stuff money buys. Yet, can you guess which topic is preached about least in the church today? You guessed it, giving. I grew up in the time where once a year my father would preach the "stewardship sermon." It was always given at the beginning of the fund drive. You could tell that this was not one of my father's favorite topics to preach on, mostly because of the reaction of his listeners. Even as a young boy I could sense the tension as the congregants sat upright staring at the back of the head in front of them. There was none of the warmth and engagement that was usually present. Afterwards dad would hear comments like, "Well I am glad to get that over for another year." Or, "Well done, I hope some listen and raise their pledge." When I became a minister I too dreaded the annual stewardship sermon that I was expected to preach. It was only sometime later that I came to realize that when Jesus talked about money he was talking about a lifestyle of generosity. He wasn't using the Bible to guilt people into giving more to the church but wanting people to respond fully to the abundance of God. So today we will look at how we, as disciples, are to live a life of generosity.

We know that the disciples got this, at least in part, because when Jesus was talking about how hard it would be for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, Peter shares how they had given up everything to follow Jesus. I am not saying that you have to do that! But it does show that they put Jesus ahead of material gain. So how do we, as disciples, live a life of generosity?

It begins by being aware that we are blessed. It is this awareness that fills the deep well of our spirit. As that concept fills us and amazes us, our response is first of all to say thank you. But even more the awareness of our being so blessed causes us also

to want to give back. Whenever I think of this idea I am reminded of the biblical story of the widow who offers her two pennies at the temple. For a moment let us look at this event from the purely practical and rational side of things. This is a very bad thing to do if you are trying to understand the mystery that is God, but yet something we all too often do. Widows in this time had no “safety net” to support them. If the family did not care for them their only option was to beg. Many widows lived around the temple because it was the place they would most likely receive a handout and they could huddle under the porticoes to stay out of the weather and there was some safety in numbers. They were a very vulnerable part of the population. The two pennies that she had would have bought her enough bread to sustain her for a day, perhaps two. She would have been intelligent enough to know that her offering would make little difference to the running of the temple. In fact she probably received more from the temple coffers, because they were supposed to take care of the widows, than she was returning. From a logical point of view this offering made no sense. So what would inspire this generosity? We are not told but here is my guess. Whenever I see this type of action in an individual it has always been a visible way of saying thank you. Some blessing has happened and they need to respond.

The church has a fund that I use to help people in need. Recently a person who had been a long time recipient of help came to me with some money for that fund. They finally have a job and are making a little more than they need to stay afloat and they are feeling so blessed that they had to do something. To see the joy in their eyes when they gave me that \$20 bill was an awesome experience. They were saying thank you for the past help. They were saying thank you to God for their current prosperity. They were proclaiming that life is good. When we are really open to the blessings God fills us with daily, we feel this way. And this is part of what causes us to have a life of generosity. If you think you are not being as generous as you should with your time and your treasure, spend much time contemplating the blessings of God that you receive.

A generous person also responds when there is a need. We talked in an earlier sermon about how much good can be accomplished in the life of another by even offering them something as insignificant as a cup of cold water. It has been my

experience that disciples who have truly learned the spirit of generosity are always on the lookout for ways they can help. Usually this requires the gifts of their time and or their talents. Every pastor knows the people to call when there is a need in the congregation for things such as a ride to the doctor or some food for a grieving family. These are the people who seem to be pre-programmed to say yes to a need. They are also the ones who seem to volunteer first for church projects, especially those that reach out to the community. These are people who have learned to give freely of their time and talents and have found the great secret that they are blessed in the giving. One of the reasons people are so generous is that in the giving they receive.

Think about those first disciples. Peter talked about how they had left everything to follow Jesus. Would they have done this if all Jesus did was take and take and take from them and they got nothing in return? Of course not. Yes they step away from jobs and family. Yes they were living a vagabond life. But in being with Jesus, learning from him, watching him heal others and all the rest, they felt like they were receiving so much more than they had given up. Generous people are open to giving, knowing that in some way they will also be blessed. When it comes to the life of the church the challenge for the Finance Committee is to make sure we use your money wisely. We need to let you know what is being accomplished so you see the blessings. We also need to provide opportunities for you to serve and give of your time.

Finally, if we want to cultivate that spirit of generosity, which is really part of what it means to be a faithful disciple, we need to unhook from our stuff. In the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man he asks what he must do to be saved. Jesus says, "Follow the rules." "I have done this" he shouts. "Then one more thing you need to do", Jesus tells him, "Sell everything and follow me." He was dismayed because he was rich and turned away. He was a prisoner to his stuff. It was getting in the way of his being faithful and generous. We who live in the affluent United States of America are often held hostage to our stuff. By the time we pay for the house mortgage, the car payment, the credit card bill that we have run up because we bought that "whatever we could not be without" item we have little left. Include the necessities like food and health care and we often say I would like to give more but... We are hostages to our stuff.

One of the cheeriest givers I have ever known was Shirley. Shirley had gone through very trying times and was now on social security living in low cost housing. She had virtually nothing. This had freed Shirley to be generous with what she had. The amounts she gave were small but given with joy. Whenever there was a special plea we would get two dollars in the special envelop from her. She once said, "I use to wish I could give but everything else seemed a greater priority. Now that I own nothing I am free to give." When her sister died leaving her with a windfall, what did Shirley do? She gave some to the church and the rest to her family. She didn't want to be burdened with having too much in the bank! Hers is an extreme example but it does show us what happens when stuff no longer is as important.

So to be a disciple is to be generous, not because we have to but because we are so aware of how blessed we are, we are so touched by the needs of others and we are not so concerned about our own wants that we share freely and lovingly. May we all cultivate this action as a disciple of Christ who reminds us that when we are most giving we are most blessed.