

“PRACTICING GENEROSITY”

Micah 6:4-8; Matthew 6:24-34

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I have what some people consider to be an odd love of subways. Whether it's the Lexington Ave. line or the D train under New York City, or the Red Line of the Boston T, or the crazy hubs of the Paris Metro where four or five lines meet, and a virtual spiderweb of tiled walls goes off in all directions at a variety of subterranean levels: there's something about navigating all this and moving along underneath the life of the city that appeals to me. The Paris Metro is my favorite, and it has been, ever since I was in high school and had the good fortune to be an exchange student in France. One afternoon, at age 17, I was sitting with some friends at a café, and across from us, an old woman in a wheel chair had parked herself at the top of the steps leading down to the Metro trains. Not more than a minute or two later, a group of young men—not the most savory looking of types—gathered up the woman and her chair between them and ran down the subway steps. I was afraid for the woman's safety. My French friends told me they were just helping her out. How else would people in her condition ever be able to take the Metro? This was long before days of the ADA, and the expectation, even of Americans, that public places should be accessible to all.

On my last trip to Paris, several years ago now, I saw a similar scene, a seemingly random group of people, transporting a wheelchair-bound individual down several flights of Metro steps; also a young woman helping an older man with a cane take his groceries down the three flights to where he was going. Later I mentioned these scenes to my friend Didier, he who always wants to educate me on what it means to be French, and he told me with great seriousness, that this is a culturally important pattern. It is deliberate. It is part of what translates into English as the generous life. “We French,” he tells me, “we live mostly closer to each other than you Americans, and from the time we are children, we are taught you live the generous life: you open your neighbor's gate for him; you find a cart for the woman at the grocery store who has three children; you stop for the car on the side of the road; you take fresh bread morning and evening to your neighbor who is housebound. It is simply what you do. Being something of a philosopher, Didier wonders how the influx of people into France from all over Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, will change these conventions. “But it is who we are, how we live,” he tells me with a strong sense of national pride in his voice.

Now I have to say that in my travels, I have met both wonderful and obnoxious French people, so Didier's generalization might be a little overboard. Still, I found myself thinking of that brief exchange with him as I contemplated what I wanted to say this morning. “We are taught, from the time we are children, to live the generous life.” Do you think that we teach our children from the time they are young to live a generous life? Is that one of our priorities? Where does the concept of being generous—in our thoughts, in our actions, with our money—where does it fit in the scale of what is important to us? It's usually an uncomfortable question to ask people. Often, what it first brings out is anxiety, and even excuses, much like the Matthew passage that is our gospel reading today. It tends to make people uncomfortable in the same way. “No one can serve two masters: you cannot serve both God and wealth. So therefore, do not worry,” says Jesus, “about what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you should put on.” Jesus is talking here about the things that preoccupy us overmuch, the

things that tug us away again and again from values we claim to hold as important. But most often, when the passage is read, the first comment that surfaces is that if we don't worry about work and shelter and clothing, we will end up on the street with nothing, and others will have to take care of us. Right. Haven't you heard that expressed? Have you thought it yourself? I find it interesting that we Progressive Christians, we who claim steadfastly not to be biblical literalists, will go straight to a very literal reading of this text, find it absurd at that level, and dismiss it, rather than taking up seriously the important question it raises. If someone followed us around, watched us live our lives, what values would they see expressed and how would those values stack up alongside our intended values? For most of us, not all of us but most of us, there's a gap there. And we know it, and we're not sure what to do about it because we don't want to give up either our preoccupations or our intended values, so we just feel uncomfortable and stuck. We'd like to be more generous; we'd like to be less preoccupied with money and things, but then again. . .stuck we are.

I don't know about you, but it has been helpful to me to understand generosity as a spiritual discipline: which is to say that it is something that is learned over time by repeated practice, and not just a frame of mind or heart which is given to different people in different measure. As my friend Didier would say, it is something taught and learned, not innate. We become generous by seeing examples of generosity around us, by acting ourselves in generous ways, pushing the boundaries of what we believe we can give of our selves, of our substance, of our talents, of our money. It's like exercise: like learning to be a long-distance runner or how to play golf. You can't just sit in your living room wishing you could learn. You begin by actually going out and doing something, taking the first step. Then you do it over and over again and keep pushing yourself to go farther, to do better, and you will improve. You will get better. The discipline will become a more and more natural part of your life.

Now this morning, as you know, is Stewardship Sunday. This is the day we officially begin calling on each other for pledges of support to the church, this year both pledges of financial support and pledges of time and talent. And I am supposed to talk to you this morning about the church budget and program and why you should support them with your dollars and your time. So there are two things I really want to say to you this morning.

First, in my experience, all of you, this community, this church, you are already the most generous community I have known and lived among: generous in your caring, generous with your time, generous with your money, generous in reaching out to each other and to those beyond the congregation. I mean that absolutely. That's why I remain here; because I think that much of you.

But—didn't you know there was a but coming? But you, we, can do better, all of us, don't you think? And the reason I support the church, the reason I would have you support this community, is that this is the community in your life that is going to encourage you and encourage you, and maybe prod you a little bit, and then encourage you some more, to continue exercising your generous spirit until more and more comes of it. This is the community that will teach your children to grow up to live a generous life. This is the community in your life of people who will be your companions and friends in learning every day to do better at walking the spiritual path of living our intended values without getting sidetracked by the other stuff that surrounds us. Just think of what this church and its people have been and gone and done. Think, pray, dream: what more can we do together? I promise you that this church will not stop

encouraging the exercise of grateful and generous hearts ever. It is essential to our mission, and we will not quit until in the words of Charles Wesley—a Methodist, I know, but with a lot of good things to say—we will not stop as a community until we have learned to:

“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

And that’s why I would encourage you to support this church. Thanks be to God. Amen.