

# TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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"The journey to generosity"

Please be seated.

I am very honored and humbled to have been asked to serve as your Celebrant, and your Preacher today, as you endure patiently in between Rectors. As this parish of All Saints is one of primarily two very intentionally Anglo-Catholic parishes in the diocese, my prayer will be that you will affirm that intention of worship and style of ministry and find the priest who will assist you and lead you in that uniqueness to the glory of God. So stay the course, be patient, and look to the Holy Spirit to assist you in identifying the right person.

Other than that, having spent 18 months as Interim Rector at a parish fairly close to you, I have heard much about All Saints ....., and as far as I know, most of it is true..... If you were sitting closer you would see the twinkle in my eye as I say that.

I am going to talk to you this morning about how the theme of Generosity can be brought forward from the scriptures assigned for today, both in the Old Testament lesson from Joshua, (as an alternative to Amos borrowed from the Revised Common Lectionary), and from Jesus' parable in the Gospel, and into your life and actions as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**From Psalm 19:14, Let the words of my mouth,** and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

Somewhere in all of our hearts, I think, is a grand desire to be very generous people.

It's just that the phrase very generous people has built into it a progression of sorts. To spoof the logical equation just a bit, we can say You are a People. And you desire to be Generous. Is it therefore true that you are a very generous people? No. the desire alone doesn't mean that we are therefore in fact generous or even to say the least very generous.

And I am of a mind to say that generosity is not a given virtue just because you were born, or even just because you were baptized. Once we've said that then I'm afraid we have to say that there is good generosity and there is wrong generosity.

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Now I will admit that there are those of whom might be said, “They were so generous from the day they were born.” Or the person themselves saying, “I’ve never known in my life how not to be generous.” Well, immaculate holiness aside, I think there are reasons for this phenomenon, and we’ll get to that in a minute.

But let’s just be clear about what BAD or WRONG or more politically correct to say an UNHEALTHY generosity looks like: an unhealthy generosity carries the hallmarks of pride, possessiveness after giving, and legalism, and resentment for giving in the first place. As the Lord God said through Joshua to the people of Israel, there are in fact wrong Gods that get followed.

Let’s be sure, though, to note that the Scripture and the teaching of the Church has always marked HEALTHY generosity not by resentment but by giving with gratitude, and not in pride of how good I am to have given but by giving in humility, and not by a legalism but in grateful obedience (that’s where serving the Lord alone comes in). That is not an exhaustive list of healthies and unhealthies, but these are the easiest I think to take and hold up against yourself and your giving, and measure the healthiness of your generous giving.

In the scriptures today we hear of one of the methods to ensure that the followers of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are encouraged to become faithful generous people. There are two other primary ways people become generous, also clearly noted in biblical stories, and so we should see them as real and observant in people’s lives today. And we do.

How do we get there then to become generous?

To say that we have become generous and then very generous people most often means that we have come to some decision, consciously or subconsciously, to be generous. Just thinking about that for a moment will help you see the natural consequence – that there are stories to tell, our personal generosity narrative from the story of our life, wherein we can point to a moment or time or decision or even awakening somewhere along the timeline of our life. Many parishes including yours have invited lay members to stand and share those kinds of moments with the congregation. And they are beneficial.

Apart from those moments, you might ask someone you look up to, or not, in the parish about their own – we often call it a testimony – of their personal stewardship, in financial giving, in time given to ministry through the church and outside of it, and in making liberal use of the spiritual gifts given through the Holy Spirit.

It’s a simple question if you dare to ask, “So, when did you become a generous person?” Just try not to put the emphasis on the wrong word in the question, such as “So when did YOU become a generous person?!” You get my point.

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And if they have a story to tell it will fall virtually into one or more of three types.

There is the moment when God directly or indirectly changes the course of your life by his word or action. This is really the heart of the story as Fr. Wayne Sanders shared it several weeks ago in October. If you remember, it was the story of the Episcopalian man in another parish who, reflecting on the message from the pulpit of 'rendering unto God' decided to change his plan from his returned pledge card that said, 'Same as last year', and the next week hand carried a new pledge card to the parish office, with an increase. And yet as he walked out of the church office he reflected on another part of the previous week's sermon on how Jesus said that all we have belongs to God. He promptly turned around and filled out a third pledge card, far more generous than the first two. The story is true. And there are many more like it.

Sometimes people will liken surviving a heart attack in the same way, maybe even allowing God to have been the causal agent. As they awaken from the stupor after surgery, their life is suddenly changed with a new gratitude and appreciation for every breath, and their church giving is evidence of it.

The second type of becoming a generous person is when you are so motivated by hearing someone else's story, like the story just related, that it is enough for them to decide it was time for them, too, and they won't need to wait for God to bring something directly to bear in their lives.

The third way that the action of generosity becomes a part of the lives of the People of God is through the teaching of one generation to another through the Holy Church of all the Good Works of God Almighty, what he asks of us, well, really commands, through his word in the scripture; and by a leadership that walks the walk. This is where that person who seems always to have been generous comes in, because I believe that as a child that person watched and learned from his or her parents and it became a natural part of how he or she lived their lives. That is the parents work, by the way.

This third way is what we hear, or partially hear, in the lesson from Joshua.

What you have witnessed in this reading is the last words of Joshua. There has been a great time of peace, Joshua is now 110 years old, and as he knows that death is near, he once more reminds the people of how Great is their God, and how Moses has led them, and how God has paved the way for their tribal home lands. Inherent in this discourse and challenge is the matter of gratitude, and gratitude is often a precursor to generosity. In this case, a Holy Generosity. There certainly is a challenge to serve the Lord, and do that by following his commands. Jesus made the same demand. "if you love me" he said, "you will do as I have commanded you."

Now I say partially what you heard because the lesson set aside some verses. As you note the Old Testament printed in your bulletin you will see that the beginning is a prophesy, that is, God

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speaking through and by Joshua. Just like Jeremiah, or Isaiah, or Moses. Then in the next paragraph we find Joshua speaking, ending with a reference to how Joshua has himself responded to the word of God. What you didn't hear in this selection of scripture is the rest of what God says. If you will, in that space between the first and the second paragraph are 10 ½ verses of God's continued word to the successful and hopefully not complacent Israelites. . I encourage you when you get home today to read the whole Chapter of Joshua 24, and then read the entire book.

Now I think it is important in listening to the remainder of the chapter from Joshua to note that in noting the faithfulness of God, and the generosity of God to the Israelites in bringing them to this point, their generosity must take into consideration the work of the community in worship. And so there is the need to make sure singers, and musicians, and priests and administrators of the Tabernacle are all able to be supplied. The key in encouragement here is as Joshua includes himself first. He will follow God's command for giving with a grateful generosity, knowing his very life, all 110 years, are due to this faithful and generous God to him. And so generosity along with following God's expectation becomes not just an individual generosity but a community one. The journey to this generosity is well-painted in this chapter.

Here is where we bring in the Gospel parable. I have written on this in the Reflection posted to the parish's blog site, and I encourage you to read it so you have a fuller sense of this. But let me just say this about it. The Gospel parable is not about stingy bridesmaids. That would defeat the purpose. It is about the tasks given by the generosity of the bride herself to these select bridesmaids. It's an honor. If they do not fulfill their selection then they have in essence disobeyed and abandoned the mission. Jesus is speaking here to his chosen apostles. God has been generous to you and will be even more generous as you find the power of the Holy Spirit given to you for the building up of the Body of Christ. Because he has been generous to you in providing one or more spiritual gifts – as symbolized by the oil lamps – it is your Ministry to be generous to the fullest extent with that spiritual gift among your fellow disciples. If it is in healing, then pray for healing. If it is in prophecy, then prophesy to others, if it is in administration, or in evangelism, or in apostleship, or in teaching, or in pastoring, then do those things with a generous heart. Jesus is leaving it generously to us. Do likewise.

The ultimate word of that day was “Choose whom you will serve.” And in serving the Lord comes generosity. If we had been a little more prepared for it this morning I would sing for you Bob Dylan's song from that early season after he had become a Christian, “It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.” And of course the choir would be the back-up singers.

These are all parts of the journey of generosity in the Church. Serving the right Lord. Gratitude for what He has done in your life. Obedience to what God says He wants from you, that is, hearing His word and following him. Being open to his direct movement in your life. Even just wanting to be and finding a way to be full of generosity.

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Through it all you see that God Himself is the First Cause of generosity. You see, the common denominator in any healthy generosity, is the work of the Holy Spirit . The Holy spirit was certainly present at your baptism in bringing your spirit to life, by making you a part of the One Holy Catholic Church, by the remission of your sins, by sanctification. You will remember, though, that Paul adjures us to be filled daily. You aren't baptized in water daily, are you. This is the sense of the Holy Spirit as common denominator in this way of generosity. This is the generosity of Pentecost. So this is where you start. Invite the Holy Spirit to fill you to overflowing with a new generosity. And He will. In one of these three ways, or all of them, He will.

You don't have to wait to be a generous, giving, Kingdom building people. Begin today by asking the Holy Spirit to accomplish this in you. Even now, I tell you the Lord is saying, The Holy Spirit is working in you already to help bring you to that place of generosity where you will find an absolute joy.

In the Name of God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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