

## FOCUS: Open-Hearted Generosity

Sunday, September 29, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Exodus 4:1-8; 1 Kings 17:10-16

John 6:5-16

You know those big things in life? Marriage. Family. Kids. Friendship. Work. Faith. They are so important, you carve out time to think about them, because they make life full, abundant. But what about your money? Who do you talk to about that? You probably have financial advisors, estate advisors, tax advisors, and even the culture telling you what is important about money. But what if they don't have the full story? Like how money shapes your heart, shapes your family, shapes your life? How money give us the opportunity to be generous and how deep down we all know the beauty of generosity? How generosity brings freedom and joy? And how you've never really met an unhappy generous person? How generosity transforms us and connects us to the heart of our generous God? For God so loved the world, that God gave! (John 3:16).

As we focus on our discipleship over the next two years, one of our FOCUS goals is Open-Hearted Generosity. Using three Bible stories, I want to talk about how God calls us to be generous people. The story of Moses shows us how God calls us to serve with what we already have. The story of the Elijah and the Widow from Zarephath shows us how God calls us to dedicate all we have to God. And finally, the story of the boy who gives his loaves and fishes shows us how God calls us to trust on God and not on what we have.

**God calls us to use what we already have.** When God called Moses to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh, Moses made excuses why he couldn't do as God asked. God patiently listened and responded to each excuse, never letting Moses off the hook. After Moses protested that the people will not listen to or believe him, that he doesn't have the skills or talent to accomplish this task, God asks him: "Moses, what do you have in your hand?"

Moses was a shepherd. Shepherding was all he knew for 40 years, and now he wanted to retire. But God asked: "What's in your hand?" Moses looks at his hand. "A staff," he tells God. A shepherd's crook. A stick. The Lord says, "Throw it on the ground." Moses did, and it became a snake. God told Moses to pick it up by the tail and it turned back into a staff. Over the next 40 years of Moses' life, God used that simple wooden stick to deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh, to open the Red Sea, to win a battle with the Amalekites, to bring water from a rock. As Moses learned to use in faith what God put in his hand, his life is changed and so is the course of world history.

What has God put in *your* hand? For God to use you, the first important thing is your availability, and your willingness. God equips people in various ways. Maybe you like to have people over to your home. Maybe you're good with your hands. Maybe you can help a group get things done. Maybe you can cook or sew or clean or build or crunch numbers or write well. Maybe you have the gift of conversation and storytelling. Take stock of what God gives you. God is not looking for few people who have special qualifications; more often God is calls the disqualified and qualifies them. God can and will use everyone.

When God calls us to serve, God does not take away what we have, God starts with what we have and adds more to it. Everyone has something with which to serve God. For Moses, the rod in his hand represented his life as a shepherd of sheep. Only an experienced shepherd could guide God's people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

Every Christian is called to serve and given something with which to serve God. It falls to us to discover what God gives us and to dedicate it to God's Glory. Offer to God in faith what God gives you, no matter how simple, and God will use it — sometimes supernaturally — to accomplish God's purpose. As you generously give of our skill, you will have a new sense of meaning in your life because you will begin to realize how God is using you in new and wonderful ways.

**God calls us to dedicate all we have to God.** When Elijah visits the widow at Zarephath, she is down to her last measure of flour and her last drop of olive oil. When the prophet asks her for something to eat, she might have refused, hoarding her meager resources for her family. Instead, she offers what she has – all of it – and God blesses her generous gift by miraculously filling her jars with a limitless supply of flour and oil.

The lesson here is about surrender. Sometimes we must relinquish something in order to gain something greater. The widow gave away the last of her food, the food she needed to feed her son for one more day, because she believed the promise Elijah made about God's provision. The sequence of events is important here: she surrendered her heart and her life to God before she gave up her food. She decided to honor God by generously giving her life first. After that, giving up a little flour and oil was easy.

God wants us to consecrate our lives to God before we give God our time or talent or treasure. When we offer what we have before God, God will anoint it for God's service, and God's power will be in it. When we dedicate what we have to God, starting with our

hearts, we will see things start operating on a higher level. Dedication of our lives to God unlocks the power and the anointing of God to work and move through what we have.

**God calls us to trust on God and not on what we have.** When Jesus sees a hungry crowd of 5,000 men (not counting the women and children who were undoubtedly present), he says to his disciples: "You feed them." They are stunned by the magnitude of the need. So, Jesus brings it down to their level. "Okay, Andrew, do a little inventory. Find out what food we have on hand." Andrew checks around. "There's a boy here with five loaves and two fishes. But it's not enough." Jesus ignores his unbelief. He takes the bread and the fish, lifts them to God in thanksgiving, and then distributes it to the people until everyone is fed and there are twelve baskets of food leftover.

Was it a miracle? Yes, a miracle that started with one young boy, two fish, and five small loaves of bread. That's how God's work gets done. By people doing an inventory, then offering to Jesus what they find. We have no indication that the disciples shook the boy down for his lunch. We assume that he gave it willingly, generously sharing what he had. God used a couple of fish and a few loaves to feed thousands.

The disciples counted the numbers and the cost and came up short. They did not count on God's abundance. The disciples saw only the size of the problem, but God saw an opportunity to be generous. The disciples said, "There is no way!", but God said, "Trust me, I am the Way!"

God calls on us to trust God's wisdom and power instead of simply relying on our own resources. God's power turned Moses' staff into a snake. God's power turned the widow's meager portion into an endless supply. God's power transformed one boy's lunch into a banquet for thousands. God asks us, not to trust on our ability or in what we have, but to trust on God completely to faithfully, generously use the things we offer.

God wants us to know that what makes the real difference is the power of the Holy Spirit working through what we give; it's not about us at all. It is God's anointing which works when we fully surrender our lives to God's purpose. It is not our gift or our education or our experience; it is not our might, but God's power and God's Abundant Spirit that makes the difference.

So, as you consider how to be open-heartedly generous with your life, remember that God calls us to serve with what we already have; and God calls us to dedicate all we have to God; and God calls us to trust on God and not on what we have.

As we FOCUS on our discipleship next year, I encourage you to weigh your financial support of our congregation's mission and ministries. If you've never made a pledge before, can you make one this year? Pledges are the tool the church uses to prepare a budget which funds our ministries and staff positions. Pledging is also a spiritual discipline which allows you to reflect on the gifts God has given you and show your thanks for those gifts by giving back to the Church. It models the importance of our spiritual lives and our commitment to a growing relationship with God and the church. Our hope is to receive 20 new pledges this year. We appreciate your prayerfully deliberation about pledging to Federated Church.

If you already pledge, we appreciate your continued support of Federated Church's mission. Like every organization, however, we are faced with rising costs for utilities, materials, and staffing needs. Can you raise your pledge this year? As Mike Shol's challenge showed, even a small increase, shared over the entire congregation, will have a big impact on the church's budget. Our hope is to receive 20 increased pledges this year.

The writer of Proverbs reminds us that the one who gives freely grows all the richer (11:24). The apostle Paul tells us that each of us must decide in our heart what to give, and then to give it cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7). Being generous is easy when we consider that all we have is God's gift to us. We are abundantly blessed, and we can be a blessing to others by how we share God's gifts.

Prayer: Lord, You are a generous God. You gave far beyond what we could ever have imagined or asked for in giving us Your Son. You gave the ultimate gift and it cost You dearly. And yet, far too often, we hold back. We keep a tight grip on the resources and the time You've given us. Too often, we hold back ourselves when You are calling us to give ourselves away. Forgive us, Lord, and teach us to loosen our grip. Teach us to give freely, remembering that all we have comes from You.

Source: <https://generousgiving.org/>