

A Season of Joy: GENEROSITY

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

*Our joy is enhanced when we make
someone else happy.*

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
November 13, 2022

Sometimes just one little word can make a big difference in the way you look at things. I remember when I was a teenager, and there were a variety of girls that I “liked.” But I was hesitant to use the other “L” word. There’s a big difference between “like” and “love.” A couple of times, either I or my girlfriend would use that word prematurely, and it damaged the relationship. But when it's right, and it’s sincere, love changes everything.

A few years ago, I read a book by Bob Buford called *Halftime*, which was full of advice for men approaching the second half of life.¹ The key idea in that book was that men (and women, too) should change their perspective in the second half of life—from seeking and building success to achieving significance. Significance involves establishing priorities and values that give meaning to life. Moving from success to significance changed my whole perspective on life.

This week, in the devotionals that we have been sending out for our generosity emphasis, there was a change in wording that I thought was potentially life-altering. Often we think about generosity as “giving”—giving to God, giving to the church, giving to others, giving back to our community. Giving is not a bad word. But the author of the devotional suggested a different word for acts of generosity. The word is “returning.” Everything we have comes from God, everything we supposedly own, every blessing, every good thing is a gift from God. So when we give, we are actually returning to God a portion of what has been given to us. Ultimately, it all belongs to God. We just get to use some of it for a time. We are not even being generous with our own resources; we are simply returning to God what already belongs to God. To me, that was a paradigm-shifting thought. Thinking about giving as returning can change your whole perspective on generosity.²

Today is the last of our sermons on “A Season of Joy.” I encourage you to go back and listen to or read the earlier sermons, or just get a copy of *The Book Of Joy*, which has been the foundation of our thoughts for eight weeks.³ Each week we have been looking at an

impediment to joy, a pillar of joy, and a practice of joy, as we have eavesdropped on conversations between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The final impediment to joy is not a surprise. It is illness and the fear of death. If you are ill, or death is near, it is supremely hard to be joyful. Archbishop Tutu had suffered illness throughout his life. As a child, he was afflicted with polio and tuberculosis. When this book was written, he was suffering from a recurrence of prostate cancer. He knew what he was talking about. Illness and the fear of death are impediments to joy because they create anxiety for afflicted people. But they can also cause us to pay attention. Illness and death can cause us to savor each moment we are alive. We can appreciate the moment, because we know it is not going to last. There is a pathway to joy through it all.

Even if the medical diagnosis is not good, there are opportunities for joy. Sometime sickness can be cured; sometimes it can't. But we can always be healed—if not physically, then emotionally and spiritually. Curing has to do with the resolution of the illness, but healing means coming to wholeness, and it's not dependent on the cure of the disease. Remember, the only permanent healing is death, because only then are we eternally whole.

It's not really death that we are afraid of; it's the dying. It's the fear of the unknown. It's the sickness and suffering that often precede dying. That's what makes us anxious. And even if we have a robust faith in eternal life, it is still normal to approach death with some trepidation.

How we confront death is a true measure of our spiritual development. Some people are totally at peace with it. Others are like the poet who said, "Do not go gentle into that good night... Rage, rage against the dying of the light."⁴ Others just close their eyes and hope it won't ever come to them. The Buddhists have a teaching from an ancient master: "The true measure of spiritual development is how one confronts one's own mortality. The best way is when one is able to approach death with joy; next best way is without fear; third best way is at least not to have regrets."⁵

Of course, the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu had very different ideas of what happens beyond death. Buddhists believe in reincarnation, that we return to earth in another living form, based on what kind of life we lived before. Tutu was a Christian, and Christians believe that we are saved for eternal life by our faith in the grace of Jesus Christ. We believe that when we die, we live eternally in heaven in the presence of God. I admit I have a preference for the Christian viewpoint! But both religions are trying to find a way to confront the anxiety surrounding illness and death without regrets, without fear if possible, and hopefully at the last with joy in our hearts.

If we can free ourselves of the impediment of fear over illness and death, we can be free to be generous. The more afraid and anxious we are, the more we are turned in on ourselves. The more we are turned in on ourselves, the less we are able to give of ourselves to others. The more we give of ourselves to others, the more we experience joy. It is counter-intuitive, but it's true. Joy is enhanced by making others happy.

Think of Christmas morning. Do you know how to tell you're an adult on Christmas morning? It's when you start feeling more joy in the gifts others receive than in what you get for Christmas. If your favorite presents are the ones you give away, then you are on the road to spiritual health.

Generosity is necessary for spiritual health. In 2015, social scientists Richard Davidson and Brianna Schuyler did a global study of happiness, and they discovered that people all over the world react the same way to generosity. Giving to others stimulates the reward

centers of the brain—that dopamine thing we talked about last week. Being generous correlates with better physical health, higher immune response, longer life expectancy and better relationships.⁶

Archbishop Tutu gave a geographical example of generosity. The Dead Sea in the Holy Land is in the lowest place on the planet that is not under the ocean. So all of the water from the Sea of Galilee flows down the Jordan River into the Dead Sea. But because everywhere else is higher, there is no outlet. That means the water has built up mineral deposits over the years and killed all the life in it. The Dead Sea has no fish or plant life; it's just salty. All it does is receive; it never gives. That's why it's dead.⁷

The generous life, on the other hand, is rich and full because it takes what is given and returns it to others. This is the life Paul is describing in our Scripture lesson today: *“The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ... You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.”*⁸

Generosity is a key concept in many spiritual traditions. It is one of the five pillars of Islam. In Judaism, generosity is linked with justice. In Christianity, generosity is called charity, which is also the word for love. In Buddhism, gifts are called *dana*. The Dalai Lama shared that the Buddhist concept of giving involves three types of generosity. The first is material giving, sharing our money and our resources with people. The second is freedom from fear. This is generosity in the form of protection and comfort for those who are anxious. And the third generosity is giving spiritual gifts. This means sharing wisdom, moral and ethical teaching, and helping people find joy in their lives. This is the type of generosity the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu were sharing through their week of conversation.

Generosity is the last pillar of joy because it is the highest expression of spiritual maturity, and it brings the greatest joy. There is a progression among the last three pillars. We feel gratitude for all the ways we have been blessed, and gratitude generates feelings of compassion for those who have not been so blessed—the poor, the sick, the grieving, the oppressed. But if feelings of compassion are not expressed in action, they are like the Dead Sea, spoiling without an outlet. Generosity is the action that expresses our feelings of compassion. The danger in all that is that we get so strung out on the suffering of others that we forget to claim the joy that gratitude, compassion, and generosity bring.

One of the students asked the two spiritual leaders a great question: “How can you be of service to people, nature, and causes in need without losing yourself completely to a crisis mentality? How can we help the world heal and still find joy in our own life?” The archbishop had a great answer. He reminded the student to look at all the good in the world, all the good people in the world, and not to feel like solving the problems of the world were his personal responsibility. He said, “Hey, remember that you are not alone, and you do not need to finish the work. It takes time, but we are learning, we are growing, we are becoming the people we want to be. It helps no one if you sacrifice your joy because others are suffering. We people who care must be attractive, must be filled with joy, so

that others recognize that caring, helping, and being generous are not a burden. They are a joy. Give the world your love, your service, your healing, but you can also give it your joy. This, too, is a great gift.”⁹

What the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop were both getting at is a special kind of generosity—a generosity of the spirit. Spiritual generosity is “big-hearted, magnanimous, tolerant, broadminded, patient, forgiving, and kind.”¹⁰ Tutu had a special phrase for this kind of generosity: “becoming an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that ripples out to all around us.”¹¹

Practicing generosity allows us to practice all the pillars of joy. We can have a perspective that sees the connection to all creation. We have humility because we have been blessed and given the opportunity to give. We can see the humor in life and enjoy every day. We accept life for what it is, but try to make it better. We forgive others who have wronged us. We feel gratitude for all we have been given. And we have compassion for other people and want to help those in need.

For your practice of joy this week, I would suggest that you meditate on your generosity of spirit. How are you expressing your generosity in ways that can be measured, and ways that cannot be measured? How can more generosity bring you more joy? And more practically, how can your practice of generosity impact the ministry of our church? Next week, we will make estimates of our giving—or returning—that will impact how we do ministry for the next year. Be in prayer, and make some decisions this week, and put your generosity into practice through your church.

The visit of Archbishop Tutu to the Dalai Lama was on the occasion of the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday. So on their last day together, they had a little birthday party for about 2,000 people. Most of the guests were children at the school run by the Tibetan Buddhists. The school, of course, is in India, where the Dalai Lama is in exile. Many of these children had been given up by their parents in Tibet and made dangerous journeys to India to be raised and educated by the monks. A few of them told their heart-breaking stories, and Archbishop Tutu spoke words of hope to them. He reminded them that he had lived through times of great hardship and oppression, but that love and justice had finally won the day. He told them that one day they would be dancing and singing again in the streets of Tibet. The children, with their hope awakened by this holy man, cheered their approval. Then they sang songs and had cake, because it was a birthday party. And they used candles that the archbishop had brought from South Africa, the trick kind that keep lighting up after you blow them out.

The final song of the party was the American tune, “We Are The World.” They sang in English, “We are the world, we are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let’s start giving.” As they sang, Archbishop Desmond Tutu got up and started dancing, what the author called an “irrepressible, elbow-waving boogie.” Then he reached out for the Dalai Lama. As a Tibetan monk, dancing was forbidden, but for the first time in his life, he got up to dance. At first, he was as uncomfortable as a middle school boy on the dance floor, but then he began to sway and rock back and forth and smile and laugh as the Archbishop encouraged him. “They took each other’s hands and moved to the music, celebrating the true joy of friendship, the true joy of the unbreakable connection to one another, and the true joy of the world coming together as one.”¹²

I want to invite you today to do the dance of joy. It is the dance of the mind, based on the pillars of perspective, humility, humor, and acceptance. It is the dance of the heart,

based on the pillars of forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity. It is the dance of connection for all things in creation. It is the dance of life. Let's boogie!

¹ Bob Buford, *Halftime: Moving From Success To Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

² Nathan King and Richard Rogers, *Generational Generosity* (NK Solutions, 2022), 31f.

³ Douglas Abrams, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, *The Book Of Joy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016).

⁴ Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," <https://poets.org/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night>.

⁵ *The Book Of Joy*, 166.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 264f.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ 2 Corinthians 9:6-12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 273f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 288.