

GENEROSITY AND HUMAN TRANSFORMATION

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There is a story about a minister trying to get serious and speak about the imminence of death and its power over us. His opening sentence was that "in 100 years, every member of this church will be dead." And with that, a man in the fourth row began to laugh.

Now there is nothing in the world more upsetting and disconcerting to a preacher than to have someone miss the mood and the intent. So he thought the brother had misheard him and he said again, "I'm here to say that within the next 100 years, every member of this church will be dead."

At that, the man laughed again. The minister began to get a little angry and was losing his fervor. So he turned to the laughing man and said, "You think that's funny?" "Yes, I do." "Why do you think it's funny?" "Because I'm, not a member of this church!"

The church I want to belong to is one which deals honestly with money and calls its members into the immense and challenging journey into generosity. I want to be part of a great church and no church rises into greatness unless its financial giving is great.

I've been honored to be with you these two days at this very rich Stewardship Conference. You are on an exciting journey. It's been wonderful to share some of it with you.

I want to make three points in this sermon.

I.

The first point is to proclaim this undeniable truth for the Christian: generosity and human transformation are inseparable.

As I've said a number of times, the bottom line of the health, vitality and integrity of an individual Christian or the corporate institution of the Church is how we deal with money.

Jesus kept reminding people again and again that the way we use money is the true index of our values, our loyalties, our priorities – no matter what our rhetoric is. Remember Emerson's words? "What you do speaks so loudly that I

cannot hear what you say." What we do with our money gives us away. Our checkbooks reveal our character.

One of my favorite stories is about a very affluent man who was approached to contribute in a major church capital funds drive. The urgent need, the campaign's compelling case, his essential role to their success were all eloquently stated – and the request made for his generous support. The man responded: "I understand why you think I can give \$25,000. I am a man with my own successful business and, it is true, I have all the signs of affluence. But there are some things you don't know. Did you know that my mother is in an expensive nursing home?" "Well, no, we didn't know." "Did you know that my brother died, and left a family of five who had almost no insurance?" "No, we didn't." "Did you know my son is deeply religious, has gone into social work, and makes less than the national poverty level to meet the needs of his family?" "No, we didn't realize." "Well, then, if I didn't give any of them a damn penny, why do you think I'll give it to you?"

The story is probably apocryphal. However, it does illuminate a quality of life that stands in stark contrast to the basic assumptions of the Jewish-Christian heritage and the life giving faith many of you have experienced in your own congregations.

I want to come close to your heart and talk about your own giving to your local congregation. You've heard lots of talk about tithing. I would urge you, plead with you, to seriously consider being a tither. During all the years of our marriage, Mary Regas and I have been tithers. The minimum gift we've given to All Saints Church in Pasadena is 10% of the gross amount of our family resources. But I'm not one who says it is easy. It has not been for us. Sometimes it has been fiercely conflictual because we also are committed to giving another 5% to charities, to important projects we strongly believe in. However, the struggle has always been life transforming.

I like the 10% tithe to my church as a standard because it indicates how I'm doing in my journey into generosity. It clearly relates my standard of giving to my standard of living.

Most of us at this conference could give \$1,000 a year to our church's work without affecting our priorities. But not 10%. Can I live on 85 or 90% of my resources? It is there that great things happen. When you decide to change your priorities, you change your life. I've seen it happen again and again. And that's the business of the Church – changing lives.

The process of authentic struggle with money is the gateway into new life for an individual and for a congregation. It brings us into contact with that place on our journey where life can be transformed forever and a parish renewed.

The happiest, most dynamic and vital people I know are those for whom generosity is the apex of Christian virtue. Remember – miser and misery come

from the same root word. The test that psychologist Abraham Maslow offered for mature adulthood was this: "When a person accepts a lifestyle that indicates that they want to put more into life than they want to take out, they have reached adult maturity." We take it even further: to give heroically is to live – to live fully, joyfully, authentically. That reality is woven into the very fabric of the universe. That's the way God made you and me.

II.

My second point. God needs you. That's why generosity is so important.

Jesus said to his disciples. "As the Father sent me, so I now send you." Today Christ is saying to us: as I reached out to those imprisoned by greed, corrupted by hatred, poisoned by self-indulgence – with healing love – so I now send you out with the same ministry. You are to be my compassionate heart and hands of healing. That is Jesus' message to you today, his disciples. That, too, is part of stewardship. The Church needs your generosity so it can be the hands of Christ's love in the world.

At the end of World War II, a couple of American GIs were helping some Italians rebuild a small village church destroyed by artillery fire. In the rubble, they noticed a statue of Christ. It was unharmed except that its outstretched hands were gone.

Shall we discard the statue?" the soldier asked the priest? "No," he said. "Let's place it inside the church door for all to see as we enter and leave. It will remind us that Jesus has no other hands than ours." That, too, is what stewardship is all about.

I sense from my conversation with you and from listening in on your struggles to be faithful that there is a deep desire for real ministry in your congregations. There is a deep desire to abate the world's misery, to be among those who work to heal its wounds, to be companions in the struggle to extend the domain of love, reconciliation and peace throughout the world! Your desire is to have an effective transformative ministry.

Is that your dream? To be God's witnesses, to be the healing hands of Christ? Don't let anyone take it away from you. We will be the hands of Christ and build a new world when there are enough of us who dare to hope – when enough say with their lives and their money that it is still possible to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless of the world; it is still possible to liberate the oppressed from racism, to care for the sick, especially the poor, the children and the elderly; it is still possible to free the world from hatred, sexual prejudices and nationalistic arrogance; it is still possible to educate all our children and assist those who seek the truth that sets them free; to preserve Mother Earth, this fragile earth, our island home; it is still possible to tame the savagery in humanity and make gentle the life of the world; and to end the monstrosity of war forever.

And it would be a betrayal of everything our faith has taught us to believe about God and the sacredness of humanity if we were to lose faith in the possibility that Israelis and Palestinians can find a way to live in peace. Oh – keep that hope alive!

I hope you get hold of the idea that God needs you. Meister Eckhart, the first Century German mystic, put it with unusual boldness: "God can as little do without us, as we without God."

There is a verse in Isaiah 43 that illuminates this concept: "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God."

The early Rabbis around 200 AD, after careful study of this passage added this amazing statement to the text: "That is, when you are my witnesses, I am God; and when you are not my witnesses I am, as it were, not God."

God needs us. That is not arrogant boasting, but a statement of high responsibility and high theology of human life.

You and I are indispensable instruments in fulfilling God's mighty purpose.

It is in this context that I call you into greater generosity. If you are timid in your dreams and your response at this critical moment in the Church's life and the nation's life – it would break the heart of God. But in your bold ministry, in your being God's witnesses, and the healing hands of Christ, your own life is transformed.

Remember Mark Twain's comment when asked if he believed in infant baptism? "Believe in it? Hell, I've seen it." When you reach out daringly in the name of Christ to the broken world to be Christ's hands of love and healing, you experience a miracle within yourself. I've seen it. I've witnessed these miracles too many times to doubt it.

One bears a burden and finds a joy. One soothes the wounds of a suffering world and finds one's own life healed and transformed.

III.

Generosity and human transformation are inseparable. God needs you. Now in my third point, I want to take you to a deeper level.

You have a need to give generously and in proportion to your resources. You have a need to give. That is the way God made you.

Some 20 years ago, in New York City, I was doing a Stewardship Conference for a very diverse group from the several congregations that made up the Trinity Parish on Wall Street. It is one of the wealthiest Christian communities in the world. So I'm aware you are wondering what in the world I

would be doing with stewardship. Trinity Parish had begun to make all its chapels independent congregations, and with Trinity Parish's incomparable endowment – no one had given any attention to stewardship development. So Robert Parks, Trinity's Rector at that time, had invited me in to help. One of the major chapels of Trinity is in Harlem. In one of my workshops were these two African-American women. A very urbane, sophisticated white man angrily attacked me for one of my comments and said you are wrong and un-Christian to ask poor people to give.

Before I had a chance to respond, an older African-American woman stood up and spoke with the strongest protest. "What a terrible thing you have said. You mean, you would deny me the greatest joy of my life – to give my tithe to extend the mission of Jesus Christ?"

You have been created in the image of God. The image of a God who gives lavishly. That thumb print of God the giver is on your soul. Down deep in you is the need to be a giver – for that's the way God made you and me, in God's image. And when you respond gratefully to the generosity of God and for all the mercies Christ has brought into your life – there comes into your being a joy the world can never give or ever, ever take away. That's the way God made you!

There is a story that indicates St. Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage in the 3rd century, knew the depth of this truth of our need to give. It is told that when St. Cyprian wanted to discipline one of his congregations, he issued an order that would seem absurd to many of us today; he would forbid the people to make an offering. Forbidden to give – that's how they were punished. Think of it. The greatest punishment imaginable was to forbid a Christian to give!

IV.

I must draw this sermon to a close. You are loved by God forever. Jesus Christ puts loving arms around you to accept you just as you are. Now the living Christ calls you and me to continue to bear witness to this love and mercy in the moral wastelands and on the death slopes of our world. You do so in part by the generosity of offering your life and resources to support the ministries of your congregation.

I share a moving, poignant episode from the life of Giacomo Puccini. Puccini – what a great man he was, such a magnificent musician! He wrote *Madame Butterfly*, *La Boheme*, *Tosca* – so many opera classics are from that incredible man.

In 1922 he got cancer. He said, "I want to write one more opera." So he sat down to write *Turandot*. His students asked, "But suppose you die?" "Oh," Puccini replies, "my students will finish it. Never fear."

In 1924 he died, and his students did finish his music. Its premiere was held in Milan, Italy, at La Scala Opera House under the direction of Puccini's best student – Arturo Toscanini. The gala performance of *Turandot* proceeded and came to that point in the music where the composer had laid down his pen. Tears streamed down Toscanini's face. He put down his baton and turned to the audience and said, "Thus far, the master wrote and then the master died."

Then picking up his baton, his face wreathed with smiles, Toscanini shouted to the audience, "But his disciples finished the music!"

Will we? Will we finish the work begun by our master, Jesus the Christ? Jesus' arms of love embraced everyone, everyone. No one was beyond the pale. There were no outcasts. Christ gave the world life abundant, justice and freedom. God calls you and me to finish that work. What a privilege! What a privilege!