

SERMON: **“Being Fruitful: Practicing Extravagant Generosity.”**

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sun., November 21, 2010, St. James Presbyterian Church

I’m glad that you are here and that you choose to join your voice and prayers with ours this morning: you’ve picked a good Sunday – not only because it’s Christ the King Sunday – but because it’s the last Sunday of our current series on fruitful living entitled “Being Fruitful,” – based on Robert Schnase’s book **Five Practices of Fruitful Living**. Over the course of the series we’ve learned how through the practice of Radical Hospitality we receive God and invite God’s love into our life. We then learned that the next step to being fruitful comes when we practice Passionate Worship by allowing God to reshape our hearts and minds through our meeting Him in worship. Then we looked at how we are called to deepen our relationship with God and how if we then reach out to, and cooperate with, the Holy Spirit and Intentionally practice our own Faith Development we will begin to see the world as God sees it – and all those in it. Which is why – as we learned last week – when we live a fruitful life, when we love God with all that we are, we must also begin to love our neighbours with all that we have by practicing Risk-Taking Mission and Service. And now, finally, we come to the most abundant by-product of being fruitful; the practice of Extravagant Generosity. So, as we begin, let me ask you this; if the truest expression of God’s love for us is His generosity, how generous is your love for Him? Or, to put it another way; is your faith more about giving or taking? Is it about what you want and need or is it about the needs of others?

My mother told me that I needed to be clear about what my sermon’s message is, so here it is: giving helps us become who/what God wants us to be. And while today is also the Sunday we are highlighting the needs of Presbyterian Sharing I want to be equally clear that giving is not merely about the Church’s needs – it’s about who we are and claim to be as a people of faith – as Christians. More so than any other religion or theology Christianity is a theology of giving. The Bible is the story of God’s love – in fact, in many ways it is a compilation of God’s extravagant generosity toward His creation and creatures. The whole account of creation is filled with the abundance of God’s generosity: everything came from God, everything happens through Him; or as Paul puts it, *“from Him and through Him came all things.”* (Rom 11:36) This initial act of generosity – the giving up of space to make space for all that we understand to be creation – forms the basis for the relationship God has with us: but what do you give a God who has everything? In the Old Testament the people of God began by giving the *“First Fruits”* – the practice of giving the first/best of the harvest, livestock, or income as a sign of their gratitude to God. Later Abraham – then Jacob – offered a tithe/tenth of everything to God. And in Malachi God call on us to trust in Him and in His promises. Clearly giving reveals the measure of our love for, gratitude to, and trust in God.

But the lesson of generosity continues through Jesus’ teachings about the widow who’s offering of two coins was greater than richer givers because she trusted God and gave all she had. (Luke 21:1-4) Through other stories, parables, and comments that focus on

possessions, wealth, poverty, giving, gifts, offerings, tithes, charity, sacrifice, generosity, and sharing what one has with those in need Jesus reveals that how we use our money matters to God. Why? Because we cannot be open to God's presence – if God's essential nature is giving – if we cling to everything, if we live lives of greed, selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-absorption (qualities that we are told lead to death). By “*giving, it [life] will be given to you,*” says Jesus in Luke (6:38) And there's no greater example of this than when Jesus tells the world that “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son:*” the source of God's generosity is His love for us – and it's heart-breaking how little we give back to this generous God!

One of the qualities of being fruitful – of living a life of faith – is that, at no time, is our focus fixed on ourselves; we are to look to loving and serving God with all that we are and loving and serving our neighbour with all that we have. And one of the spin-off benefits of this outward focus is that at some point – as our lives truly express our gratitude to God for all that we are and have – we become humbled by the realisation that all that we are comes from God and belongs to God: which leads us to our thesis – that giving helps to change us into the person God longs for us to be. Like the ‘circle of love’ that I talked about last week, God uses our practice of giving to reconfigure us – to cultivate a different nature within us: in the circle of giving generosity only comes through giving and the more we give the more we align with God's desire for us and grow closer to God – our generosity begets God's generosity.. Seen this way, giving – the practice of Extravagant Generosity – is a sign of a growing, maturing, fruitful faith: while we were made in the image of God, by giving generously we are transformed into the heart of God. But if God created us and gave us gifts so that we would bear fruit – if God gave us the capacity to be generous, I wonder why in God's name we aren't?

Our two readings speak of God's promise to provide what we need to be fruitful – to enjoy God's favour. The Isaiah reading the people of God were promised that God will provide the means for them to prosper and be productive – as long as they were faithful and trusting. The 2 Corinthians reading tells us that those who sow bountifully (those who trust God and are generous) will receive God's abundant blessings and “*will be enriched in every way for [their] great generosity.*” (2 Cor 9:11) But if we don't – if we sow sparingly (if we have little faith and withhold our generosity) – then, friends, we are told in the clear and stark terms of the vine metaphor that we will be “*removed,*” “*gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*” (John 15: 2;6) So, when it comes to being fruitful – or living faithfully – as we close out our series on fruitful living, ask yourself this one question; what kind of life does God really want you to have – how does God want you to live? And if your answer is anything different than the one you're living right now; then you have a choice.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts enable us to open ourselves up to God as we seek to live fruitful lives. Amen