

# Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

## Extravagant Generosity Frankton – 7/20/14

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9.6-11a      enriched by giving

Proposition: Extravagant Generosity is in response to God's love for us

**[SLIDE]** I need to have the ushers come forward and help me for a minute. We are continuing a series of sermons based on the Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Five Principles of Fruitful Congregations*. To remind you that we are to be fruitful, every week we're going to give you a different fruit. Today we are going to talk about Extravagant Generosity. When I think of an extravagant fruit, I think of maraschino cherries, probably because they usually sit on top of an ice cream sundae which is pretty extravagant for me. So as the ushers distribute these maraschino cherries, you don't have to wait for everyone to get theirs, once you get yours, you can mow down on it or you can wait and savor it at your leisure.

In his book, Schnase outlines five specific areas that he has seen be effective in growing congregations: **[SLIDE]** Radical Hospitality, Intentional Faith Development, Passionate Worship, We talked about Radical Hospitality and how churches that practice Radical Hospitality go above and beyond what is expected because the church folks love those who do not have a relationship with Christ, so they go out of their way to show them Christ. For Intentional faith Development, Christians understand that in order for them to have a good relationship with Christ, they must work on that relationship through Bible study, prayer, small group participation, etc. We talked about Passionate Worship and how we all need to prepare through week by being close to God so that our worship of him on Sunday is more passionate. **[SLIDE]** The last two practices are: Extravagant Generosity, and Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Today: Extravagant Generosity.

**[SLIDE]** Craig and Lisa each grew up in church going families in separate communities. Though they both attended youth fellowship and Sunday school while they were in high school, they were a lot less active in church during their college years. After a chance meeting at college, they fell in love, got married and settled into the community where their jobs took them. After the birth of their first child, they decided to 'find a church home.' They found a United Methodist church a few miles away and began attending. As time passed and their second child came, they became a little more active. Both of them were in their mid-thirties and their household income was moderately high even though Lisa worked just part-time. They lived the American dream lifestyle: a house in the 'burbs that they were paying a mortgage on, two cars, two kids, and a dog.

Two things happened within a year of each other that deepened their faith and commitment to Jesus and his church. First, they both started attending a Bible study on Wednesday night, led by their pastor. The church made it easy for couples to come to Bible study by providing care for their children. The Bible study took hold of both of them and they began to ask more questions about their own faith and the way they lived it. The second thing that happened was that one of Lisa's friends convinced her to go on the mission trip the church was taking to help the folks in the Appalachian area of the US. And as many of you who have been on a mission trip can attest, you come back a changed person. So did Lisa. She felt different inside and couldn't stop talking about the trip.

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Then, during the church's fall giving campaign, their pastor began talking about giving to the church. But he didn't talk about it in dollar terms. He talked about giving in terms of our giving as a response to God's love for us. He talked in terms of not everyone giving equal amounts, but each should give equal sacrifice. He talked about giving as a proportion or a percentage of income. He talked about the Old Testament concept of the tithe portion, 10%, and how the New Testament takes that concept even further. He challenged everyone to figure out for themselves what portion or what percentage of their income they give, noting that, on average, United Methodists give 1-2% of their income to the church. Then he talked about proportional giving with the goal of tithing. Craig and Lisa did their homework and figured out what percentage of their income they were giving to the church. Guess what it was: 1-2%.

Craig and Lisa were typical middle-class folks. They had a mortgage payment. They had a car payment. They had all the other bills you folks have: groceries, utilities, telephone, satellite, insurance, gasoline, entertainment and the like. Then there were those unexpected expenses: the car's fuel pump, their home's air conditioner, and a washing machine that went kaput. They had two kids they were hoping to send to college, so they were saving for their children's college. They were also hoping to retire one day, so they were trying to put something away for their own retirement. With all that, they didn't have a lot of money left over at the end of the month. They looked at their income and their outgo and, quite frankly, giving 10% of their combined income to the church seemed crazy and extravagant and really just too much to expect.

During the Bible study that week, the lesson was about the widow who gave her last two cents to the offering while many of the others were giving larger gifts. (That's one smart pastor.) The lesson was that the widow had given out of her poverty while others were giving out of their abundance. I think the Holy Spirit worked on them during the car ride home. Their discussion on the way home from Bible study that night led them to make a decision. While giving 10% of their income seemed way too much to expect, giving another 1% didn't seem excessive. They decided to raise their giving by 1% of their income. And they took another step as well. They decided to make it a goal of taking a few years to get to the tithe level.

In order to keep raising their giving level, they had to do some rethinking about their spending habits during the ensuing years. They had to look at how frequently they bought fast-food rather than eating at home. They had to look at how many Starbucks coffees and Ricker pops they drank each week. They had to look at the number of years they drove a car before replacing it. They had to re-think the kinds of entertainment they did together as a family. They had to look at how they spent a raise in their salary: did they just roll it into their income or did they set a specific part of the raise for giving. They looked at their investments and how quickly they were growing and accumulating interest and dividends. It took them eight years, but Craig and Lisa finally made it to the tithe. As much as they had prayed, talked, read and committed themselves to the tithe over those intervening years, nothing had prepared them for the first time they actually wrote a check for 10% of their income to put in the offering plate as it passed by them. What had seemed crazy and extravagant and too much to expect just a few years ago, now seemed like an incredible sense of accomplishment and a spiritual lift.

Their pastor asked Craig and Lisa to talk about their faith journey to tithing during the fall stewardship campaign. (I told you he was pretty smart.) Craig told the congregation about how tithing had deepened their understanding and practice of faith. He said that people talk about

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putting God first in their lives, but in practice most of a person's major decisions are made with God sitting out on the periphery. Instead of giving God the leftovers at the end of the month, tithing is a spiritual discipline that puts God first. Lisa talked about how they looked at their money as if each dollar had a mission. As stewards, their job was to see that the money fulfilled purposes consistent with their Christian beliefs. How they spent, saved, and gave reflected on this sense of mission. Finally they both talked about how tithing sealed their sense of belonging to the church and being a part of the church's mission to the community and the world. And that's the end of the story.

I'm sure there are other stories like Craig and Lisa's that have occurred down through the centuries of Christendom. First century Christians, early Methodists, and United Methodists living today have all discovered a truth as sure as death and taxes: generosity connects people to the body of Christ, enlarges the soul, and realigns our priorities to fulfill Christ's ministries on earth. [SLIDE] Our giving reflects the very nature of God. God has given us all that we have. Every one of us in this room today owes our very lives to God's giving nature. So when we give, we reflect God's nature, God's image, within us.

In the Old Testament, the ideas of tithing and of first fruits were significant. [SLIDE] In Genesis 14, Abraham gave a tenth of everything to God. [Gen 14.20] [SLIDE] In Malachi, the Prophet calls upon God's people to genuinely rely upon God by offering the tithe so that God's response will be to bless them greatly. [Mal 3.8-10] [SLIDE] When we look at the Gospels, Jesus' words about the widow speak to us about sacrificial giving, not giving just out of our abundance. [LK 21.2-4] [SLIDE] And finally, there is today's scripture. *Yes, you will be enriched so that you can give even more generously.* [2 Cor 9.11] When we give to God, it will come back to us even more so that we can give even more.

[SLIDE] John Wesley and the early Methodists practiced Extravagant Generosity as a necessary and indispensable aspect of discipleship. To Wesley, Extravagant Generosity was essential for the maturing of the soul and for the work of the church. He feared that frugality of early Methodists would lead to levels of wealth that would distract them from their growth in faithful living. Generosity, according to Wesley, was rooted in grace, an emptying of oneself for others, an expression of love of God and neighbor. Wesley taught Methodists to "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."<sup>1</sup> These practices deepened faith, avoided pride and vanity, and resulted in a greater capacity to help others.

We Americans live in an extraordinarily materialistic world and a consumerist society. We are immersed in a culture that feeds the appetite for more and bigger and that fosters the myth that our self-worth is found in material wealth and that our happiness is found in possessing things. [SLIDE] Dave Ramsey, whose Financial Peace University seminar was held here in this church this past winter says, "We buy things we don't even need to impress people we don't even know."<sup>2</sup> A recent national study asked folks, "How much more income would it take for you to be happy?" The very consistent answer among all economic levels of society was 20%. In other words, people

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<sup>1</sup> From "The Use of Money", 1744.

<sup>2</sup> From "The Dave Ramsey Show"

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who earn 20% less than you do think they will be happy on your income. So why do you feel discontent on your income?

At their root, our materialistic world, consumerist society, and our desire to want more to impress folks are not financial problems. At their root, they are spiritual problems. They reveal a value system that is spiritually corrosive and that leads to continuing discontent, discouragement, and unhappiness. We can never earn enough to be happy when we believe that satisfaction, self-definition, and meaning derive primarily from our possessions. At some point, followers of Jesus must decide whether they will listen to the wisdom of the world or to the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God tells us that his eternal love for us is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that Christ is the source of our self-worth, not money, not a big home, not a big truck, not a big tractor, not a big rock on your finger.

I can understand those who are new to the faith may find the practice of tithing extremely challenging. They need to take it one step at a time. But, those of you who have been active in the church for a while – five, ten twenty, thirty, forty years or more – and have attended worship faithfully and studied Scripture regularly and have felt sustained by the fellowship of the church and have offered yourself in countless ways in service to the church but do not tithe...I just want to challenge you to think seriously and prayerfully about just why that is. Why are the other practices of the faith so relevant and helpful, but the discipline of tithing is not?

I encourage you: **[SLIDE]** practice Extravagant Generosity. Practice the tithe. If you're not tithing now, figure out a plan to work your way up to it like Craig and Lisa did. When we practice Extravagant Generosity, we are changed, just like Craig and Lisa felt changed when they practiced it. And when we change, our church changes and when our church changes, our world changes. Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshipped, every church organ that has lifted our spirits, every pew where we have sat, every communion rail where we have knelt, every hymnal from which we have sung, every praise team that has touched our hearts, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every church camp cabin where we have slept – all are the fruit of someone's Extravagant Generosity.