

Sermon for April 28, 2002
Ryan Ahlgrim
First Mennonite Church

Matthew 6: 22-23

Generosity

The whole land of Israel was in a terrible drought. No rain fell. There wasn't even any dew on the ground in the mornings. Crops withered. Cattle died of starvation. Streams dried up.

The prophet Elijah had predicted this would happen. He himself was thirsty because his own source of water had dried up. Then God said to him, "Leave the land of Israel. Go to the land of the Phoenicians, to the town of Zarephath, and there you will find a widow who will feed you." So Elijah went to this foreign town, and as he approached the city gate he saw a woman collecting sticks. I don't know how he knew she was a widow. Maybe gathering sticks was usually done by men, and so for a woman to be doing it would show that she had no male support. Or maybe Elijah could just tell. That's what makes a prophet a prophet—they can see what most of us cannot see. In any case, Elijah immediately goes up to her and says, "Could you get me a cup of water?" The widow nods and begins walking to her house. Elijah shouts out after her, "Oh and bring me a piece of bread too." The woman, emaciated, turns around and says, "I have nothing baked. All I have is one handful of ground grain in a jar, and a little bit of oil at the bottom of a jug. I was just picking up these sticks here to build one last fire, bake the last bit of grain and oil into a little piece of bread, feed it to my son and myself, and then wait to starve to death."

Elijah looks at her and says, "Trust me. Do exactly what you were going to do—make that little piece of bread, but give it to me to eat, and then you can make some for yourself and your son. Because this is what the God of Israel is telling you: that jar of ground grain and that jug of oil will not run out until this drought ends."

The woman went to her house; Elijah followed. She shook out a little grain from her jar and a little oil from her jug and baked a little piece of bread and gave it to Elijah. Then she shook out some more and baked another piece of bread for herself and her son. The next day she made some more bread for Elijah, and some more for herself and her son. And the next day she did it again. And the next day she did it again. And the ground grain never got quite used up, and there was always a little oil in the jar.

I had not read this story in a long time. This week when I read it again in 1 Kings 17 I was shocked by it. How dare God send Elijah to a widow for food and water! A widow was the most vulnerable and poor person in society. And not only is she a widow, but she's starving, and her little son is starving. How dare Elijah instruct her to give him food first! And she's not even an Israelite! Elijah is in a foreign country. So that makes

Elijah a foreigner—a foreigner telling a starving widow who has a starving son to feed him first. It's outrageous.

But what's even more outrageous, and in fact the whole point of the story, is that she does it. She does the unthinkable. She gives a stranger, a foreigner, her last bit of food when she and her son are starving to death. Why does she do such an outrageous thing? Perhaps it's because she has faith—faith in the foreign God of this strange and foreign man. But even behind that faith there is another quality basic to her personality that must have been there: she possesses that incredible and outrageous virtue we call generosity.

Last week I said that one of the greatest spiritual virtues is faithfulness: being utterly loyal and sticking with the courage of your convictions. Another spiritual virtue, just as great and just as reflective of the heart of God, is generosity. Now, when I say "generosity" I'm not talking about how much money you give away. I'm talking about a quality within us, an attitude toward all people and all of life. I'm talking about a carefree and open heart, open spirit, open hands. I'm talking about freedom, not counting the cost, gleeful giving, hospitality, and letting go. Generosity is about the heart, not the wallet.

But generosity isn't simply a light-hearted, puffy cloud floating around. Generosity is rooted in courage, deep faith, inner strength, and openness to self-sacrifice. There's an old Arab folktale about a man who owned the most beautiful thoroughbred stallion of all. Everyone who saw this horse wanted it. Many people made fabulous offers to buy the horse, but the owner always said no. One person in particular who wanted the horse was this man's best friend, who was a horse-dealer. The dealer also made generous offers to buy the horse, but the man always politely refused. But one year the man fell on very hard times. He was barely making it. And the dealer thought to himself, "This would be a good time to make an offer on that horse. My friend desperately needs the money, and I'll get the horse." So he approached his friend and said, "I have a business deal I'd like to discuss with you." Following the custom of that country, the two men ate a meal together before transacting any business. After the meal was over, the dealer said, "I am willing to offer you a third of my entire fortune for your horse. Surely you can't turn down this generous offer." The man replied, "It is indeed generous, and I thank you for the offer. But it is no longer possible for me to offer you the horse. For, you see, in my present impoverished circumstances I butchered the horse in order to provide this meal for you."

Generosity makes sacrifices. The woman who fed Elijah had to make a giant sacrifice to show generosity—she had to be willing to feed Elijah before herself or her son. Generosity sees the face of God in all other people, and therefore prizes all other people as much as one's self. Generosity is proven, not when we have plenty, but when we have almost nothing. If I were to win the lottery (which would be a miracle since I've never bought a lottery ticket) and suddenly had a million dollars, it would be easy for me to give lots of it away. But that's not really generosity; that's just giving away extra I don't need and don't feel the loss of. Real generosity comes out of our poverty, not our wealth.

But here's the miracle behind generosity: even though generosity makes sacrifices, it also fills us. Generosity can never empty us—it can only make us more full. This is the spiritual truth behind the story of that jar and jug that would never empty. The story is telling us that this is true for all of us when we have the courage and faith to be generous, to give out of our poverty. Through these actions we will never be emptied, but always re-filled.

Proverbs 11:24 says, "Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want." Financially this is not always true. A preacher in Florida told people that if they gave to his ministry, God would repay them tenfold. One businessman made a very large donation to the ministry and then went bankrupt. He sued the preacher for false contractual promises. The judge threw out the case, telling the man he should have known better than to believe everything a preacher says! People who give a lot away can become bankrupt, and tightwads can become millionaires. And yet, have we not seen for ourselves how generosity creates more generosity? Once someone gets the ball rolling, it opens up everyone's heart and spirit, and we all are filled with what we need—love, appreciation, and gratefulness.

Jesus once said the eye is the lamp of the body, so if your eye is healthy your whole body is full of light. The eye is how we look at the world. A healthy eye is a generous eye, a generous way of looking at the world. In fact, the word "healthy" here can be translated "generous." And an unhealthy eye is a stingy eye—an eye that looks at the world with tightness, holding on to what it has. A stingy eye doesn't let light in, and so our whole body is full of darkness. Jesus is urging us to look at all of life generously; our whole spiritual well being depends on it.

I have to admit this is a challenge for me. Some spiritual virtues come naturally to us, and some we need to learn over many years and cultivate. By nature I tend to be a faithful kind of person—loyal and tenacious with my convictions. But the virtue of generosity is not one I was born with. I was born to be a tightwad—or as Mennonites prefer to say, "frugal." You know how, when you buy brand new socks and you put them on, they feel so soft and tight and comfortable. That's my basic personality: a tight sock—close, hold it in, warm and cozy. But generosity is an old sock, washed a thousand times so the elastic is all limp, and the sock itself is full of holes. Generosity is loose and it lets all sorts of things through.

God wears old socks. James 1:17 says, "Every good and generous action and every perfect gift come from above." We learn generosity from God. It's a super-abundant world, and it's poured out on all of us whether we deserve it or not. And that's one of the problems with generosity: it's so generous, it offends us. Jesus once told a story about a man who went out at 9 a.m. and hired a bunch of migrant workers to pick fruit for \$80 a day. At noon he went out and hired some more and sent them into the orchards. And at 5:00 he hired a few more. At 6:00 he called everyone in to get their pay. The ones who worked one hour got \$80. The ones who started at noon thought they'd get more, but they also got \$80. And the ones who worked all day thought for sure they'd get paid more, but they also got \$80. They complained to the man. He said, "You agreed to work

for \$80. That's exactly what I gave you. I've been totally fair with you. And if I want to give these others, who started work late, the same amount, that's up to me, isn't it? Are you envious because I am generous?"

Are you ever envious because God is generous—sometimes just as generous with others, maybe even more generous with others, whom you don't think deserve it? That last line in Greek literally reads, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" In other words, are we so offended by God's generosity toward others, that we become stingy, that our eye—our way of looking at the world—becomes stingy and our whole body is full of darkness? Wouldn't it be the most ironic tragedy if God's crazy, unfair generosity caused us to become, not generous, but tightfisted?

The greatest challenge of generosity is not to freely give money or hospitality; the greatest challenge of generosity is to freely give love, mercy, and forgiveness. Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Love your enemies. What credit is it to you to love your friends? Everyone does that. But love your enemies and pray for those who abuse you." This is the real heart of generosity. God freely forgives us when we come to God in humility. God freely gives mercy and good gifts to everyone—whether they've asked for it or not, deserved it or not. God gives this to us. But if our response is not to pass on this generosity, if our response is to become stingy with mercy and forgiveness, then we can no longer receive it from God either. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Elijah is calling to you in your poverty, calling to you in your affliction, asking you to feed him first. Will you do it? Generosity is the heartbeat of God, the heartbeat of all life. Join your heartbeat with God's heartbeat and be filled to overflowing.