

“DARING FAITH: II – DARE TO GIVE EXTRAVAGANTLY!”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Genesis 28:10-22

Luke 21:1-4

One day, a young woman in Oklahoma walked into a support group meeting in her church. She was going through a really rough time. She had recently lost her husband and was now facing the task of raising three young children all alone. She was scared, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to do it, and most of all, she felt all alone. She listened for a while, and then, she had a chance to speak.

“If it were just me, I'd be okay. Sure, I'm hurting and I'm lonely, and I'll have to do without some things, but I can handle it just fine. It's my kids that I'm worried about. So many of their friends have new clothes to wear to school this year – and not just new clothes, but expensive designer clothes. There's no way I'll ever be able to afford things like that, and it hurts me to see my kids feel like they're out of place. And later, when it comes to college, I don't know what in the world I'll do. We're just barely making it now.” Overcome, her voice trailed off and she started to cry.

At that point, an older woman came over to her and put her arm around her shoulders and tried to comfort her. And then she began to speak. She said, “You

know, I can really relate to what you are feeling right now because twenty years ago, I was in the same predicament. I had lost my husband, I had four young children, and I wasn't even making \$500 a month. But let me tell you something. We made it, the five of us, and I'm so proud of who and where my kids are today."

And then she said, "I have one piece of advice to give you. It's the best advice I know. You may not be able to give your kids designer clothes or sports cars or trips to Europe, but there is one thing you can give them that's better than all of that: You can give them the church! Make sure that you and your kids go to church and Sunday School every week. That might not seem like much to you right now, but I cannot tell you what a difference it will make in the long run. They'll receive something there that many kids don't have and that money can't buy, and it's something upon when they can build their lives for the rest of their days. Give them the church. It's the best gift you can give them! It's the best thing you can do for them!" (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, "The Attitude of Gratitude," p. 19)

That was some wise advice that the woman gave to that young mother. But you know what? I wish I could have heard more of their conversation. I wish I could have heard that woman go on to tell her why church would be such a gift to her children. I can only imagine.

Actually, I did start to imagine after I read their story. I started to imagine and think, what if that older woman's kids were in this church? What are the gifts they would have received from our church?

Well, they would have learned what it means to worship, to remember that God is the center of everything, and the giver of everything. They would have learned, in worship, the joy of Christian fellowship and caring; the opportunity to hear again and again the Word from God, words of guidance, comfort, strength and challenge; they would experience moments of beauty – in sunlight coming through a stained glass window, in the words of a song, in the awe of holy communion or the tenderness of a baby being baptized. The gift of weekly worship would have helped them keep their lives in balance, in perspective, centered on the right things in life. It would have helped strengthen them for the days ahead.

Another gift of the church for them would have been spiritual formation opportunities – like Sunday School, Bible studies, Vacation Bible School, Emmaus, youth group and confirmation, among others. In those places, they would have learned what it means to claim the faith as their own, they would have had a safe place to ask questions and struggle with things. In those places, they would have gone deep into the Word, and really figured out what it meant for their lives.

Still another gift they would have gotten from church was discovering their own gifts and using them for the Kingdom of God. Here they would have had opportunities to put those gifts to work alongside others, and make incredible things happen. They would have come to know that service was important, and that they had gifts that were needed. It might have happened as they sang in a choir, or lead a study; it might have happened when they served on the tech team or went on a mission trip; it might have happened when they gave of their own money to One Great Hour of Sharing, or when they served at the Spaghetti Dinner. In church, they received the gift of knowing they were someone special who had gifts from God that He wanted them to use, and here they found a way to use them.

In this place, they would have received the gift of being reminded that life is more than just about them – and they would have heard about people around the world in need, like those in the Congo and places where earthquakes and flood ravaged countries. They would have had their eyes opened, and their hearts opened to God's world, not just their little world.

And in this place they would have known the gift of being cared for. No doubt they learned it after they father died, but this place is something special, and we have tons of ways of letting each other know we care – whether that is in the hugs and smiles we exchange when we gather, or in the prayers we lift when

someone is hurting or in need, or in food we take to each other, or notes we write. One of the greatest gifts those children would have learned from the church, this church, is that they were never alone – because we were there for them, and always would be.

But surely the greatest gift they learned, the greatest gift they received from the church was Jesus – knowing Jesus and being known by Him. That is the gift that would carry them through life, and give their life meaning and purpose. Nowhere else would they be shown the gift of Jesus as they were in church.

That woman was so right in her advice to the young mother – the greatest gift she could give her children is the gift of church. I don't have to tell you that, because if you didn't believe it, you wouldn't be here. You know how much church means to you.

And you know too, that church doesn't just happen. It takes a lot of people doing a lot of things to make it happen. And one of those things, is giving money. Plain and simple. As most of you know, next Sunday is Stewardship Sunday, the day on which we make our pledges for our financial giving to the church for next year. It's the day on which we say in a very tangible, concrete way that we want to help keep the church the gift it is to so many people.

It's not a day on which we think about paying some sort of dues. And it's not a day which we dread. And frankly, it's not a day on which we need to drag out the calculators. It's a day on which we're invited to open our hearts and decide how to give back to God out of the abundance he has given to us. It should be one of the most joyous days of the year in the life of our church!

It all depends on where your heart is! Once again, the world in which we live will tell us to keep a tight grip on our wallets, keep it all for ourselves. It will scare us into thinking we'll never have enough. It will scare us into thinking we can't give too much, because we need it for ourselves. It will make us think only of ourselves.

One writer put it this way: "Many of us are trapped on the same treadmill of consumption that wearies our national American soul. As soon as 'our cup runneth over,' what do so many of us do? Why, we go out and buy a bigger cup! That means we're always living in an illusion of scarcity, always bemoaning the gap between what's in our cup and the rim – when, in reality, we, of all the people on this planet, are the most blessed financially." And, he concludes, "If you and I believe we live in a world of scarcity, it is a sure thing we'll find giving to be a chore, a threat, even an insurmountable challenge. Yet if you and I catch the vision of abundance,

extravagant giving will be our joy!” (Carlos E. Wilton, “Hilarious Giving,” *Speaking of Stewardship*, p. 72)

I’m sure you all recognize the name of Alfred Nobel, or at least know the peace prize that is given in his name. But do you know his story? Do you know that he invented dynamite, and as a result, became an incredibly wealthy man?

Well, one day, in 1888, he picked up the morning paper, was flipping through it when he came to the obituaries, and was shocked to see his own obituary posted there – big as life! It was all a terrible mistake, of course, it was actually his brother who had died. But some careless reporter had confused them and instead composed the obituary for Alfred Nobel.

When Nobel read it, he was crestfallen, because he got to see what the world really thought of him, and it wasn’t good. The obituary talked about his invention of dynamite, his factories, his patents, his wealth, but nothing about his beliefs, values or things he held dear. He thought, “This is what the world thinks of me.” They’ll only remember me as someone who invented something that leads to destruction and war.

Right then and there, he decided that he'd been given a second chance, so he made some decisions from his heart. And he began to give his money away. He made provisions for money to be set aside to honor those who worked for peace, and now when Nobel's name is mentioned, that's what he is remembered for – his heart of giving, not his tremendous wealth. (Ibid)

The moment when Nobel picked up that newspaper and read his own obituary, which was no negative, changed his life, and from that moment on, he listened to his heart and gave extravagantly.

Hopefully, you and I don't need a shocking moment like that to open our hearts to give extravagantly. Hopefully, we'll do it because we trust in God, we're thankful for the gifts He has poured into our lives, and we want to share them for the sake of His kingdom. Hopefully, we won't give God what's left, instead we'll give to Him first, and trust we will have enough.

I think Jesus is challenging us to have daring faith in our giving. He surely saw it in the woman at the temple that day, who we heard about in the Gospel lesson. It's a matter of faith, and trust, and excitement at seeing what we can do when we partner with God.

A few years ago, when we were getting ready to build the Wesley Wing, each of us was invited to make a pledge. I prayed long and hard about what I would give, and I really wrestled with it. In the back of my mind were those “what about me?” questions. I kept thinking that when I retire, I’ll need to buy a house. At a time when all of my contemporaries are paying off their mortgages, I’ll just be starting one. Maybe I need to not give too much so I’ll have enough for me.

But you know what? When it came down to it, I decided to trust God and give extravagantly. It was more than I had ever given before, and yes, it scared me more than a little bit. But I did it, and I have to tell you, that every time I walk into the Wesley Wing, or see people gathered around tables there studying, and laughing, and enjoying being together drawing closer to God, it makes my heart sing a little bit, knowing I helped make it happen.

You can help make great things happen here in this church with your giving. You can help ensure that this place continues to be a gift now and for generations to come. Dare to give, and dare to give extravagantly! It will be a blessing to you, a blessing to God, and a blessing to so many others!

So I want to close today with a challenge. And it comes by way of a story by Tony Campolo. One day, he was coming home from a speaking tour, landed at the

airport and was greeted by his secretary who had come to pick him up. He looked exhausted, he was exhausted, and she couldn't believe what she had to tell him – that somehow, some way they had both messed up and forgot to put something on his calendar, and in just one hour from that moment, he had to speak at a church gathering in Philadelphia. He couldn't believe it, but he drew a big breath, and off they went to the speaking engagement.

It was a World Day of Prayer gathering, and as Tony stood up and got ready to speak, the woman who had put it all together, came over to the microphone and announced that she had just received an urgent request from some missionaries in Venezuela who were in dire need of \$5000 for a medical clinic, and then she turned to Tony and said “Would you lead us in prayer that the Lord might provide the five thousand dollars that is needed in Venezuela?”

Tony says, that by then, he was dead on his feet, and before he knew it, after she asked him the question, he blurted out, “No, I won't. I won't pray. But what I will do is lay everything I have in my wallet on the altar. And I'm going to ask everyone here to do the same thing.”

As luck would have it, Tony only had \$2.25 in his wallet, but he laid it on the altar. The woman, standing there, said benevolently, “We've all gotten the point,

haven't we?" Tony responded, "No, I don't think we have. My \$2.25 is on the altar. Now it's your turn!"

He says she was somewhat taken aback by his request, but she went over to her wallet, took out \$110 and put it on the altar, and then turned to the crowd and said, "Okay, that \$112.25. Now it's your turn!"

Tony pointed to the woman in the first chair in the first row, and she got up and brought her money and then the next one and the next one. Twenty five minutes later, they were done. And when they were finished, they counted the money, and it came up to \$8000! (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 153)

They already had everything they needed to do the work of the Lord, they just needed to give it. And my friends, so do we! Don't worry, I'm not going to have you come up to the altar and empty your wallets, but I am going to ask you to pray this week about how and what you will give to Christ for His work in this church in 2016. We have the money, all we have to do is dare to give it! May it be so!

Amen.

Amen.