

“The Practice of Extravagant Generosity”

Salado UMC, Salado, Tx 76571—Preaching Text: 2 Corinthians 9

8 November 2020—23rd Sunday after Pentecost

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“If you knew what I know about the power of giving, you would not let a single meal pass without sharing it in some way” (Buddha 563—483 BCE).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

[9:1] Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, [2] for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. [3] But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; [4] otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. [5] So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

[6] The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. [7] Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. [8] And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. [9] As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

[10] He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. [11] You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; [12] for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. [13] Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, [14] while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. [15] Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift (2 Corinthians 9:1-15, NRSV)!

2 Corinthians 9:1-15 is about “Cheerful Giving.” Here Paul urges the church at Corinth to take a collection for Jerusalem’s poor believers. Paul asks them to be generous! Given the collection’s repetition in other texts, we sense these contributions are a vital matter. Paul encourages generous giving. “The ministry to the saints” (9:1) refers to the collection itself.

Paul employs the Macedonian churches’ generosity to spur the Corinthians to a better degree of charity. In 2 Corinthians 9:2-3, Paul writes about his boasting of Corinthian generosity. In turn it created great generosity in Macedonia. Now Paul urges the church to live up to his boasting. Paul’s words reflect antiquity’s honor/shame culture. Paul suggests neither he nor the Corinthians wants shame. Thus, be generous. Most believers expect Corinthian generosity. If they do not produce abundant gifts, then others may see them as selfish in the face of human need. This circumstance brings shame on the church.

I have heard people remark about how simplistic Bishop Schnase’s ideas seem reflected in his book *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Our congregations studied this book several years ago with profit people tell me. The suggestion about simplicity suggests that everyone already knows the things that Bishop Schnase offers. We all know to offer guests radical hospitality. We all know to immerse ourselves in passionate worship. We all know to practice intentional faith development as we study our Sunday school lessons/Bible. We know to engage in risk-taking mission and service. Last, we all know to observe extravagant generosity because we believe what Paul reminds us: “remember[ing] the words of the Lord Jesus . . . ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (Acts 20:35). If true, then we partake of:

1 Radical Hospitality; 2 Passionate Worship; 3 Intentional Faith Development; 4 Risk-taking Mission and Service; and 5 Extravagant Generosity . . . and give them some roundness . . . then . . . what is the next step?

Thus, let’s suggest that if we truly want to be the church God created us to be, then we can take faith measures to become even more faithful than we are now. First, let me clarify that Bishop Schnase’s “practices” are of “congregations” and not individuals. This means to be fruitful as a group, in contrast to an individual, is a tricky thing to pull off. It is true enough that individual people can do a multitude of good things. When we consider some of the church’s great saints, we marvel that alone they did so much. Paul planted churches as he fought the Romans, the Jewish hierarchy, Christians who thought he was still a Jew—and Jews who thought he had converted to the Christians and so on. In reality, Paul fought against just about everyone.

Augustine, Wycliffe, Luther, Wesley, Mother Teresa and a host of others did marvelous things seemingly alone. But the most authentic fruitfulness comes in community. During the Exodus, all fled—men, women, children, horses, donkeys, camels, and herds of goats, sheep, and lambs. Israel was like our modern Christmas lights—if one goes out, they all go out! The five practices are of “congregations” not merely of individuals.

Second, most ideas are simple if someone else thought of them and brilliant if we did. Thus, although Schnase's five practices are things that just about anyone who attends church could speak intelligently about, we really don't embrace them like we could. It is like, if you are able-bodied, parking further from the door on Sunday morning so that more mature folks or those with mobility issues, for example, can more easily get in the building. Being a fruitful congregation means that we are a church that considers "the last, the lost, and the least" as we practice weekly discipleship.

This brings me to a third idea prompted by the five practices. These practices are simple and yet are too unpracticed. Recently, I pondered some literary critic-type biblical questions. These biblical questions a novelist, E.M. Forster, brought to high relief. Back in 1927, in his book *Aspects of the Novel*, he mused: "What's the difference between a round and a flat character?" E.M. Forster, wrote three novels later made into films: *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howard's End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924).

Forster describes characters by their development in a work of literature. Flat characters are two-dimensional. They are rather simple and do not change much throughout a piece of fiction. By contrast, round characters are complex, developed sufficiently to surprise readers. You probably remember our church's "flat Jesus" phase a few summers ago.

This literary distinction between flat and round characters reminds me of the distinction between the excellent theology I might ponder (flat theology/character) and practical/sensible/hands-on theology that calls forth my commitment of both time and energy (round theology/character). In other words, if you think, as people tell me, "that everyone knows this stuff" [stuff = pertaining to Bishop Schnase's practices], then we might describe these five ecclesial practices as flat and lacking surprise, development, or that they are just plain boring. Yet, this is where people in our congregation can plug-in. We can take something flat and undeveloped and put our God-given gifts and graces to work. Thus, we round out the practices. Those persons with ingenuity can breathe personality and spirit into:

1 Radical Hospitality; 2 Passionate Worship; 3 Intentional Faith Development; 4 Risk-taking Mission and Service; and 5 Extravagant Generosity . . . and give them some roundness.

As Christians moved in mind, heart, and will by the things producing fruit in our congregation, we can become round characters in our own story of faith. In other words, we are convinced in our minds that the five practices can indeed produce fruit. Then, we understand emotionally the feelings associated with hospitality and generosity. Last, moved by our thoughts/feelings we act out of our convictions and become fruitful. Thus, we take flat theological assertions and turn them into live giving and fruitful practices. As Jesus might have said long ago: "Go and be flat no more!"

David Neil Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado, Texas 76571