

A Matter of Generosity

We'll have a long, holiday weekend next week, but today feels like the last day of summer.

For that reason I feel a little like an academic advisor at a spring break party...I fear that your minds are focused on things other than spiritual matters.

Some of you come wearied from school shopping. Others of you will hit the stores this afternoon to buy clothes and school supplies.

Students wonder about their teachers and teachers wonder about their students.

While our life circumstances are very different, we stand with our future before us, we face the unknowns with hopes and fears.

Tomorrow, the little children will march to school with backpacks big as a tent, and their mom or dad will make sure that they have what they need for class, for recess, and for lunch, and maybe a favorite toy for reassurance.

Like those children beginning a new day in a new season, we face our future, carrying our supplies and tools of faith, not on our backs, but in our minds and hearts.

And that's what we focus on today.

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Now some of you may think that you stand at the base of Mount Everest with a hip-pack barely big enough for a bottle of water and a sandwich.

But we have a much bigger pack because of the tremendous resources we have.

First in our pack is a bible that tells us that our God is a GENEROUS god.

We read in the beginning of Genesis that God said,

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food."¹

God gave us beans and sugar snap peas, corn and tomatoes, cantaloupe and watermelon, and strawberries.

God not only gave us such fruits and vegetables, God gave them rich colors of greens and reds and orange.

¹ Genesis 1:29

And then God gave us receptors in our eyes and sensors on our tongue that we might see and taste the bounty that God has provided for us.

Our God is a GENEROUS god.

Then there was matter of the commandments. Sometimes we see them as a fence that limits our freedom and squelches joy.

But the commandments are the wisdom of God putting before us conditions that make life human and allow people to live in community.

- Remember God
- Worship and do not curse God
- Set apart a day for rest in God
- Embrace your neighbor
- Honor life

Another way to say it is that God sent

Law – to guide us
Prophets – to correct us
Priests – to heal us
Kings – to provide and protect us

Our God is a GENEROUS god!

And then, when humanity sought short-cuts that actually cut life short, God was GENEROUS IN MERCY.

Using two names for God's people, God said,

*How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.*

*I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.²*

Years later it was not what God had said, but what God did that most expressed God's generous mercy.

² Hosea 11:8-9

“...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them....”³

Think of everything you could take back if it were possible.

Think of every hurtful or mean thing you ever did.

Think of every way you failed someone you love.

In Jesus Christ, God has wiped it away...taken it off the list.

It required Jesus' very life which he freely gave.

To this day, we hear those words of mercy from the cross, “*Father, forgive them.*”⁴

This divine generosity exceeds our every possible expectation, but God gives lavishly: before anyone could really adjust to the life-giving love of Jesus, Jesus announced that the mighty spirit of God, that spirit of creation and life and resurrection, God was giving to all God's people.

Friends, our God is a GENEROUS God.

Whether we go to school, or work, or into advanced years, we go with the blessings of a generous God.

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Also in this pack of faith is bread.

We know that we'll get hungry but because our lunch is packed, we know that we'll be fed.

We are fed with the Word of God in Scripture, sermons and study groups.

We're fed in the fellowship of faith, where other people's love and kindness nourishes and renews us.

We're fed in prayer where we not only speak our needs, but listen for God's responses.

And we're fed in sacrament.

Yes, we'll get hungry marching into our futures, but our generous God has packed our lunch, and we'll be fed.

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³ 2 Corinthians 5:19

⁴ Luke 23:34

An important need for children on the way to school, or for those moving into their future is direction.

When we're young, our parents take us to school.

As we get older, we can walk with our friends.

In our backpack of faith, we have a compass.

Its an old one that Jesus gave:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵

It is the north and south, east and west of the compass of faith: loving God and loving one another.

But we have advanced beyond compasses, we now have GPS – global positioning satellites.

Our GPS orients us in the world.

Fact is, I don't have a GPS unit in hand, I have my walkman, but you get the point.

Our GPS of faith, tells us that we live in a world with a generous God who is also a God on a mission.

Every mom and dad wants their children to have what they need in school – and so moms and dads are generous in filling their kid's backpacks.

But they want more than a backpack fully supplied; parents want their children to learn.

So too with God.

God is not just being nice in being so giving. Our God is on a mission.

God gave the Hebrews manna in the wilderness because God had compassion for them, but God also wanted them to get to the promised land, and to be a light to the nations.

We know of the purpose behind God's love in an early memorized verse of scripture:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, SO THAT everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”⁶

God is on a mission to forgive, reconcile, resurrect, gather together and empower.

⁵ Matthew 22:37, 39

⁶ John 3:16

We remember that Jesus said, “as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you”.⁷ And later Jesus said “as the Father sent me, so I send you.”⁸

God’s generosity is both expression of love and provision for carrying out Jesus’ mission of loving, forgiving, healing, restoring.

God orients us in a certain direction (loving God and one another) for a certain purpose (the new life God gives to us and seeks to give to all).

God’s purpose explains why there is a second loaf in our pack.

It’s not the provision for our lunch; it is so that others might eat.

God overfills our pack because God has drawn us in to the divine love and into the divine mission.

We’re given extra so that we can give. God has been generous with us so that we can be generous with what we have.

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This is where we encounter a practical problem that needs a practical solution: how can we be generous when we’re time debtors, talent weary, and monetarily challenged.

Jesus gives us the example. If we are to receive God’s generosity and to use it for God’s purpose, we will need to improve at saying “yes” and “no”.

Jesus had had phenomenal success in healing people. Jesus had more people coming to him than Presbyterian Hospital during the flu season.

In the midst of all this he went off by himself early one morning to pray.

Jesus’ devotional decision frustrated his followers; after all the waiting room was filling up as the ailing crowd gathered to see Dr. Jesus.

You can imagine their surprise when Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”⁹

We don’t know what happened in Jesus’ prayer time, but we know that he got clarity about what he was to do.

⁷ John 15:19

⁸ John 20:21

⁹ Mark 1:38

The practical lesson is that Jesus said “no” to one possibility so that he might fulfill the purpose God had for him: proclaiming “the message”.

God has given us a second loaf in our back pack to share with others, but to say “yes” to that, we’ll have to say “no” to something else.

This is not an easy practice.

Saying no, cuts off possibilities.

With Jesus, he was saying no to seeing immediate results to his work.

He was frustrating people who wanted him to touch their lives.

He was going against the expectations of his disciples.

Saying no is not a simple matter.

But it is essential, if we’re going to say yes to the important things God wants for us.

Someone said, “We must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.”¹⁰

Every climber knows that there are different trails; some will get you to the mountaintop and others will not.

It is your “yes” and your “no” that set the course and determine the outcome.

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Living generously with our time and talents and treasures will require that we say “no” to some other uses.

As someone said, “What you decide today, you are tomorrow.”

And what you decide shapes what the world will become.

The first task is to be aware of that, and to make conscious choices.

That is why the last item in our pack is a notebook and pencil.

What is the pattern of your “yeses” and your “no-es”?

Who are you becoming in the process of your choosing?

¹⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, “*Saying Yes and Saying No*” in Dorothy C. Bass’s *Practicing Our Faith*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1997, p. 60

Is God's world blessed by your choosing or deprived?

In the coming month you will have opportunities arise and choices to make:

- Incredible opportunities to understand and grow in faith
- Brad will be leading a new Bible Study. I believe it will be offered on a week-day as well as on Sunday a.m. Brad is a person of deep faith and a gifted teacher.
- Joan has assembled a stellar group of speakers for the Sunday morning seminars. Jim Mead and Iain Campbell are just two who are powerful teachers.
- David is planning wonderful musical opportunities for a ministry of music. Two singers that blessed us last Lent will lead a Friday evening program on September 16th. And the various church choirs will lead us in worship.
- Lauren, our youth director, will be getting to know our youth and parents, and has some exciting ideas for youth and youth mission.
- Plans are being set for monthly mission work for our congregation to go and make a difference in God's world.
- And yes, as God always intended, we'll be asked to use our finances to support the ministry and mission of this church.

In each of these areas, our ability to say "yes" to the important things God intends for us will require some "no" to something that would be desirable in other ways.

Growing in faith requires a "yes" to be present on Sunday morning and a "no" to other enjoyable ways to use the day.

Saying "yes" to using the abundance of our pack for others means saying "no" to using it all for ourselves.

God has filled our pack and prepared us for the journey.

What you decide today, tomorrow you become.

What you choose today shapes the world around you.

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