

Manningham Uniting Church

4th February 2024 Together@10. Theme: Generosity Encouraged

Texts: Mark 12:28-34 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Introduction

In the Uniting Church Basis of Union, the section on Gifts and Ministries states: *“The Uniting Church... acknowledges with thanksgiving that **the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.**”* In short, the Uniting Church believes in the priesthood of all believers. This morning's commissioning service is a good example of that truth. So many of you are using the Spirit-given gift to serve God in MUC and the wider community. Thank you for your labour of love.

Let us pray...

There is a word that is seldom used in the church nowadays. Probably it's an unfair question to ask. There are probably many words that are seldom used in the church now. Does anyone want to guess? The clue is the word is related to the focus of today's worship service. The word is STEWARDSHIP.

I want to start with a very basic explanation of stewardship as a concept.

At its root, stewardship tends to boil down to the act of watching, overseeing, or managing something on behalf of another. Merriam-Webster explains it as *“the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.”*

Dictionary.com's *stewardship* definition uses the phrase *“a person who acts as the surrogate of another”* adding that they are responsible for *“overseeing and protecting of something considered worth caring for and preserving.”*

I wanted to dig into these “shallow” secular definitions first because even in the eyes of the world the act of being a steward is important. It involves responsibility and accountability. It takes work and attention. The term surrogate particularly stands out to me here. In many ways, as Christians, we are God's surrogates in, to, and for his creation. In other words, we are acting on behalf of someone else when we interact with the world around us. This is

important to realize, as it establishes the fact that we are not the boss, we are subject to a higher authority.

Okay, so we have a good idea of what it means to be a steward. But what does it look like to practice stewardship from a Biblical perspective?

Interestingly, the New Testament word for stewardship comes from the Greek word *oikonomos*, which means the manager of the affairs of a household or in other words, work. This guardianship or custodianship position is clearly shown throughout the Bible from beginning to end.

There is a stigma attached to the word “stewardship” in some churches, likely because it has been mistakenly equated stewardship to money. But a true steward knows that couldn’t be further from the truth. Stewardship is a biblical principle that has nothing to do with money per se.

Nineteen of the main parables of Jesus relate directly to stewardship. And, in those parables when they speak of stewardship, it never mentions raising money. Stewardship simply means being grateful for all of God’s blessings. Everything we have — each breath we take on earth, the tremendous talents we possess, and our ability to earn income to sustain ourselves — all stem from God.

We come into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing. Recognizing this and being grateful for our bountiful blessings are the first step of stewardship. Once these realizations fall into place, we are then eager to find a way to respond to God’s generosity and embark upon a stewardship way of life.

It’s more than giving money. Unfortunately, sometimes stewardship is mistaken for fundraising, but stewardship is not about the church budget or paying for a new addition to

the church building, it's about recognizing God's work in our lives and responding to God with gratitude. Stewardship is more than money.

Do you know there is one subject if mentioned in the church some people would be upset or uncomfortable? Five-letter word. M O N E Y.

This morning, I don't want to talk to you about money per se. Instead, I want to reflect on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 which talks about generosity. I would like to set the context before we look at the text.

Paul has been talking with the Corinthians about the Jerusalem Collection. The church in Jerusalem was extremely poor and plagued by famine and persecution. So, over five years, Paul organized relief for them from churches all around such as Achaia, Asia, Galatia, and Macedonia.

Paul's motivation for this was to care for the poor Christians in Jerusalem and it would also make sense that Paul also sought to decrease the divide between the Jewish Christians and the non-Jewish (Gentile) Christians, as this was part of his commitment and calling from Jesus. And so, Paul is appealing to the Corinthians to get involved in this big collection project.

We dive in at chapter 9 as Paul continues his case. *"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 regretfully 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 partnership 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 9:6-15. In this passage, Paul was talking about generosity, about generous givers.

Deep down, every one of us is generous. We all give our money, our time, and our energy away to someone. The problem is that some people are only generous for their benefit. Even when they're "giving," they're only looking for something in return (see [Luke 6:34-35](#)). That's why prosperity theology/gospel is so wrong.

Sincerely, Biblical generosity gives to others without expecting to ever be paid back.

I hope you know by now you know the theme of Manningham Uniting Church for 2024.m.

LOVE IS THE WAY: Love God and Love Neighbour

It's based on two commandments: ³⁰ *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.* ³¹ *The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* There is no other commandment greater than these."

Giving to others is inextricably tied to loving others. Without loving our neighbours, even the grandest acts of generosity are meaningless.

We typically associate financial giving with generosity, but generosity is much more than that. The truth is everyone can be generous no matter how much money or how little money they have. Or else only those who are rich can be generous.

To say that God is love in one breath is to also say that God is generous. We all know that you can give something to someone without loving them, but you cannot love someone without giving to them. We can't say that we love God or we love our neighbour, while not at the same time being generous toward God or generous to our neighbour or to those whom we love. Ultimately being generous is about aligning our priorities with God's priorities, aligning our hearts with God's heart. God gifts each person with boundless grace and unending love. Our response to that love and grace is to serve others and let generosity become part of our nature. Generosity is at the heart of the Christian life, just as it is at the heart of the Gospel.

Do you know it is often through our generosity that we can bring the love of God to life for others in very real and tangible ways.

God invites us to a life of gratitude while the world fosters discontent.

God proposes trust; the world arouses fear.

God promotes giving; the world promotes getting.

God invites us to partnership, while the world rallies behind the delusion of total self-determinism.

God gently proposes stewardship while the world aggressively peddles ownership.

The world encourages entitlement when everything is a gift from God.

God invites us to look out for our neighbour; the world tells us to look out for ourselves.

God operates out of abundance, the world from a place of scarcity.

God created us out of generosity to live generous lives; the world encourages us to live small, scared, selfish lives.

Paul is pointing out in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 some factors we may want to keep in mind as we consider how generous we can be. According to Paul, the kind of givers that honour God are: **First**, those who give bountifully or generously. *“The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”* (2 Corinthians 9:6) Here Paul quotes a proverb — a saying that is generally

true, although exceptions may exist. A farmer who sows a lot of seed will usually be rewarded with a good crop. But sometimes bad weather can ruin the crop. Even then, the farmer will probably receive in proportion to the amount sown.

I don't believe Paul is saying what prosperity pastors are saying. The adherents of the prosperity gospel believe that God wants believers to be richly blessed in this life and that physical well-being and material riches are always God's will for the faithful. A generous person will usually be rewarded. Paul believes that the reward doesn't always come in money, and it doesn't always come in this life, but God does bless generous people. Generosity is not a transaction. It's not that if you give me this, I will give you that!

Second, those who give must give willingly. *"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion..."* If we feel obligated to give, if we resent the offering, if we dread the request, then we are not generous. True generosity is an attitude of the heart.

And Paul added, God loves a cheerful giver. *"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."* (2 Corinthians 9:7)

If you're seeking to be a cheerful giver and to live a life of radical generosity, then here's our starting point: God's love for us. The cheerful giver can hardly hide his joy. The term "cheerful" could very well describe both the inward feeling and the outward expression of the giver. A cheerful giver touches our heart. He also warms God's heart. Another translation says: "God loves people who love to give." (*Contemporary English Version*)