

## INTRODUCTION

For the last 3 Sundays, we've been journeying together through a sermon series entitled "Deepening Our Foundation." This series was birthed out of necessity because our church has reached a critical point where our financial resources are not accommodating our growth. But, as I pointed out two weeks ago, this is an opportunity for us to go deeper, and to mature in our understanding of what faithful Christian giving looks like. Because when we begin to grasp this in our hearts, we will be on the road toward a deep spiritual alignment between our faith and our finances, and as a church, we will have more than what we need to continue to do the work of God.

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## RADICAL GENEROSITY

People often ask me "how in the world did a boy from Jerusalem end up going to Alabama for college?" And I say, "well, I picked the one state that would make me feel most at home." Which then makes people ask, "well what kinds of things make you feel at home?" And I say, "you know...the kinds of things that you would get in Jerusalem: like good cooking, a ton of religion, and some good ole fashioned racial discrimination."

Let me tell you how I actually ended up coming to school here. When I was a senior in high school, a group from a small liberal arts college in Birmingham, Alabama came to Jerusalem for their Jan term, and they invited my father to come and speak to them as a Palestinian Christian. So my dad drags me along with him, and at the end of his presentation to the group, he says, "by the way, that's my son sitting in the back, he's a senior in high school, and hasn't yet decided where he's going to be going to school in the fall... So feel free to tell him about your school." And of all people, the president of the school, who happened to be on that trip, walks up to me and says, "we'd love for you to come to Birmingham Southern, and I want to help make this happen for you." It's always nice to be accepted before you even apply.

So, after returning to the States, one of the religion professors (who was also on the trip) starts visiting churches, and networking, to raise funds for my tuition and board. And thanks to the generosity of churches in the south, I was able to attend college on a full ride... It's there, by the way, where I met Tanory, and it's there where my relationship with God took off. Radical generosity.

At the end of my four years there, just before I graduated, a friend from the campus Christian fellowship that I belonged to came to me one day and said, "Sari, I know that when you graduate you won't be living on campus anymore, and you're going to need a car to get around. And i've been thinking about that, and thinking about how the last thing you need is to be making a car payment when you're just getting going, so I scraped some money together and I bought you a used one. It's not much, but I'll definitely do the job. It was a 1989, Chevy Astro van. And I have so many stories to tell you about this van that I'll share some other day. Radical generosity.

Two years later, Tanory and I (now married) we're preparing to go to seminary, and the night before we left - with our U-Haul packed and ready to go from Tuscaloosa Alabama to Pasadena California - a couple in our church whom we didn't know very well, hands us their Shell credit card and say, "take this with you, and use it for gas the whole way out there, and then when you get to California hold onto it for a couple of weeks until you get settled in - use it - and then mail it back to us. We want to bless you in this journey, and this is one way we know how. Radical generosity.

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## GIVING BACK

Sometimes I think back, and I reflect on the question, "how did I get here? And I realize that much of my life is the product of the generosity of other people. Where I am today, the way my life played out, even me standing here before you in this church, is because God used faithful people (some of whom I have never met) who were willing to give in faith for a purpose that was bigger than them.

How did you get here? Who invested in you? Who did God use in your life to make possible what you have Today?

For Tanory and I, we have chosen very consciously to be a part of this symphony of generosity, and to play our part in giving back to God from the riches that God has and continues to bestow upon us for the sake of making a difference in the lives of other people. And to keep us from accidentally losing sight of this, we've created a system of financial giving in our family that keeps us focused on being generous.

Some of you maybe have heard the old story about a dad who gave his son two quarters as he heads for Sunday School. He told the boy that he should give one quarter in the offering and he could keep the other to get an ice cream cone. (The fact that the ice cream cone only cost a quarter tells you how old the story is). As the boy walked down the street he accidentally dropped one of the quarters which then rolled into a storm drain and disappeared. The boy looked for a moment down the drain and then slowly looked toward the sky, sighed and said, Well God, there goes your quarter.

And so, to make sure that we stay consistent with our generosity, Tanory and I follow the biblical model of Tithing. The first 10% of the money we earn we give away, and we choose to do this by giving it to the church because we believe that the church is here to make a difference in the world...and it's a difference that we believe in. And we pledge this amount so that the church can count on it for its budget, and this also ends up being a form of accountability for us. And then, if we choose during the year to give to other causes, other transformative work that we believe in beyond the church, then we give on top of the 10% to those things.

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## STORY

About a week ago, I was on a sermon walk (that's when I walk and mentally process my sermon for the next Sunday), and I was thinking about this concept of tithing - or proportionate giving that we see in the Bible - where you give a certain percentage of your wealth back to God for God's work and purposes as an act of worship. And as I was walking and thinking about these things I happen to see this religious Orthodox Jewish family - a man and his wife and their young daughter - sitting in a park. And I thought to myself, I wonder if religious Jews today still follow the commandment to tithe? So I walked up to them, and I said, "excuse me, do you mind if I ask you a question?" and I could tell they were looking at me with the same look that I might give a stranger who approaches me like that out-of-the-blue: "how can I get out of this nicely?!" But I was quick to offer my credentials: "I'm an Episcopal priest and I'm working on a sermon on giving, and I just wanted to ask you, as religious Jews, about the tithe... Do you practice tithing in your household?"

And so the guys says, "yes, of course, we have a separate account that we put 10% of our earnings into every pay period, and then we use that account for philanthropy including our synagogue. So, as long as that money is being used for purposes that benefit people beyond just ourselves, then we feel that this accomplishes the

spirit of the 10% giving to God's work... And it's up to each individual where they choose to give their money, but the expectation is that one gives no less than 10%."

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## OT & NT

Now, what's interesting is that even though the Old Testament is very prescriptive when it comes to the 10% giving level, the New Testament says nothing about it. Instead, we begin to see in the New Testament a different approach to giving. As I mentioned last week, Jesus (and eventually the early church) had very little interest in more prescriptions, rules, and regulations. So the idea of giving back to God for the purposes of God's work in the world goes from a prescriptive 10% in the Old Testament to an exhortation in the New Testament to be a generous giver.

But what does that mean? What is the dollar amount or percentage point that qualifies a person as being a generous giver?

Many years ago, I was at a pool with some friends - just a bunch of young guys enjoying a sunny day throwing a Nerf ball around in the water - and there was this young attractive woman sitting on the side of the pool lounging in a chair reading a book. And I guess after a while the sun became a little too much for her, because she says to us, "will you guys splash a little water over here so I can cool off a bit." So one of my buddies says to the rest of us, "I got this." And he gets out of the pool to the opposite side from where this lady was sitting (the pool wasn't very wide) and then he does this running start and jumps in the pool in such a way that he starts a title wave. And in my memory the whole scene is in slow motion where the water just rises up above all of our heads and completely obliterates this woman and all of her belongings. And the funny thing is that she just wanted a few sprinkles but instead she got the whole pool.

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## SPRINKLES

Here's the thing about radical generosity: it can't be quantified in sprinkles. Generosity at its essence is something that overflows. In the New Testament we are told that it's not the amount that God cares about... rather, it's the overflow of generosity with which one gives. Some of us might be struggling financially - struggling to make basic ends meet. God doesn't care about amounts. Take the gospel story we heard today: Jesus is at the temple, and he sees the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury - they're bringing their tithes and they are giving a lot of money. But then he notices a poor widow who walks up and puts in two very small copper coins, and he is moved by her gift - even though two small copper coins amounted to nothing in comparison to the other gifts that people were putting in, and he says to his disciples, "I tell you the truth...this poor widow has put in more than all the others." How is that possible? It's because there's something more valuable to God than simply how much we give - and that is the generosity with which we give.

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## PRACTICAL STEPS

Generosity in giving is a matter of personal spiritual integrity. Paul says: "Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. So my job as your spiritual leader is to help you take the next step in your life of faith. If you've been listening to the sermons these last three weeks, and something inside of you is saying I need to be paying attention to this and you are wondering, "how can I take the next step?" Then let me offer some very practical ways for you to consider:

1. Move away from dollar figures and begin to think more in terms of proportions. Even though the New Testament does not talk about tithing, it is very clear that proportionate giving - or as Paul puts it, "giving according to one's means" is still the biblical model for giving.
2. Decide on a generosity benchmark that you will set for yourself and won't go below, and then begin working towards that benchmark. Tanory and I have chosen 10% of our income as our generosity benchmark. Someone I was talking to earlier this week has set 15% as theirs.
3. Some of us here can easily begin giving at that chosen benchmark level; for others, we need to work toward it gradually. One practical way is to take the amount you currently give away, figure out what percentage of your current income that amounts to, and then try and move to the next percentage point above that. And keep moving up annually until you reach your benchmark. What we want to do, as one psychologist put it, is to leave our comfort zones and head into our stretch zones but we don't want to go so far that we wind up in our panic zones."
4. Enjoy the act of giving away your money to causes that are greater than you. I was blown away last night. My son opened a birthday card from his grandmother (he turns eight today) and inside was a gift of \$150 in cash. He took one look at his sister, who was feeling a little left out, and he took the \$50 bill and handed it to her. It blew me away! So I asked him, "Naeem, how does that make you feel?" And he said, "it feels really good." Savor each opportunity to be a generous giver.
5. Finally, remember the church when it comes to your giving. There are many worthy causes, and you should give to as many of them as you can. But remember the body of Christ and remember your home church. In the next week, you'll be receiving a pledge card in the mail. This is an opportunity for you to pray and to take the next step in your giving. We're going to ask you to bring those back with you on Sunday, November 8 where you'll have a chance to place your pledge on the altar during the service as your gift of thanksgiving and generosity to God.

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## CONCLUSION

It has been a blessing for me over the last several weeks to have had the opportunity to wrestle with scripture and to bring to you a practical message (I hope) regarding the biblical teachings on faithful Christian giving, and also why your church needs you to take this subject seriously. A clergy mentor said to me a long time ago, "all you can do is offer people the truth... It's up to them to receive it." So, now, may your your minds be attentive and your hearts receptive to what God might be saying to you. And remember, sometimes we have to behave our way into a new way of thinking, not think our way into a new way of behaving." May God bless you in your Journey of discipleship and generosity.