

Extravagant Giving II and Summation of The Five Practices

Here we are, at the end of the sermon series on The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. In today's sermon, I'll finish up Extravagant Giving and look to the future of this church. How will we live out The Five Practices? What do we need to do differently? What do we need to stop doing? What do we need to add?

Extravagant Giving is not entirely about money. Last week I talked about the tithe, 10% of your income, that Jesus expects us to joyfully give to the less fortunate, usually through the church. The tithe is not some grand goal for just a few of us to shoot for. It is the minimum he expects us to give, the basic amount on which to build a life of Extravagant Giving.

If we read carefully, we find that everything Jesus says about money is a warning. He warns us against accumulating so much wealth that we have to build bigger barns. He warns us about how money can control our lives. He warns us about ignoring the needs of the poor.

Bishop Schnase says that churches that practice Extravagant Generosity don't horde their money. They don't circle the wagons to protect their money. Instead, they look for new ways to make a positive difference in their community and all over the world.

The attitude is what makes the difference between a generous congregation and a stingy one. Generous churches have an attitude of Abundance, recognizing how generous God is, how God provides for his people when they are obeying His will.

Stingy churches have an attitude of Scarcity. All they see are people and causes that want their money. So, they hold on tight to what they have, fearing they will never get any more.

Consider this church. We have benefited from Extravagant Generosity in ways we simply take for granted. This sanctuary, these pews, these windows, this pipe organ, this piano are all here because of somebody's extravagant generosity.

And, as I mentioned, Extravagant Generosity is not just about money. A week from Monday, you will have the opportunity to donate blood at the Community Center as our UMMen sponsor the Red Cross Blood Drive. Your gift of blood will save lives.

When my father died, he was an organ and tissue donor. Because of a lifetime of smoking and poor eating habits, he had a massive heart attack while doctors were scraping his arteries to clear out all the blockage. As a result, his organs were useless. But, they took his eyes, his corneas. And because of his Extravagant Generosity, two blind people were given the gift of sight. Both he and my mother donated their bodies to Duke for medical research.

I've mentioned how our generosity should lead to some sort of sacrifice. It's not extravagant if we don't feel it somehow. Here is a quote from Ben Campbell, an Episcopal Priest and director of Richmond Hill Retreat Center in Richmond.

A healthy Christian sacrifice is an act of mercy that costs me something.

Extravagant Generosity will cost us something. For each of us,

that cost will be something different: time you spend helping someone at the cost of not being able to do what you wanted to do with that time. Money you give that you already had plans for. Clothes you are fond of, and would wear, given to the clothes closet. All of these gifts cost us something. Such is Extravagant Generosity.

So, how do we put all these practices into action. Bishop Schnase tells us in his book that churches that do not live out all five practices joyfully and with enthusiasm decline, eventually turn in on themselves and finally die. So, we want to do the best we can to bring these five practices to life. A reminder: Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Giving.

The Virginia Conference is encouraging its congregations to focus on their mission, which is to make disciples for Jesus Christ. The Conference wants us to work hard to bring in more people, younger people, and more diverse people. If we were to take this seriously, we'd be praying for God's help in this difficult task. But, we don't want to ask God to do for us the things we can do for ourselves.

The idea of bringing in more people is pretty straightforward. And this isn't about numbers. It's about souls, about people out there who need the Lord. We need to reach out and bring them into the fold, into the Body of Christ.

The idea of making an effort to be a church that serves all ages, that makes a special effort to meet the needs of younger people, and by younger people I mean people 50 and under, is very important, even in a retirement community by the lake. Where is

the next generation? How will the Word be spread when we are all dead and gone? Do we leave that responsibility to the House of Prayer and Water's Edge because they already have younger members? Or do we consider what we believe as children of John Wesley important enough to live beyond us?

"More diverse people" is an interesting phrase. It calls to mind racial diversity. And it certainly means that. But, it's also a matter of diversity of economic situations, lifestyles, educational levels. It includes single parents and their children. Churches with diverse congregations are richer in their church life, in their energy, in their vision. We cheat ourselves out of a whole lot when we simply refuse to try to bring in people who are not like ourselves.

The whole point of the Five Practices is to have the goal of excellence. We don't want to be a mediocre church, proud of doing what every other church is doing. We want to grow towards excellence in everything we do. God's gifts to us are many and certainly excellent, not the least of which was His own Son. If God gives us the greatest, most excellent gift, we can certainly respond with our greatest efforts, spending our lives seeking what the Apostle Paul called "a more excellent way."

The wonderful thing about a church striving for excellence is that excellence takes many forms. We aren't aiming for one specific goal. Our lives together are dedicated to raising all our efforts, all our plans, all our dreams to being the very best they can be, as we strive to be the very best Christians we can be.

Ultimately, the Church fulfills its mission when it does ordinary practices with an extraordinary effort. We need to always

remember that churches are not clubs or social service agencies or networks of friends and family. Churches are expressions of the Body of Christ, outposts of the Kingdom of God. We are given the means to reach people with the gift and demand of God's grace.

I'm going to conclude this tenth and final sermon in this series with a quote from the end of Bishop Schnase's book, the book that has guided us through the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.

Congregations are called to change the world, no just keep their doors open.

Rev. Walt Westbrook 11/22/09