

From “Sacrifice to Generosity”
Luke 4:1-13, Deut. 26:1-11
Waterford Mennonite Church
Lyle Miller
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Introduction

If I were to ask, “What is the greatest commandment,” most of you would know the answer. Many of us learned that in Sunday school. We remember how a lawyer comes to test Jesus and asks that question. And Jesus responds by quoting part of what we know as the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’

“This is the greatest and first commandment,” Jesus says. Then he goes on: “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

So that’s the most important thing we’re supposed to do as followers of Jesus:

- Love God, and Love Each Other.

But have you ever wondered:

- if those are the most important things we’re supposed to *do*, what are the most important things we are *not* to do? Is that an important question to ask as well?

Whattaya think? What is the most important “do not”? What is the most significant sin?

- Some of you might point to Matthew 12, where Jesus talks about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.
- Others of us might point to the sixth commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” After all, murder takes away a person’s life. It ends another person’s possibilities. That seems pretty major.
Our penal system seems to agree. The death sentence, life imprisonment – both of those are most frequently associated with murder. So maybe it’s that commandment that we most need to avoid.
- In the church, frankly, we have often made sexual sins the most significant sin. We’ve put a level of shame and public humiliation on sexual sin that we don’t put on other sins. So maybe it’s “You shall not commit adultery.”

Covetousness as primary sin in scripture

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, however, points to another sin as the most significant:

- “Thou shalt not covet.”

Really?

That seems like an incredibly wimpy sin. I mean, how big of a deal is it to like a neighbor’s ox? Or their donkey? Or even their house? I mean, yes, coveting our neighbor’s spouse is probably a problem, but their car? Their 72-inch flat screen? Their backyard patio? With the pool? That they paid for with their middle-management job? With the corner office?

I know it's not good to covet that stuff, but the *worst* sin?

Well, Brueggemann's point is to say that coveting is about desire. It's about being driven in ways that we don't even understand to desire stuff, and things, and relationships, that are not our own. And then it leads to seizing.

Brueggemann says that coveting becomes "an addiction that skews relationships, so that no one is safe from predatory eagerness."¹

Satan seems to have read Brueggemann's book. Think about the biblical history and all the times when coveting, when desire, led to all sorts of evil:

- Adam and Eve desire knowledge in the garden of Eden.
- Cain desires the recognition from God that Abel got with his offering, so Cain kills Abel.
- Jacob desires Esau's birthright and steals it, setting up 20-years of running away and worldwide conflict that still exists to this day.
- David desires Bathsheba, so he sets up a murder.

I could go on and on, with ways that Satan uses *desire* to tempt people like you and me to do stuff that is incredibly wrong.

- On and on to the New Testament, where Herod wants to stay in power, so he has all the boy children killed.
- *On and on to the temptation of Jesus.*

The Temptation of Jesus

That's really what the temptation story is about – Satan is trying to get Jesus to *desire something that he shouldn't have*.

We can break it down. We can talk about...

- how the bread that Satan offers represents physical needs,
- and how seeing all the kingdoms of the world represents political power,
- and how jumping off the top of the temple represents physical safety.

But really it's about desire. Satan is playing to Jesus' humanity. The Devil is trying to get Jesus to want something so deeply, so badly, that he'll do anything to get it. Just like he got Adam and Eve to want something, just like he got Cain to want something, like he got Jacob... and David... and Herod...

And you...

And me...

The Temptation of us

That's what Satan does.

Satan gets us to desire stuff:

- That 72-inch flat screen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press (all Brueggemann material is from chapter 2).

- The patio with the pool.
- The corner office with the window.
- The stuff we buy with the money we don't have, to impress people we don't even like.
- I could go on and on. Individual things, sure, but we have corporate desires as well. Think about our desire as a country, a desire that led to us stealing the land and destroying the lives of the people who lived on it.

So if desire is the issue, how do we get past it?

How do we get past that sense of desire that we all have, a desire that leads us to all types of sin? Because if you think about, Brueggemann is probably right. At the root of almost every sin we can think of, is probably an unhealthy desire of some sort. How do we get past that?

Pharaoh: A story of desire

Well, there's another story of desire in the Old Testament.

Pharaoh.

Pharaoh is the quintessential coveter in the imagination and memory of Israel, Brueggemann says.

- Let's start with Genesis 12, way back before Abraham was even Abraham. In Genesis 12, Abram and Sarai travel to Egypt, because there was a famine in their homeland. And the Pharaoh had food.
- But apparently the Pharaoh was anxious about that food and desired more. Many chapters later, in Genesis 41, Joseph has been sold into Egypt. (And as an aside – Joseph's brothers *sold* him. They sold their own brother, because they desired their father's love. That's another coveting story that I didn't even mention!).
- But anyway, Pharaoh has food, but he has this anxiety that leads to dreams, to nightmares. And maybe the dreams are about grain, but more likely they're about desire. He's worried about scarcity and that he might not have enough!

When Joseph interprets these dreams for Pharaoh, Pharaoh puts Joseph into a position that helps to ensure that the Pharaoh's desire for more, more, more, will always be filled. In Genesis 47, we see how in a manner of three short years, Joseph – working for Pharaoh – reduces peasant agriculture to slavery.

Amidst a famine...

- First, Joseph takes all the people's money in exchange for food to eat.
- Then he sells them more food, this time in exchange for all their livestock.
- And finally, for their land and their servitude.

All to Pharaoh, to try to satisfy Pharaoh's desire for more.

- Pharaoh coveted his neighbor's field, and he got it.
- Pharaoh wanted storage for his "more," so he got it, thanks to the forced labor of his people.

In a nutshell, that's the slavery the children of Israel were in. And escaping Pharaoh's coveting is what the Exodus is about.

The children of Israel wandered for many years, as Yahweh sought to teach them a new way.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

A new way of living. A way based on love of God. And of neighbor.

- That doesn't murder.
- That doesn't commit adultery.
- That doesn't steal and bear false witness.
- That doesn't covet.
- That doesn't desire.

God's response to desire

How does God go about this?

How does God teach the children of Israel to get past that desire and that covetousness?

How does God teach *us* to get past our desires?

By remembering. And by being generous.

"When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess," George read for us. "When [you] possess it, and settle in it,² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us."⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God,⁵ you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us,⁷ we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.⁸ The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders;⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.¹⁰ So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God.¹¹ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.²

To remember.

To be generous.

Theological and contemporary rationales for generosity

Why does God invite the children of Israel to generosity?

Why does God invite us to generosity?

Because you know, the fact of the matter is that God does not *need* our generosity.

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#). (1989). (Dt 26:1–11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

But we need it.

One theologian says this:

What I've learned from my personal experience is that *God does not need (my generosity)*... [But] I benefit from it. I've drawn closer to God through this spiritual discipline, this holy habit. I've learned more about God as I've experienced God's love and God's grace through giving.”³

And God knows that we need that.

God wants the best for us, and God knows that generosity is good for us.

And doctors know that:

“Intentional and regular practices of generosity have been associated with the release of a slew of good chemicals, including oxytocin, dopamine and various endorphins,” say John Cortines and Gregory Baumer in the book *God and Money: How We Discovered True Riches at Harvard Business School*. They go on: “These chemicals are the same ones released after a hard workout or after a particularly pleasurable experience. Generosity is strongly and clearly associated with a sense of purpose in life, personal happiness, and overall personal health.

Giving... lifts up human health as much as aspirin protects the heart. Giving even activates the same portion of the brain that lights up when winning the lottery or getting a raise. You may not be able to control when you get a raise, but you can feel just as good simply by engaging in regular, consistent generosity.”⁴

All of the major world religions know that giving is good. Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism – all of their holy writings contain an invitation to generosity. Philosophers like Peter Singer and Immanuel Kant say the same thing.

Generosity as conversion

So why does God invite the children of Israel to generosity?

Why does God invite us to generosity?

Because in giving we are converted.

When thinking about conversion, Martin Luther said this: He said that we each have to undergo three different types of conversion – the conversion of our hearts, the conversion of our minds, and the conversion of our wallets. We must undergo:

- The conversion of our hearts to *accept* the gospel;
- The conversion of our minds to *understand* the gospel; and
- The conversion of our wallets to *live out* the gospel.

³ Kristine Miller & Scott McKinzie, *Bounty: Ten Ways to Increase Giving at Your Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), p. 44.

⁴ John Cortines and Gregory Baumer, *God and Money: How We Discovered True Riches at Harvard Business School*, Carson, Calif.: Rose Publishing Company, p. 83.

Giving is what converts our wallets.

And so God invited the children of Israel to generosity, as a way of converting from the desires of Pharaoh to the desires of God.

And today, God invites *us* to generosity, as a way of converting from the desires of Satan to the desires of the cross.

Generosity as a Defined, Disciplined Decision

How do we do that? How do we practice a generosity that converts our wallets and converts our hearts.

I'd like to leave you with what I think is a well-rounded approach to generosity.

It's 3 Dimensional.

It's a 3 "D" approach.

First, giving is a decision. It's a choice that we make. I think sometimes as thoughtful, cerebral Christians, we tell ourselves that we have to "*think* ourselves into new ways of acting." We don't want to change our habits until we are convinced, until we know it's the right thing to do.

But sometimes, it's just as helpful to "*act* ourselves into new ways of *thinking*." We do something, just because we think we should, and eventually it becomes a part of who we are.

The first "D" in generosity is *deciding* to do it.

Second, giving is a discipline. It's not something we do once and then forget about. It's something we do regularly, whether that's

- once a week with our checkbook,
- or once a month with our ACH transfers or Donor Advised Fund distributions,
- or once a year with our Qualified Charitable Distribution.

Disciplined giving is being intentional.

I think it was close to 20 years ago that I preached my first sermon about stewardship here at Waterford. I interviewed a number of women in our congregation about generosity, and I shared from their responses. In those interviews, one woman said, "My husband plans our yearly giving based on our income. It is divided between local church, mission, colleges and other areas of interest."

When I asked him how much time he puts into this process, he replied, '30 minutes.'

Then I asked if he prays about it, and he replied, 'Constantly.'"

Twenty years later, that story still shapes my generosity. Because I think that's what generosity as a spiritual discipline looks like. It involves looking at our pocketbooks, our bank statements, our online accounts, and asking the question, "God, how do you want to organize my life to give me away, so that I can remember your goodness in my life and be converted from desire to generosity."

The second "D" in generosity is "discipline."

Finally, generosity is defined.

And that's a *whole* 'nother sermon – the “Sermon on the Amount,” as my friend Vyron Schmidt likes to say.

- What's the amount to give?
- How do we determine the amount?
- How much do we give to God?
- And maybe more importantly, as another Waterford friend once changed my life by asking, “How much do we *keep* for ourselves?”

And we could talk about tithing, and whether that's the right amount.

Frankly, I'm not sure how many of us at Waterford are actually called to tithe.

- Some of us probably are.
- But for some of us, legitimate circumstances might make it difficult or even inappropriate to give a full 10 percent at this point in our lives, although I think it should be a priority to give at least something on a regular basis.
- And now that you think I've let you off easy – no. In a congregation like Waterford, most of us educated, many of us with decent paying jobs, often with two incomes in our households, I think giving just 10 percent lets some of us off too easily. If I may be so bold, as I know this congregation, I think a lot of us may be called to give *more* than 10 percent.

But in any case, generous giving is usually “defined.” It’s proportional. After all, in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul was one of the original planned giving officers. He invited the Corinthian believers to set aside a defined amount *according to their means*.

Defining your giving as a proportion of income is tremendously helpful for a couple of reasons:

- First, it helps ensure that we give from our firstfruits, not from what's left over at the end of the month.
- Second, it's helpful when our income changes.

I once had a conversation with a person in our church who was getting ready to retire. He told me that one of the biggest emotional hurdles he was facing was that he might not be able to be as generous to Waterford as he had been. Throughout our conversation, I tried to assure him that thinking in terms of percentages rather than amounts could free him from that self-imposed guilt as his income decreased.

It also goes the opposite way. Planning to give a defined, proportional amount gives us a logical starting point in generosity when we get a bonus or a raise.

And it's also good to think about what I call the “backward” raises:

- When we pay off our mortgage, it can be like getting a sizeable raise.
- When our kids are through college, we don't have to set aside money for their education.
- When we meet with our financial advisor, or we take a serious look at our balance sheet, and we realize that because we started early or because our employer also contributed, we might discover that we have *enough* – enough to retire on, and enough to give even more generously.
- When we get an inheritance, at age 40, or age 50, or even after we've started drawing social security, that's money we may not have been counting on. Save some, sure. Get out of debt, sure. But give generously as well.

All of those life circumstances can be opportunities for greater generosity. And thinking about generosity in defined ways gives us a great starting point for the nuts and bolts of generosity.

Conclusion

Defined, disciplined decisions about generosity.

That's what I think we're called to, as we remember the journey:

- For the children of Israel, it was the journey from Pharoah's desire to the Exodus.
- For us today, it's the journey from our desire to Jesus's cross.

As we follow the one who made the defined, disciplined decision to give his life.

And thanks be to God, for this indescribable gift. Amen.

Benediction

From this time and this place
into whatever awaits,
may you follow God's way of generosity.

May you release the desires you have
and whatever you hold in fear,
so that you may be free to live generous lives.

As you go, know that our God of the wilderness
remains with you on the way.