

The Gospel of Generosity: Recognising Giving as a Spiritual Disciple

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Why preach and teach about giving?

The answer seems pretty obvious in our cash-strapped times: "For my church's future...", or "For those who struggle to make ends meet."

But, giving isn't only about meeting need. Money in the scriptures isn't only meant to be a tool we use to solve problems. The things we own aren't merely resources to fill a need.

In other words, giving isn't something to only benefit a recipient, but a spiritual discipline that changes the giver for good.

When I think of giving, I often think of Patrick. Patrick was a lay preacher in the parish where I served my curacy. He was a lovely man and a memorably effective preacher, but was most renowned for his frankly astonishing collection of theological books collected over a lifetime of ministry. Patrick had a passion for reading and his house was crammed full of bookshelves in every room.

But Patrick would speak of how books had become a problem for him. He saw, over many years, how he was becoming increasingly obsessed by them, tracking who had borrowed even the most rarely read tome, and fretting over even a brief absence. It wasn't that books had somehow become bad, but his over-possessiveness was damaging his enjoyment of them, and even damaging his relationships with those who came to borrow what he prized most dearly.

And so Patrick started giving them away. If someone asked to borrow a book he chose to stop tracking who took them and stopped asking for them back. He wanted to recognise that he was the recipient of a gift, and that he needed to hold them lightly not tightly.

Patrick told me that this small act, on something seemingly quite trivial, had a big impact on his spiritual life. His heart became more open to the Giver of all good gifts and less weighed down by the gifts themselves.

"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." [James 1:17 NRSVA]

The scriptures remind us regularly, both in story and teaching, that that one of our most common and damaging failings as human beings is to become so attached to the gift that we prize it over the giver.

It was the danger God saw in Abraham with his longed-for firstborn son.

It was the sin of God's Old Testament people, ancient Israel, as they worshipped a calf made from the gold God had given them.

It was the source of the disastrous damage King David inflicted on Bathsheba and her husband when his desire for her became more important to him than the love of God.

In each case, and in countless more, good gifts threaten to usurp the Giver.

In our own spiritual lives, and those of the congregations we serve, financial resources often play that role. Our hearts are quickly and easily weighed down with a focus on all that money can buy us, both literally (in "stuff") and in security, safety and status. The culture in which we swim reinforces that focus, and (ironically) even our own church's need to ask for money, can increase the sense that nothing (even God's unfailing love) is more important.

Generous giving is the most radical and effective antidote to this most undermining of human failures. To give something away (when we don't have to) says: "This is a really good gift, and it's important to me. But there is something - someone - even more important.". Giving more than is comfortable, remarkably, breaks the power that "love of money" can have over us. It's a significant and effective spiritual discipline, and would be one worth pursuing, even if the needs of our communities weren't so urgent.