

The “Miracle” of Generosity Susan Flanders, 7/2/06  
Deut. 15:7-11, 2Cor. 8:1-4, 12-15, Mk. 5:22-24, 35b-43

There are some amazing stories in the gospels about what God, working through Jesus, was able to do. The raising of Jairus’ daughter, a miracle story, is one of them. And frankly, I don’t know what to make of it. In the literal sense it is totally outside of my experience. Even if, as Jesus told the people, she was only sleeping, or in some sort of a coma (because they were quite sure she was dead), we still have a healing miracle, something beyond most of our experience. But who are we to say what God could and does do through Jesus Christ? Perhaps far more than we ever allow ourselves to believe or even hope – but that is all in the realm of mystery and conjecture – at least for me.

What intrigues me far more than such miracle stories beyond our experience, are the surprising, exceptional things that God just might be able to do through you and me, or – to use Christian language – God working through Jesus Christ. One such surprising, exceptional thing is generosity – and I do believe it comes from God – open handedness with what we have.

This is the kind of generosity urged in the first two readings. Generosity is certainly not presented here as a miracle. There’s nothing supernatural about it, but, given our humanness, it certainly doesn’t often seem to come naturally, and if hard-core realism suggests that self-interest is basically our chief motive, then you could suggest that generosity is downright un-natural!

But the ancient community of Israel understood that generosity was an essential response to need. It was the rule of the community to lend or give to the needy. The self-interest of the individual was to give way to the overall good of the whole community. In much of our culture today that seems out the window! Bonds of community break down as we look out for #1, as individuals or as a nation.

In the second reading, St. Paul praises the fledgling Christian communities that have given beyond their limited means to help build up the church in Jerusalem. He goes on to urge those who have expressed a desire to help, but have not acted on it to follow through. Paul praises their eagerness – eagerness as the first step toward generosity.

He then continues that what’s important is not how much they give but that they give according to their means. He says, “for if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have”. For Paul, a fair balance is needed between our abundance and others’ need. He quotes from Hebrew scripture this model: “the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” So eagerness to be generous and then following through based on a sense of fair balance are what Paul advises. I think these two components of generosity are important for us today as well.

What makes a person eager to be generous? Maybe it’s easy if you’re Bill and Melinda Gates or Warren Buffet – these incredibly wealthy philanthropists must truly

enjoy putting their vast wealth to work on large-scale world problems – HIV/AIDs, TB, malaria, quality education. Their generosity can really make a difference, and I'd like to think that if I had their money, I'd be eager to be generous and very eager to share a great deal of my too much with folks who have far too little.

But that's not where I live – or any of the rest of us. We can't get our eagerness to give from huge fortunes we can't possibly use all for ourselves. And it can be really hard to be eager to give when we feel we barely have enough. And yet, and yet, people are generous; they do give to others anyway. Where does that come from?

Sometimes it comes from our parents – parents who, by their example, taught us early on to give to our churches, to charities, to schools. My dad continued to ask me well into adulthood whether and how much I gave to my church, and told me how much he gave – the same dad who otherwise taught us that “nice people don't talk about money!” But I learned that dad felt good about giving money away and about raising it as well – again, for the church, or a school or World Federalists and other favorite causes.

Maybe eagerness to be generous comes because someone else has helped us. There are lots of stories – the wildly successful French restaurateur who gave away his kitchen's leftovers five days a week, then closed for the weekend to visit the orphanage he founded and supported – because he had been an orphan. The man whose father sold vegetables at a little country store in Georgia but who managed to earn a scholarship to VMI. He later became a wealthy businessman, and he now gives a full scholarship back to VMI for someone every year who is in need like he once was.

Eagerness to give can come from great wealth, or the example of others, or wanting to give back in return – but it's not automatic. Some fortunate folks turn out to be stingy anyway while others are generous of heart and hand for no apparent reason. They may have little wealth and nothing in their background to foster giving. All this is to suggest that generosity is a gift of grace, a quality of spirit – sown freely by the Holy Spirit but then cultivated by the receptive heart.

This notion of the receptive heart has put me in mind of Harrison's sermon last week when he spoke about the undefended heart. I think the undefended heart is needed not only for reconciliation (as our outgoing Presiding Bishop urged) but that maybe it's the undefended heart that leads to the open hand – that it is the undefended heart that leads to generosity. The undefended heart can look on another's need and be moved to compassion.

If our defenses are laid aside, we can perhaps not only be more open to listening to and understanding other who are different, but we can be more receptive to the promptings of need in our world. If we loosen up a bit on protecting ourselves and trust in God's providence, we may actually begin to see ourselves as part of that providence in the ways we care for those who have too little. When I say trust in God's providence, I am not for one second suggesting we abandon prudence and foresight. They have their place. But “God will provide” is just a pious cliché unless we co-operate in that

providence. And the providence of God is not personal – not just for me, if I’m good and hard-working – God’s providence is for the whole creation – for all people. We can look to it, but we must also be part of it!

That’s where Paul’s fair balance comes in – “the one who has much does not have too much, and the one who has little does not have too little”. We must attend to this! Generosity, when we cultivate it in ourselves and in our churches is a profound gift of the Spirit – even if it is expressed in cold cash or scarce free time given to others’ needs. In being generous, it feels to me that we participate in God’s providence.

But generosity to the receiver can be nothing short of a miracle! It can be healing, it can lift a person up and bring new life. Whether a client of Samaritan Ministry, a visitor to Shepherd’s Table or to Bethesda Cares, a homeless person finding shelter – generosity can keep people going through the worst of times. It can change their lives – on the receiving end of generosity, there can be this quality of miracle as hopelessness gives way to hope, and light shines in darkness.

Whether we are givers or receivers, (and for most of us, life brings both), generosity, born of undefended, receptive hearts, can feel miraculous and holy. And the miracle of generosity is not something to believe in; it’s something to do, something to experience – it’s only when we open our hearts and then our hands that we get it. God is so incredibly generous with God’s love! May we grasp God’s hand stretching towards us and then reach our hands and stretch hard to touch the needs of this community, to be sure, but beyond these walls and far beyond – wherever our too much can be used so that others won’t have too little. Amen.