

4-Week Sermon Series on Generous Living
Week 3: Radical giving (Acts 20:32-38)
Pastor Hubert Den Draak, July 27, 2014



There are a few texts in the Bible that almost everyone knows, and the one we just heard is one of them: "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

It's so well-worn that we tend to overlook how radical and counter-cultural it is. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't find one single politician who would state that in their election platform. That would make them unpopular pretty quick and cost them a lot of votes fast. Who in their right mind would say that it's better to share than to get? That flies into the face of everything society tells us, now probably even more so than in Paul's time.

And on top of that, if you're a cynic, you would immediately point to an inconsistency in the verse just before it, where Paul says, "remember what Lord Jesus himself said". And you'd smirk and say, "Oh really? Jesus doesn't say that anywhere in the *my Bible*." And you'd be right. So what gives?

Well, for one thing, the Bible as we now know it didn't exist yet in Paul's time, and wouldn't for another three hundred years. In Paul's days there were many other gospels, and one of them may well have had those words in it. But that's not the point, is it? The point Paul makes is that the teachings of Jesus could almost be summarized in one single word: *give*.

Without giving and for-giving, God's Kingdom will never happen. God's kingdom of shalom, of justice and abundance for all depends on it. Pretty much everything Jesus teaches boils down to that: to give and to for-give.

In today's Bible passage we hear Paul echo this essential teaching of Jesus. So here's the situation: Paul meets with the elders of the fledgling church at Ephesus, which he helped establish. Ephesus a port city on the Mediterranean in what now is Turkey. Paul is about to board a ship bound for Rome for imprisonment, and perhaps even execution. Needless to say it's a sad farewell. Paul has taught them, raised them in the faith, helped build this tender community that is unsure how to carry on without him. But he has to leave, and now he gives them his final instructions in his farewell speech.

We just heard the last part of this speech, in which he cautions them not to be greedy for personal gain but to *give* to be a blessing. And he closes with sharing a fundamental premise that he based his entire life upon, echoing everything that

Jesus ever taught and did: "It is more blessed to give than to receive". It's at the core of our faith, and we prayed it for our opening prayer this morning: God gave Jesus out of love for us. Jesus lived and gave his life out of love for us. Those are two huge givings

But we're so familiar with that idea and we've heard it so often, we almost take it for granted. It's just the way things are, right? Like the weather, or the government, or your in-laws. But not so for Paul. He realizes that after Jesus' death and resurrection, "business as usual" is no longer an option. This is a game changer. It shakes him to the core and it changes *his* life. He becomes a dropout, one of the first dropouts for Christ. He drops out of a prominent religious career, he drops out of what others tell him to believe and do, he drops out of the need for security and comfort. He drops his big ego (and big it was) and lets Christ take over.

So Paul has earned every right to offer himself as an example, which he does. I never wanted wealth or admiration, he says. I worked hard to provide my own keep, and shared the little I had with others. His only goal in life was to build faith communities that showed glimpses of God's coming Kingdom on earth; communities that are driven not by money or power, but by God's generosity: abundance and justice for everyone, especially the weak, the marginalized and the voiceless. For Paul that is not a sacrifice, but what life is all about. So that's what he means when he comforts the leaders of the church in Ephesus with the words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

About a week ago I presided at a celebration of the life of a friend of ours who had died. She was only 68 years old; a deeply spiritual person, but she didn't consider herself a Christian; and neither did the people attending that afternoon. After her children had spoken, others came forward to say a few words. But after a while I realized something was different: instead of talking about what a special person she had been, each speaker shared very concrete stories of how she had touched their lives in very real ways.

There must have been at least a dozen speakers, old, young and middle-aged, women and men, even girls and boys. And every single one of them was able to say how they had become a better person because of her. And so, slowly, with each new speaker this picture emerged of a modest, yet extremely *giving* person.

It blew me away, and I remember thinking how much we as a faith community could learn from this woman who left behind a legacy of love, respect and changed lives. And who probably wasn't really aware of it, who just did it because it was the right thing to do. That afternoon she defined for me what it means to live a generous life just by being there for others, by taking everyone seriously, by not judging but by encouraging and affirming others, and by sharing her wisdom, joys and concerns with them. A non-Christian teaching a Christian about giving and sharing what we have, the core of our faith. If that's not the Holy Spirit at work, I don't know what is.

"It's more blessed to give than to receive". Sharing what we have: our time, our skills, our energy, our best ideas, and yes: our possessions and our money. Nothing to it, right? I don't think so! It's tough and goes against everything society thinks we should be doing.

Everyone has a theory "why people are leaving the church", "why churches are dying" and "where the kids have gone". Those theories vary from hockey to Sunday shopping, and from single-parent families to the evils of internet. But they hardly ever question if *we*, the church itself, might be part of the problem.

There are churches out there that are still thriving. Joyful communities of faith that draw people like moths to a flame. Of course they do, because those are the communities that have somehow found ways to *share* what they have. And by doing that, they share the peace of Christ, and are blessed for it. Who wouldn't want to be part of that? They are blessed - not necessarily in a budget that's in the black, full pews with a healthy bank account.



Christ never promised us those; in fact, time and again he told his followers that money, possessions and being comfortable are not what faith is about. But they are blessed by being transformed into thriving, generous, fearless communities of faith that actually live the gospel.

Personally, I think we should stop worrying about institutional outcomes, and try instead just to be hopeful, joyful, generously giving people of faith. And if we allow God to transform ourselves into generously giving people, interesting things may happen. Suddenly, we may find ourselves participate in political debates, speaking out in matters of the distribution of wealth, and justice, and power.

And people will listen, because, just like Paul, we'll have earned the right to offer ourselves as an example of what life should be like. A life of hope, a durable, rock-solid hope that *God* is God - not the economy or our ego - but the God of love. And this God can use us to make a difference for ourselves and the world.

Who *wouldn't* want to be part of that?! Amen.