

“Inspiring Generosity”

Mark 10.17–31

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 12 October 2003

The story in today’s reading from the New Testament is often called “The Story of the Rich Young Man” or alternately “The Story of the Rich Ruler.” The way the author of Mark’s gospel tells the story, there is no governmental authority in this young man: he’s your basic, garden-variety yuppie. Luke¹, however, picks up the story from Mark and doesn’t say anything about youth, but in his telling of the tale, he adds a political twist: that the man is a ruler of some sort.

This is one of the stories that Jesus told that a lot of us identify as one of the “hard” stories of Jesus, because it pushes us, and it pinches us where it hurts. But, that’s why I **love** this story! After all, we live in the wealthiest society the world has ever known; and virtually all of us have a higher standard of living than even the rich young man. Most of us have better nutrition, better shelter, better healthcare, better education, and better oral hygiene. So, if you’re like me, it’s easier to identify with the rich young man than it is with the people who are already following Jesus.

So, what do you think this story is **essentially** about? Let’s just focus on the Markan text: the one that deals with the “Rich Young Man.” *Is it about power?* Well, sure it is. *How about wealth?* That’s certainly in there. *Do you think it’s about faith?* Of course. *Is it about eternal life?* Yep. That’s in there, too. *Does it deal with “radical socioeconomic reversal?”* Yes, when Jesus says, “the first will be last, and the last will be first,” that’s just what he’s saying. *Is it about the power of God?* Absolutely.

But, fundamentally, I don’t think it’s about any of those things.

Let’s go back to the text for a moment. Here is the yuppie...he’s made a killing on the stock market (must have been in the ’90s, because God knows that wouldn’t be happening now), and he’s basically been able to obtain everything his heart desires...or so he thinks...at least he’s cleaned out Nordstrom, The Sharper Image, and Williams-Sonoma. He’s led a life of piety and righteousness according to his Jewish faith. He spells it out for Jesus: “Teacher, I have kept all these [commandments] since my youth.” This young fellow is what we church sociologists call a “seeker,” a baby boomer or GenXer who is looking for something broader than his current religious tradition in order to find spiritual fulfillment. (I don’t want to denigrate seekers, especially because I consider myself to be one.) Being a seeker is one of the privileges of affluence. Something in the young man’s form of Judaism doesn’t sit right with him, so he goes and seeks out Jesus, the purveyor of alternative wisdom.

And the instruction Jesus offers is definitely counter-cultural – both in the first and the twenty-first centuries. The young man appears to be doing all the right things, but then Jesus looks into his eyes and sees something going on in him. Jesus doesn’t just give him a cursory glance. Jesus looked at him and *loved* him. Have you ever been in a really deep conversation with someone, looking them in the eye, and just really felt your heart fill with love for them? I have a sense that this is what Jesus felt. “Sell everything you own, and give the money to the poor...then come, follow me.” That is Jesus’ prescription for the salvation this young man is seeking.

So, what do you think this story is intrinsically about? Jesus is trying to open something up in this young man whom he loves. He doesn’t offer this direction because he’s trying to drive the young man away, or even because the poor need the money

¹ Lk 18.18–30

(which, of course, they do). What is it that Jesus is trying to help the young man unlock within himself?

I'll give you a hint: it's one of the miracles that God builds into each one of us, and it's something a lot of you who are parents try to instill in your children. Okay, here's another hint: look at the sermon title in the bulletin! It's *generosity!*

Now, you may never have thought of generosity as a miracle. But, as I was laying in bed early Friday morning, I heard this great honking sound: it was the Canada geese heading south on their migration. And I thought to myself, "migration – what a miracle!" The geese have a hard-wired instinct to get on track and engage the flyway twice a year.

And we are hard-wired, too. On the most basic level, we need to have food and shelter, but when we have met those needs, we human beings start to reach beyond ourselves. The great psychologist Abraham Maslow identified this paradigm, calling it a "hierarchy of needs," ranging from physiological needs (food) to safety (shelter, government), to love, to esteem, and finally to self-actualization. Maslow contended that all the "deficiency needs": physiological, safety, love, and esteem – have to be satisfied before a person can act unselfishly. (Yet, haven't you seen people reach out before their own needs have been met?) It's a type of miracle that we humans get to the point at which we are no longer motivated simply by self-interest. I have no doubt that each of us has a strong **need** to give of ourselves generously; that's who we're meant to become as persons created in God's image. But, for all of us, generosity is a planted seed that needs to be watered and tended in order to sprout.

Maslow said that self-actualization is "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming." Or to use some theological language, we have the innate desire to be the persons God intends us to be.

Now, I'm not going to contend that Jesus was out to introduce the principle of self-actualization to the yuppie. But, I think what Jesus did was a bit of good psychological analysis of what this young man needed to do, in terms of his own internal transformation. He had all of those Maslovian "deficiency needs" taken care of quite nicely, and it was time to move on. (And it may not be that Jesus would identify quite the same need in you...but then again, perhaps he would.)

What Jesus did for this young man was to invite him to God's intention for him: **extravagant generosity** – the very same kind that God shows each of us. When we sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," we identify the source of all generosity: God's blessings don't just ooze, or trickle, or drip: **they flow!**

It's an irony that **giving** fills us. Francis of Assisi wrote that "it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." That's part of the miracle.

Now, I can hear what you're saying: "God has never shown me extravagance! I've had to keep my nose to the grindstone for years in order to get what I have! I've earned what I have!" I don't want to downplay anyone's accomplishments, but let's look at it this way: Are you able to hear music? Do you love another person? Can you breathe air and stay alive? Have you touched the life of another? Are you passionate about chocolate? Have you felt a soft Spring raindrop hit your face? Have you smelled the rich scent of pine? Are you the recipient of God's unconditional love?

God acts out of a sense of **abundance**, not out of a sense of scarcity. Look at the planet around you! Look into the sky and see Mars or the Milky Way! Gaze over the mountains at a sunset! But, sometimes we act from a sense of scarcity and fear, rather than from a sense of abundance. There is no sense of "Maslovian deficiency" in the way God acts toward us, and we must **flow** likewise in the way we respond to God and to

humanity. Now, this might go against your family ethos, especially if you grew up in a family in which money or love or faith was a scarce commodity. Regardless of how you grew up, each of us is the recipient of God extravagant generosity, and we are called to pour out that flowing extravagance far and wide.

There are different kinds of extravagant generosity that God models and the Bible portrays: the father of the Prodigal Son, welcomes the boy with open arms and kills the fatted calf to welcome him home. This is extravagant hospitality. We are called to give all God's people an extravagant welcome, whether that means a conversation with a stranger and a good cup of coffee after worship or reaching out into our community through initiatives like the Homelessness Prevention Program we help sponsor here at Plymouth. Think about it: we enact extravagant generosity liturgically every time we celebrate communion around the open table.

God's extravagance also encompasses generosity of spirit: opening oneself fully to the other. If you look at the incarnation: God's self, God's essence, being poured into Jesus, you see the ultimate sense of generosity of spirit. And our willingness to give of ourselves, our very selves, is that same generosity of spirit. I don't know how many thousands of hours people here at Plymouth volunteer, both within the church and in the wider community, but it's a huge number. People give of themselves to do everything from landscaping to preparing communion elements to teaching our kids to helping with the photo directory and more. Your gift of time *and spirit* is a mark of extravagant generosity!

And as today's gospel reading indicates, extravagant generosity also extends to the realm of material wealth. Giving with reckless abandon is what Jesus is calling the rich young man to do. And extravagant generosity is also what God calls us to do. Last year, an inactive member of Plymouth told me that he objected to my stewardship letter, because he saw it as equating faith and money. But, Jesus had already beat me to the punch when he said, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."²

Benjamin Franklin once heard the great English orator and evangelist George Whitefield, who took the East by storm in the late 18th century, and Franklin wrote this in his *Autobiography*: "I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all." What Whitefield did was to invite Franklin into God's abundance and extravagant generosity.

Here's a secret: generosity feels GREAT! Michael Durrall, a Unitarian author, writes that "Being a generous person is one of life's great privileges." YES! It is absolutely!

As a way to illustrate this, I'd like to lift up some of what has happened here at Plymouth in the last year: **our** extravagant generosity. You remember when we took the initiative to help our denomination through additional giving to Our Church's Wider Mission: and in a matter of weeks, this congregation committed \$12,000 – exceeding our goal by \$2,000? That's extravagant generosity! **How did it feel?**

I did some tabulations of the 16 people who serve on your church council. Those 16 households give a combined total of \$65,280 to support the mission of Plymouth.

² Mt 6.21 and Lk 12.34

They are setting a great example of what it means to be extravagantly generous. Last year, while many churches were facing a reduction in their funding, we increased giving at Plymouth by 20 percent. ***How did it feel?***

And what about our outreach as a congregation? Our annual budget is roughly \$315,000. So, because you give to Plymouth, over \$63,000 – 20 percent of our budget – goes for mission and outreach. ***How does that feel?***

So, why do you give? Because it's something you're "supposed" to do? Before Fred Edmonds's ministry here at Plymouth, the congregation had set dues for all members – that deprives people of their best instincts of generosity! Do you give because it's part of who you are as a person of faith? Do you give because it feels good to help the mission of the church and accomplish part of God's intention for the world?

I'm going to surmise that these are true for many of you. And it's also important to note that we are called to extravagant generosity as part of who we are as human beings.

If Jesus were to approach you, how do you think he might try to unlock your inner need to be generous with your spirit, with your hospitality, with your wealth? May we, each of us, find the key that fits the particular lock that shackles us, and unlock the true freedom extravagant generosity can bring.

Amen.