

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 20, October 14, 2012, dedicated to Grant Elijah Washington on his baptismal day, to the memory of Marilyn Taylor Koetz, who entered eternal life October 8, 2012, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“How Hard is it to be Generous?”**

**Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; I Timothy 6:17-19;  
Mark 10:17-31**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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We just heard the story of a rich young man who comes to Jesus with questions of ultimate meaning. He has made his millions. He has followed the law. He is genuinely and sincerely a good business man. So, we know from the start, his religious heritage, his prosperity and his sincerity are admirable qualities he brings to the conversation about eternal life.

It would be so much easier for biblical critics and those who don't like rich people to turn this young man into a self-righteous caricature of a snobby, silver-spoon in the mouth, elite young "Richey Rich." But Jesus and the Gospel of Mark will not allow us to do that – if we have an ounce of integrity ourselves.

No, this young man is the one every pastor wants in his or her church. He serves on committees. He prays. He worships. He

gives his time and talents to the church. He files taxes and pays his share. As he comes and kneels before Jesus, he is wondering what he must do to get into heaven. When Jesus asks him about the keeping the commandments, he answers, *“I have kept them all since my youth.”* This straightforward answer should not be heard as edgy or arrogant. Jesus does not hear it that way. He does not mock this young man’s integrity.

This passage hinges on what happens next. In 10:21, we read from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*: *“Jesus looked him hard in the eye – and loved him!”* (p.1844). Seeing the young man just as he is, Jesus does not rebuke him or discipline him, he simply looks him right in the eyes and loves him. This man at Jesus’ feet receives more than a passing glance of sentimentality, admiration, or respect. Jesus sees the young man in turmoil and truly struggling with the questions of ultimate meaning. After he has loved him, he speaks directly to him: *“You lack one thing. Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. Then, come and follow me”* (*Ibid*, p. 1844).

The young man is so entwined with his money, his possessions, his stuff – that all he can do is stand with his head down, turn and walk away. Perhaps the young man cannot handle the love that Jesus has shown him as he called him to share all he has. We do not know.

So many of my kind (that would be preachers) want to turn the sermon away from money and generalize everything talking about those parts of lives which hold us hostage. Like the disciples around Jesus we would like to deflect this story. Today, the sermon will be on . . . “What claims our highest loyalty? Is it ambition? Education? Medicine? Religion? What is it that we must ‘give up’ in order that we might inherit eternal life?” I want to tell you, this is not helpful.

Rather, take a look at what happens next in our Gospel. Jesus pursues this conversation about money as he turns from the fleeing young man and addresses his disciples. Jesus says, *“Do you have any idea how hard it is for someone who has it all to enter the*

*gates of heaven? . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter God's kingdom!"* He sets his disciples on their heels with this comment! In other words, it is really, really, really hard to be rich and get into heaven!

Let's face it – this passage leaves many of us feeling like we want to put our heads down, turn and walk away, too. We can feel defeated and deflated by the challenges of faith being put into action.

So what is really at issue here? What are we to do?

If we are in the 1% or perhaps the 53% depending on who is counting and how they are counting, do we have to give up everything we have to the poor to make it to heaven? Apparently, yes! But I believe the core issue for the young man (and ALL of us) is one of allowing God to change our hearts. The central issue is **Generosity**. So the answer to the question "What must I do to get to eternal life?" might be reframed, "*You must be generous in all things and at all times with all people.*"

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines "generosity" as: "*1) Readiness or liberality in giving; 2) Freedom from meanness or smallness of mind or character.*" Generosity is a way of living. It is a way of being.

How do you live in this world? Are you liberal in your giving? Are you ready at all times and in all places to give away your money? Are you free from meanness or smallness of mind or character?

***Are you generous?***

With whom are you generous? Some of us are generous with our family but not with our friends or other people. Some of us are generous with friends, but not family or other people. Few of us are generous in all times and places with all people. But I don't know anyone with great wealth who gives it all to the poor.

In his little book, *The Genius of Generosity*, Chip Ingram teaches us that generosity works! Chip speaks wonderfully and well to being generous in all things at all times.

I have put together an insert for you (see below). I want you to take it home, meditate on it, use it in your daily devotions, and consider the “12 Bright Ideas” Chip offers for generous people of faith. These twelve ideas will guide you to become a generous genius. It will allow you to take measures to be become a brighter and more giving and more generous person.

How bright are you as a generous person of faith?

Take a look at the beginning and end of this sheet from Dr. Ingram. First, generosity is genius because it changes lives. Generosity connects us with others. Generosity helps us invest in what matters. Generosity frees our hearts- so much so that might find ourselves slipping through the eye of the needle! ☺ Chip offers “twelve bright ideas” which I encourage you to reflect upon.

Finally, Chip says, *“We will grow wonderfully and well because of God’s generous and wondrous gifts in our lives and our willingness and ability to be generous givers as we share these God given gifts with others.”*

I want you to know that struggling with generosity is as old as the Christian church itself. In I Timothy 6:17-19, Paul was writing to Timothy and the church in Ephesus. Paul knew Ephesus well. Ephesus was a wealthy city and the Ephesians’ church most likely had wealthy members.

In his words to Timothy, Paul advises his friend and understudy about the potential problems of wealth - teaching that having riches carries with it great responsibilities. Those who have money must be generous, not arrogant because they have a lot to give. They must be careful not to put their trust in money instead of the living God for their security. Paul says, even if you don’t have material wealth, you can be rich in good works toward others. No

matter how poor you are, you have something to share with someone.

**You see, generosity and stewardship are about returning thanksgiving and gifts to a generous and giving God.** Being a generous person is all about turning total control of your life over to God. It is about living the words of the Lord's Prayer we speak each Sunday - and for many of us - many times during the week - "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*" In other words, if we want God's reign in our life and God's will for our life to become the guiding principle of our daily living, we need to become geniuses of generosity. (Drawn from *Giving to God* by Mark Allan Powell, Erdmann's Press, 2006, p. xii).

Generosity never happens by accident. We don't stumble into stewardship by showing up at church and suddenly become generous givers of our time, talent and financial resources. We also don't care for ourselves, God's creation or other people by accident.

In the year ahead, we are being asked to grow in our "*circle of faithful generosity.*" May God grant you a generous heart as you grow in the genius of generosity. You will find heaven happening here and now as you grow in this godly way. Amen.

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### **Generosity Works!**

1. *Generosity is Genius because it changes lives.*
2. *Generosity connects us with others.*
3. *Generosity helps us invest in what matters.*
4. *Generosity frees our hearts.*

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### **"Twelve Bright Ideas" about the Genius of Generosity:**

1. To be smart, spend carefully. To be wise save, regularly. To be genius, give extravagantly.

2. Where your money goes, your heart flows.

3. Generosity is a gateway into intimacy with God.
4. Stewardship is the path. Generosity is the adventure.
5. Generous Givers make God and God's purposes their highest priority.
6. Enjoy God's Generosity to you . . . and the share it with others.
7. Faith increases giving and giving increases faith.
8. Those blessed by God become blessers for God.
9. Generous living is joyful living.
10. God measures generosity not by the size of the gift but by the size of the sacrifice.
11. Generosity isn't an act; it's a way of life.
12. True generosity doesn't stop with possessions, it starts with them.

**Remember:**

*We will grow wonderfully and well because of God's generous and wondrous gifts in our lives and our willingness and ability to be generous gives and share these God given gifts with others.*

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*The Genius of Generosity*, by Chip Ingram, published by Generouschurch, 2011, pp. 16-20, 96-97.

