

August 4, 2013
Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43
Colossians 3:1-11
LUKE 12:13-21

GRACE LEADS TO GENEROSITY LEADS TO...

In some churches, there is one “Stewardship sermon” a year. It’s usually in the fall, just at the time that pledge cards for the upcoming calendar year are handed out. In some churches there’s brief theological introduction and a quotation from scripture and then a heavy emphasis on the particular church’s financial needs so as to fund an operating budget which has already been drawn up.

Such an approach gives only lip service to the spiritual and biblical basis of true Christian stewardship, ignores time and talent stewardship, focuses on the institutional church’s local needs with a ceiling on the need to give pre-determined by leadership, ignores the reality that every person needs to *give* whether a particular institution needs more money or not, and most important radically understates the importance of stewardship to *Jesus*.

In fact, 1/6 of all of Jesus’ words in the New Testament and one third of all of his parables are about peoples’ relationships with their possessions -- including today’s Gospel. Jesus spoke more about our relationship with our possessions than about heaven and hell and the sacraments combined. If a church is following the proportion in its preaching of Jesus in his, there should be more like *nine* “Stewardship sermons” a year, not one or two.

Today’s Gospel clearly has a message from Jesus of the dangers of greed, and today’s Epistle calls greed “idolatry.” I agree. Greed can produce “vicious circles” of declining moral behavior in an individual, in a community, a nation, and in the world.

But today I’m not going to focus on what not to do, or even say what we should do. I’m just going to tell you a story about the opposite of a vicious circle: a *grace-filled circle*, one which spirals *upwards*, not down. Grace leads to generosity which leads to grace which leads to generosity and so on up *beyond what people expected or planned for*. Even, and sometimes especially, beginning in the midst of pain and great sorrow.

The story starts back in 1989, when I was then the Vicar of what was then a small mission church which had an Average Sunday Attendance less than half of Christ Church's today, a budget a small fraction of Christ's Church, and virtually no savings: maybe \$5,000 total.

I went to a workshop on handicap accessibility for churches. This was back before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The leader of the workshop was a man who had once been a minor league baseball player in the Dodgers system but who was the victim of a stray bullet in a drive-by shooting in his neighborhood in Brooklyn. He was left paralyzed from the waist down. He was in a wheelchair, but thanks to his determination and athleticism he had built himself up from the waist up. His biceps looked like my thighs.

But, because of the lack of national standards for the few ramps to public buildings which then existed, even *he* could not get up some ramps, so he taught us what standards were reasonable and asked us to be advocates for better codes. He also left those at the workshop with a challenge: "Why is it that someone in a wheelchair can get into McDonald's but not into most churches?"

"Why indeed", I thought, when I came back to my church and looked at all the steps. I talked to some parishioners and one, an architect, drew up (at no cost) blueprints for a wheelchair ramp. We put the project out to bid.

The bids were opened at the next Vestry meeting. \$10,000. There was a long silence. A couple of people cleared their throats. Some rolled their eyes. Another crazy idea from Frank. I said, "Let's just post the blueprint on the bulletin board in the Parish Hall, pray about it and see what happens." So we did. I personally prayed, "Lord, if this is your will and not just another crazy, expensive idea of mine, please give us a sign." Maybe something will happen. Maybe.

That fall, a long-time member of the parish, a woman in her 60's, 8 o'clock service regular and Altar Guild member but little known to most of the congregation, got sick. Really sick. Sick with the kind of respiratory infection that the body can usually shrug off with its immune system and maybe simple medications.

The doctors couldn't figure it out until they did a test which hadn't occurred to them to do because she was a woman in her 60's. You see, she had had heart surgery a few years before, and back in the '80's they were not screening the blood supply. Understand what I'm saying?

She was H.I.V.+ She got A.I.D.S.

Remember the paranoia about A.I.D.S. in the '80's? Well, the paranoia was in full flood among her co-workers (who, after all, might have shaken her hand or put their hands on the same rest room doorknob as she had) and in the community. I took her communion in the hospital. I knew that, as long as I protected myself from any bodily fluids, the danger was of something devastating passing from me to her, not the other way around. Intincting a communion wafer and doing laying on of hands and anointing her for healing were not risky to me, and meant a lot to her.

After she died and people in the church found out what had made it impossible for her to shake her respiratory infection, one of the older ladies announced, "We really have to be there for her. We *all* have to go to that wake. And we have to have the best possible lunch in the Parish Hall after her funeral that we can cook." Everyone nodded, and that's what they did. I was very moved and proud of them. This was church as it ought to be. Grace, at a time and in circumstances when it was really needed.

The lady who died had three grown sons, none of whom were members of the parish and who knew few if any of the members. Her sons were very moved by the love they received from parishioners at the wake, at the service, and at the lunch, especially because they were being treated as pariahs elsewhere.

As noted in her obituary and in the funeral service leaflets, her sons had picked out a worthwhile charity which dealt with respiratory illnesses as the focus of memorial gifts, but they told me after the lunch that they wanted to "do something" for the church.

A couple of weeks after the funeral, they asked to meet me in the Parish Hall, not in my office. They walked over to the bulletin board and tapped the blueprints for the wheelchair ramp. They told me, "We want this to happen. Everybody ought to be able to get into this church." They handed me a check for \$5,000.

Grace leads to generosity.

Meanwhile, as I soon learned, some of the men in the church had gathered around the blueprints without telling me. The group included skilled crafts workers like finish carpenters. They said to each other, "You know, if the architect simplifies a couple of things, *we could build this ourselves*, for just the cost of materials."

Grace leads to generosity.

One Saturday morning in late October, they gathered in the parking lot where the framing for the ramp was laid out, ready for the concrete. When the Teamster who was driving the cement mixer realized he was delivering cement for a wheelchair ramp for a church, he called his other deliveries and said he was running late, and stayed for free for as long as it took to make sure all the concrete was laid out and smoothed out just right.

Grace leads to generosity.

The last piece of the ramp -- the lip to the door -- was not finished before the first frosts hit, so the ramp was not completed until spring. On Mother's Day, we had a parade at the end of the service and gathered around the ramp for the dedication and ribbon-cutting. We read the story of Mark 2:1-12, about the four friends who carried the crippled man up on the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching, made a hole in the roof and then lowered him down to Jesus. I said that thanks to this ramp, and to the more than four friends who made it possible, it won't be as hard to get people to Jesus here as it had been for those four friends. Little did I realize how appropriate that Gospel story was.

The first person wheeled up the ramp was one of the matriarchs of the parish, brought in a wheelchair from her nursing home. The second person up the ramp was a man named Leonard who lived next door to the church and had been in a wheelchair, on permanent disability, since an automobile accident 11 1/2 years before. He was a Christian but not an active member of any church, so we invited him to the dedication. A neighborly thing to do. Grace leads to generosity leads to grace.

Leonard came back the next Sunday. And the next. And the next. We had a spot in the sanctuary where he could sit in his wheelchair next to his nurse and we would bring them communion. He also liked that we did laying on of hands and anointing for healing. He showed up for worship every week.

Then one Sunday that August -- why bother to come to church in August, right? People say, "Nothing ever happens in church in August." One Sunday in August, as I was lining up for the procession in the back of the sanctuary before the service, I saw Leonard's wheelchair.

Folded up.

He was sitting next to his nurse in the front row of pews.

When we got to announcement time, right after passing the peace, I asked if anyone had any announcements or sharings.

Leonard stood up. "I'm sitting in a pew," he said. "And today, I'm going to walk to the altar rail for communion." Which he did. Jesus said, "Rise and walk."

Subsequently, Leonard pledged financially to the church out of his disability checks. He liked that we talked about stewardship as a way to give thanks to God. He wanted to do time and talent giving too, so he became an usher and passed the plate. It took him a little longer to get around than it did most ushers and he needed to be on someone's arm as he did it, but nobody minded. Leonard was walking. He was that Gospel story come to life. New life had come to him -- and through him to others.

When that church got so crowded that people decided they needed to build a new and bigger sanctuary, Leonard also pledged to the capital campaign. We need more room? Everybody ought to be able to come to church. We shouldn't turn anyone away. Let's make room. The new sanctuary was built and now there is more room, room for everyone.

Grace leads to generosity leads to grace leads to generosity leads to grace leads to whatever God has in mind.

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