

Sun. Oct. 23, 2004

The Healing Power of Generosity

2 Corinthians 9: 6-15; Matthew 7: 1-5

The question I have been asking myself this week is: Why am I not more generous than I am? One of the things I like about the church's annual stewardship season is that it causes me to ask myself questions I pretty much avoid the rest of the year: Why am I not more generous?

This question has been exacerbated for me this year because I have been reading a book by Heidi Newark who has served as the pastor of a Hispanic Lutheran Church in the South Bronx, New York, for the past 20 years. Her book is entitled *Breathing Space*. I picked the book up because Heidi was one of the founding pastors of South Bronx Churches (SBC), a sister organization to the Washington Interfaith Network (WIN). When Heidi went to her church in South Bronx 20 years ago, it was perhaps the poorest, most devastated community in America.

One of the powerful messages I could not manage to avoid while reading her book is how amazingly generous the people of her congregation and community are when they themselves have so little.

She talks about families living in one bedroom apartments who open their apartment to 10 other people to sleep on their floors, and they were sometimes not relatives but friends of friends of friends who had nowhere else to go for help, and sometimes they would stay for a year until they got settled enough to get their own places to live.

Why am I not more generous than I am?

She tells the story of 10-year-old Danielle who participated in her church's summer program. Danielle came to Heidi one day in tears. She told Heidi she could not go with the others on the swimming trip schedules for the afternoon because she had no swimming suit. Heidi took Danielle out to buy her a swim suit and while they were out, she took Danielle to MacDonaldis for lunch. Danielle got a Happy Meal and then got up and brought some extra napkins to the table. She divided the fries into five piles and put each pile in a napkin. When Heidi asked her what she was doing, Danielle said: "My sisters and brothers will feel sad that I got french fries and they didn't. I am taking them home to share."

Why am I not more generous than I am?

The name of Heidi's church was the Church of the Transfiguration. They had adopted the Hispanic tradition of celebrating the church's feast day as a big celebration, so they planned a special celebration for Transfiguration Sunday. They had wanted to decorate the church and they did, but they decided they just could not afford to buy flowers for the celebration. Transfiguration Sunday morning, Heidi says, Ben walked into the church with two huge flower arrangements – orchards, daisies, and little purple flowers. Ben had gotten a temp job at a florist for Valentines Day and the next day, then they had told him they did not need him anymore. Ben had begged the florist to let him work one more day and to pay him in flowers, so he worked all day Friday, a 12-hour day, to earn flowers to bring to his church and to bring to his God.

Why am I not more generous than I am?

How is it that the people of Heidi's church can have so little and be so generous when I who, in comparison, have so much am so much less generous in sharing what I have?

The Scripture lessons of the week convince me that the problem is that I have a distorted view of the way the world works. Theologians and philosophers would say that my ontology is messed up ... my understanding of the nature of being and reality is distorted.

And I am part of a world with a messed-up ontology, and part of a society that reinforces this distorted ontology just about every time I turn on my TV or read an ad or take a college course or read a book.

This is the distortion: the distortion is to suppose that *having* makes me rich ... that having makes me secure, powerful, in control and well.

It is an ontology that is so prevalent and so deeply engrained within me, and probably within you, that it is almost impossible for us to see reality any other way.

New Testament ontology says exactly the opposite: *Giving* is what makes us rich. This is what II Corinthians says: “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.” (II Corinthians 9: 11) It is through giving that we find security, power, and wellness.

New Testament ontology says having divides us, giving heals us and creates community. Having fragments us and leaves us insecure and weak and anxious. Giving unites us and gives us the only security there really is.

The poor people in Heidi Newark’s church in South Bronx, some of them, seem to get this. They live in New Testament ontology. They seem to know that being generous to others, even when they themselves have so little, creates a generous world where everybody is better off.

For most of us, really believing this is harder than it would be for a camel to get through the eye of a needle. We live in a Cookie Monster world: me see cookie, me want cookie, me eat cookie, me see cookie, me want cookie, and on and on and on.

And, in the New Testament, this is true about more than money. It is true about our time and service, which are sometimes harder to give than money. But it is true finally about our spirits.

Matthew 7 says: “Judge others, and you will be judged. The measure you give is the measure you will receive.” Judging is a way of having, and it divides the world. Not judging, but understanding and accepting, heals the world and creates community.

New Testament ontology insists: Give and you will have. Have and you will lose. Hard to understand. Yet it is what the people of Heidi Newark’s church practice everyday.

Let me tell you two more stories about this, and then I will stop and ask you to consider your commitment to God through the ministries and mission of Foundry Church for next year.

The first is a story I heard from Bishop James K. Mathews, a retired former bishop of this area. Bishop Mathew’s father-in-law was E. Stanley Jones, a famous missionary to India. E. Stanley Jones was from Baltimore and when he visited the US, he would often speak in churches throughout the Middle Atlantic states. E. Stanley Jones told Bishop Matthews about a small church he visited in Pennsylvania. He got

there early because traffic was better than he expected. The pastor was not there yet. The only person there was the janitor, who was playing a simple two-finger tune on the church organ.

While they were waiting for others to arrive, the janitor told E. Stanley Jones some of his life story. Before the banks crashed in 1930, he had been a successful and affluent man. After 1930, try as hard as he could, he never recovered financially. He worked low-paying jobs the rest of his life, barely getting by. Finally he retired and took the job as janitor at his church.

“Before the 1930 crash,” the janitor told E. Stanley Jones, “I donated this pipe organ to the church.” The man looked at E. Stanley Jones and said, “You know, the only things I have today are what I gave away.”

The other story I want to tell you is this: Last Sunday when Bob Benn showed up at 7:30 or so to open the church, there was money sitting on the front stoop. It was mostly pennies, nickels and dimes, a few quarters. It was neatly stacked in piles. When Carol Watkins counted it on Monday, it amounted to \$10 and some cents.

The coins were stacked at the entrance that is used by the people who come to our walk-in mission for the homeless, so I suspect it was from one of the men and women who come here for help and friendship. I do not know how he or she accumulated more than \$10 in pennies, nickels and dimes, but I suspect it is one of the most generous offerings we have ever received here. And here is what else I think. I do not think whoever left it was paying us back for help he or she had received here. I think he or she was not giving it to us. He or she was giving it to God through us.

Last Sunday, when I saw that pile of pennies, nickels and dimes and heard Bob’s story of how he had found them on our church stoop, I asked myself this question. Why am I, who is so fortunate and who have so much, not more generous than I am?

¹ Heidi B. Newark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).