

“The Wisest Way is Not Always the Most Obvious”

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church
on the Third Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 4, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 19, VU #740, (refrain 2)

I Corinthians 1:18-25

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Today we continue our reflections on Richard Wagamese’s book *Embers*, and particularly what it means to be generous. Michael Durall in his book *Creating Congregations of Generous People* writes: ‘Stewardship includes the ways that we encourage people to lead generous lives, and how we use all the resources at our command to strengthen our religious faith and make the world a better place.’

Generosity and our views of money can be determined by many factors, but Durall identifies two main ones:

1. How we see money as a vehicle for living life – if money is a way we can support others, then we have a different understanding of generosity than if we see money is a vehicle to support us in seeking our personal needs or desire for personal acquisitions.
2. Also, how we view assets will be determined by what we see as valuable – if we have a strong connection to the local congregation, we have a different perspective than if we have been disappointed with, or in conflict with, members of the local congregation. We support what we see as valuable and worthwhile.

I would add that if we have a sense of the role of the church in other parts of the world, then we have more of an openness to sharing in God’s mission than if we have no idea what is happening beyond our own community or even own neighbourhood.

In short, giving of ourselves that is frequent and consistent is a way to live our faith.

Bill Easum is an American church consultant who held many workshops in Ontario through the 1990’s, and after that spent some time working in cooperation with Tom Bandy, a United Church minister in Guelph whose background, like Easum’s, is with the United Methodist Church USA. Easum, 20 years ago or more, suggested congregations should have special envelopes or special project giving every Sunday of the year – but, since most churches would find that a bit much, and hard to keep track of, he suggested 35-40 special donations or projects every year.

Why? First of all, no one would be expected to support them all (and no one would), but then people would have many options in which to share generously and find ways to live their faith in terms of giving, volunteer time, and outreach. Each person could be generous for a project or a program that met their own passion and interests. If you have two or three special projects in a year, everyone feels they must support it whether it matches their interests or not.

Laurent Parks Daloz has identified what is pre-determinant as to a generous attitude later in life. People who are generous, for the most part, have experienced many of the following realities in the first three decades of their life. Not any one aspect is determinant, nor is any one experience a magic formula to create generosity, but people who have many or all of the following experiences tend to be generous as adults:

- The experience of being “seen” as a child
- Having at least one publicly active parent
- Growing up in a home that is hospitable to the wider world
- Living in a safe yet diverse neighbourhood
- Actively participating in religious life
- Having contact with adults in the community who model commitment
- Participating in youth groups
- Having mentors.

As one stewardship leader said: “Charitable giving should change your life in some way.”

What does Richard Wagamese mean by his concept of “generous”? Clearly in an indigenous landscape, generosity is always related to the Creator. Creator has made what we need to live an abundant life, and we must honour it and care for it. Our commitment to what the world offers is part of our spiritual journey.

And so the Psalmist wrote in the opening of Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the vault of the sky reveals God’s handiwork.”

Surely being generous is a reflection of the generosity of God to us.

We are recipients of that generosity, but we also are to share and enable that generosity to be evident to others. Now that is a lot of words, but how can we live that, express it in concrete terms, and show it in our overall lifestyle?

Last Saturday Catherine, Connor Ross and I walked in the Coldest Night of the Year walk. Fortunately it was not the coldest night, and in places the salt and sand was making the sidewalks passable.

We were part of a downtown churches group walking, with a goal of raising \$1,500 for the Samaritan Centre. We did that and more, but the generosity of St. Andrew’s folk meant that almost \$1,200 came from friends, members and adherents of this congregation. Thank you.

Our Lenten project is off to a rousing start, as people see the need and opportunity to buy books for the local jail to assist those who are incarcerated to begin anew and develop, or enhance, reading and learning skills. We expect that our library poster will be fully subscribed by Holy Week. Thank you again.

So how can I in concrete terms ask you to show generosity beyond all of this, even as we look to an annual meeting and commitments for the regular ministry that are ongoing?

I turned again to Michael Durall in his book *Creating Congregations of Generous People*, and there I read: “Charitable giving should make some difference in how we as religious

people experience life from day to day. If giving to your congregation is similar to writing a cheque at the end of the month to pay the phone bill or the electric bill, and then forgetting about it until the end of the next month, you are not giving enough.”

Wait a minute, I wanted to yell at the book, you talk about generosity and sharing in ways that are not limited to financial contribution, and now you are telling people how to know if they are giving sufficiently to the congregation or wider church.

I am not here to tell you generosity is about your church giving – it is not. Many people are generous with their talent, their artistic ability, their presence, their prayers, their attention to the needs of others, their vocation and their family to name a few examples of generosity.

But I do want to say that generosity in the church is never defined by money alone; it is defined and enhanced by interactions with others, finding points of connection with others, and being attentive to the needs of others.

So relax – we will hear in a few moments the impact of our Lenten project, and the importance of supporting the library in the jail. You will have a chance at the meeting of the JNAC report after service and the annual meeting the end of March (March 25th to be exact) to renew your awareness of the overall needs of this congregation.

We have had lots of talk, and will have more, as to how we define generosity in monetary terms.

So relax – today you are the recipients of a token of thanks.

I learned yesterday that it is no problem to walk into a local bank branch and ask for 5 roles of toonies on the spot. So right now I invite you to pass these bags around and take a townie. If you need 2, then take 2.

I want you to use this toonie, maybe with a toonie of your own, to buy tea or coffee for someone this next week. But buying the coffee is the easy part – it is like placing a small amount of money on the offering plate that does not affect our lives or we do not think about after it is gone. Buying a coffee is a blip in the world’s reality.

I want this to be a generous gift, and this toonie, no matter what the financial circumstances for the person with whom you will buy a coffee or tea, is hardly a generous gift.

The generosity will be that you will not just buy the beverage, but spend time speaking with the person, getting to hear their story if a stranger, or talking with them intently if someone you have a connection to. You see, generosity is not so much the dollar value we place on gifts, as important as that may be for charitable work, family support and community enhancement. What is really generous is giving our time for the good of others – now that is a difference maker.

So take a toonie and be ready to share a tea or coffee and (most importantly) share yourself with someone else. And if the request seems like too much, or maybe you do not

have a chance to buy a hot or cold drink for someone in your daily activities, you can pass the bag and let someone else take two or three toonies as they seek to make a difference in the lives of people they will meet this week.

But you also can simply take the toonie then treat yourself, for if we really reflected on what Richard Wagamese has called us to do, and the Psalmist echoed in his words, "God is generous to us, and when we experience that generosity, however we experience it, we are more prepared to be generous toward others."

I have no illusion that a \$2 gift will buy any favours or commitment, but a real sense of the generosity of God in creation transformed Richard Wagamese in his life, God's generosity animated a Psalm writer thousands of years ago whose words we heard earlier, and that awareness of God's generosity can make a difference in your life and mine as to how we look upon others.

A toonie may not be the obvious way to see the generosity of God. But it is a start. God is generous. God calls us to be generous. I believe it. I know it.