

## ***Grounded in Gratitude***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

October 31, 2021

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This is the first of a three-week series focused on Giving and Discipleship. During our three Stewardship Sundays, this one along with November 14 and celebrating on St. Andrew's Sunday – November 21 – I would like us to think about giving – giving of your time as well as giving of your treasures to causes that touch your hearts – how can we give intentionally, patiently, with our whole hearts not grudgingly.

Giving is rooted not in our global financial economy, it is grounded in God's economy, it flows through us as we give. Today, the spiritual practice of gratitude as the foundation of discipleship.

We are in relationship with each other as a community of people on our faith journey. We seek to live as a disciple of Jesus and to centre our lives in the love and grace of God. Our faith in God and Jesus is expressed through our actions, our words when we talk to people.

That word "disciple" – maybe we don't use that word often.

Maybe you think only of those friends of Jesus in the Gospel stories. As a disciple of Jesus, how do we seek individually and as a community to share God's abundance and love with each other and the world?

In the 2 Corinthians scripture passage, Paul is writing to remind the Corinthians of a gift they have promised to give. The gift is a collection Paul is taking to the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is sending some friends in advance to make sure that the gift is generous (and given voluntarily).

I'm going to be honest with you, I was a bit uncomfortable reading this. It was an audacious message to Christian sisters and brothers – I hope that you will be generous as you said you would be. Whew!

What can Paul's instruction for a generous and voluntary gift mean to us today? How do we give to the church and to others from a generous and voluntary place in our hearts?

For a gift to be voluntary and generous, we need to look at how we orient and root our spiritual selves. There are many practices that sustain us on this journey: spiritual practices that can help us be strong in mind and help us to remember why we are here, practices that nurture our soul and strengthen us in the journey to love Jesus and serve as he showed us. These practices help us to centre ourselves in God's love and abundance.

I am betting that many or all of you have a spiritual practice for gratitude, or perhaps ten. We can make a habit of beginning and ending our day with a ritual of gratitude. We can create a ritual at mealtimes to say thank you to God. To begin or end our day naming the blessings of our day and in our life helps us to name that God is

good. We trust in God. We bring to our consciousness the blessings in our life and know God is present in our lives when we can name them.

Gratitude is our response to God and God's blessings. When we know in our heart that God's grace is freely given, no strings attached, we are able let go of trying to hold on. We can rest in God who is generous, and then we can cultivate a life lived from a place of abundance.

The spiritual practice of gratitude makes a difference in us when we start to live differently and reach out to the world. When the practice of gratitude roots us and how we live, we breathe more deeply and we are inspired. We breathe deeply into the sense of abundance and from this place we are inspired to give freely, no strings attached.

But there are many things in our life that get in the way of centring ourselves in God's love and grace. Think about reading the newspaper or turning on the computer or tv to see another senseless tragedy.

It where spiritual practices can breathe life into us,  
The realities of life – violence, injustice, people in power betraying trust.

There are many voices around us advocating for individualism, consumerism, and autonomy. Too many of us are caught up in busyness, the push to produce, achieve, and attain. It is exhausting. And when we are caught in this whirlwind, it leads us to live in a world of scarcity.

There is so much that encourages us to view our world through the lens of scarcity. You know, scarcity – “seeing the glass half empty rather than half full”, of not enough. Through this lens we cannot give to others of ourselves, of our time, of our money. If we do give, it is not freely given, not voluntary. Jesus knew and taught of God's abundance. He knew that God's love and grace is freely given.

The Gospel reading today from Luke is the story of Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector, someone most people hated. A chief tax collector in the time of Jesus was a person who collected taxes for the Roman oppressors. Luke describes Zacchaeus as wealthy. One gets wealthy as a tax collector by extortion and embezzlement, by taking advantage of the people, including the working poor and the elderly. Luke also tells us that Zacchaeus has changed. Zacchaeus has seen that what he has done is wrong and is returning the money he has extorted.

I wonder what happened to Zacchaeus to make him change? When we meet him, he is trying to climb a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. Might he have heard Jesus speaking and been changed somehow by Jesus' message of God's love for all? Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree, names him, and invites himself to Zacchaeus' home for dinner. We can imagine Zacchaeus being thrilled to have Jesus in his home. Zacchaeus promises to give half of his income to the poor and, if he is caught cheating in the future, he will pay four times the damages. Jesus approves of his actions and names him as being a part of the family, a child of God.

Can you imagine what must have been going on in the heart and mind of Zacchaeus? I imagine he was filled with love and gratitude. He had a moment of transformation that led him to give his income to others. He now seems to live life

out of a sense of abundance and generosity. And to prove to Jesus he has changed, he states that if he is caught cheating, he will pay four times the damages!

Zacchaeus is changed. He now sees the world through the lens of abundance, and he is filled with gratitude. God has called him and named him, and he responds with gratitude and giving. God calls each of us and names us, and through Jesus, teaches us to live a life of gratitude and giving.

Trusting in God's love and abundance does not mean that there will not be difficult times. What it means is that we can move through difficult life experiences and trauma with resilience. Seeing the world in abundance can strengthen us to move through life when it is difficult. To give generously and voluntarily is our response to God's love, which is freely given, no strings attached.

We are human and we need to be in relationship with each other, with God, with Jesus, to help us on this journey in life. These relationships are foundational in the practice of discipleship. We are called to co-create God's vision here on earth, and this is not easy or light work. Our spiritual practices, done together and individually, help us to live with a sense of abundance and give us the will to share our abundance with others. We are blessed to be a blessing.  
Amen.