

September 25, 2016



"DISCIPLE: Practice Generosity"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 4

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

1 Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Last Sunday we were privileged to participate in the baptism of Olivia Elise Iskander Pike, she just over one year old. And as part of the baptism liturgy, we remembered the words of Jesus, how he said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

Hold that thought..."for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs"...and I'll return to it in just a moment. It gives us important insight into today's DISCIPLE theme of "Practice Generosity."

It's baptism, actually, that connects last Sunday to this Sunday. There's a verse in this passage from the letter to Timothy that scholars think is a reference to Timothy's own baptism. Verse 12 reads: "Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." In the baptism of an infant, the parents make the pledge on behalf of the child. But Timothy would have been baptized as an adult and so would have pledged his faith, confessed his faith for himself. Baptism is the sign and seal that one has given one's life to following the way God as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. All baptized Christians here present this morning, hear this instruction as if it's being spoken to you. Take hold of, seize what this really means, seize the eternal life to which you were called. The question is, of course, how in the world—meant quite literally—how in the world do we seize eternal life? Fortunately, a big clue comes in this same passage, verse 19, when that verb command to "seize" is used again. "...do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up the treasures of a good foundation for the future, able to seize the life that really is life."

This is what we pledge to aspire to in our baptism, all of us. To do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. That's what this entire passage from 1 Timothy is about.

So what can children teach us about these kingdom values of doing good, and being generous and ready to share? I know some of you have little ones who are at the age when "sharing" is NOT their operative mode. Just the opposite! "Me, mine, want that" are their primary ways of approaching just about everything. But with some good role modeling and boundary-setting and impactful Sunday School lessons they do grow out of that. And children can practice the most faithful, extravagant generosity imaginable.

A number of years ago, Anne Herbert wrote a book for slightly older children ages 7-10ish. Its title and theme caught the hearts of children of every age: *Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty*. That title made its way onto t-shirts and bumper stickers and posters in college dorms. Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty. Even made it to the reading list of Archbishop Desmond Tutu who said of it: "We can indeed transform the world, and we are each called to take part in this sacred work. *Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty* offers this simple and powerful message of wisdom and hope. Wherever you are, you can create beauty. Moment by moment, you can create joy. Instant by instant, you can offer kindness."

A children's book, and children seem to do it best. They get it intuitively. They can teach us.

At the United Nations Summit on Refugees in New York City last week, seeking better ways to respond to the desperate need of some 21 million refugees around the world, President Obama told this story during his address:

"We can learn from a young boy named Alex, who lives not far from here in Scarsdale, New York. Last month, like all of us, Alex saw that heartbreaking image -- five-year-old Omran Daqneesh in Aleppo, Syria, sitting in that ambulance, silent and in shock, trying to wipe the blood from his hands.

And here in New York, Alex, who is just six years old, sat down and wrote me a letter. And he said, he wanted Omran to come live with him and his family. "Since he won't bring toys," Alex wrote, "I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him addition and subtraction. My little sister will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him... We can all play together. We will give him a family and he will be our brother."

"Those are the words of a six-year-old boy. He teaches us a lot," the president said. And the leaders of the nations applauded as one.

From a six year-old. Probably the most powerful example of what it means to practice generosity. The kind of generosity the letter to Timothy is all about. "We will give him a family and he will be our brother."

You know, we tend now to think of the word "generous" primarily in relation to money. And it is that, of course. Some of the verses in today's Scripture passage make that abundantly clear. But the word "generous" is used in other ways as well. It's used sometimes in recipes—"a generous sprinkle of pepper"—to mean more than is usual or necessary. It's used to describe kindness towards others—"it was generous of them to ask her along." And it can mean magnanimous, free from meanness or smallness of mind or character. "She has a generous spirit."

In all these ways, generous means "more than is usual or necessary." And that's the key, I think, to the truth of the Word of God contained in this Scripture passage. Generous, in every way, beyond what is usual or necessary. And in this we seize the life that is really life.

I heard another story recently about a church that is doing just what six year-old Alex described. The Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey. The sign in front of the church reads: "We resettle refugees." You know, we here did that in the '70s when we sponsored a refugee family from Vietnam. Well, Nassau Presbyterian Church started before that then and have kept on doing it ever since. Over 50 years, they've sponsored ten families: Cubans, Vietnamese, Bosnians and Iraqis. Their pastor says simply: it's an expression of faith, the teachings in the Gospels.

Now they're sponsoring a Muslim family from Syria. Father, mother and their four children. Their Refugee Resettlement Committee is experienced, deeply committed to this ministry, and well connected throughout their community. They secured free housing, and stocked the new home with furniture, food, and clothing. They provide an English-language tutor and retired teachers to help the kids adjust to school and do their homework. The father is blind, having lost his eyesight in a mortar attack in his uncle's home. The committee found someone from a center for the blind who is teaching the father mobility—how to use a white cane and get around and how to develop vocational skills that may make it possible for him to get a job. And they're teaching the mother to drive—not the traditional women's role, to say the least.

This is really the definition of generous—beyond what is usual or necessary. To my mind, it takes Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty to a new level, from random to intentional, dependable. From senseless to thoughtful and loving. The disciples of Jesus Christ in the Nassau Presbyterian Church have seized the life that is really life in Christ Jesus and are living it out, family by family, year after year. It is to be generous, beyond what is usual or necessary, in the way Jesus himself was generous, in the way children are generous. "It is to such as these that the kingdom of Heaven belongs."

Sponsoring refugees is one way to do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. There are many other examples we could offer—to participate in the Habit build or the community meal with Family Place families. To give someone a ride to church. To be generous in prayer for the congregation and the community. To be generous in giving as we are able to support the ministries of the church. To be generous in spirit, kindhearted towards those we may not understand or whose opinions are not our own. To be generous with our time and involve ourselves in the education and formation of our children and youth. To be generous in time set apart to rest in the quiet presence of God, that we might grow in wisdom and in hope.

The writer, Frederick Buechner, put it this way: "To see [Christ] with the heart is to know that in the long run his kind of life is the only life worth living. To see him with the heart is not only to believe in him but little by little to become bearers to each other of his healing life until we become finally healed and whole and alive within ourselves. To see [Christ] with the heart is to take heart, to grow true hearts, brave hearts..."

And what a gift to a world broken by rancor, enmity, violence....what a gift are disciples of true and brave hearts, kindhearted, generous in spirit, generous to a fault.

Let us seize the life that really is life, growing ever more perfect in love, as John Wesley would say--rich in good works, ready to share, generous in all things, disciples of him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. AMEN

Notes:

The DISCIPLE sermon series is drawn from the work of Martin Thielen in *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*. Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

Anne Herbert. *Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty*. 2014 (3rd edition): New Village Press.

The White House Office of the Press Secretary: September 20, 2016.
Remarks by President Obama at Leaders Summit on Refugees. United Nations, New York, New York.

Deborah Amos story on Syrian refugee family. NPR Morning Edition, Sept. 14, 15, 16, 2016.

Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993

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