**Living Gratitude**

**Part 1: Gratitude Burning in our Hearts**

**Text: Luke 24:32**

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It was an act of generosity: Jesus offered them bread. That’s how they recognized him.

You’ll recall that two followers of Jesus were walking to Emmaus, a town about 7 miles from Jerusalem. Their emotions were all jumbled up that Sunday afternoon. Jesus’ death had torn their hearts apart with grief. But now this word that he was somehow alive. And you get the impression that they wanted to be at least hopeful in the wake of that seemingly good news. But something was holding them back. Perhaps it was skepticism akin to that of their friend Thomas, who insisted that he wouldn’t believe unless he saw the wounds of the Risen Christ himself. In any event, they certainly had much to talk about. So it’s not surprising that when this stranger encountered them on the road, they were deep in conversation. This stranger, who was not really a stranger, but they didn’t know that yet. It was only when he shared his bread with them that they recognized him. It wasn’t much, but he shared what he had. And in that act of generosity, they knew that they were in the presence of the Risen One. And their hearts burned within them: burning with hope; burning with joy; burning with gratitude.

Acts of generosity can open our hearts and eyes and minds in marvelous ways. They help us to see things that we’ve never seen before. I remember an afternoon when I was in seminary and I was in just an *awful* mood! I was having doubts about my faith, my vocation, my self-worth, about almost everything. I was so filled with doubt that I wasn’t sure that I even had any friends. And of course when you get yourself tied-up in a knot like that, you start to do things that push people away, and your fear about friends becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. It was an afternoon when my emotions were all jumbled-up, and my friend Carol – because, in fact, I really did have friends – my friend Carol offered me a little butterscotch candy. It wasn’t much, and she didn’t say much; she just gave it to me. And like those disciples at Emmaus, my eyes were opened by her act of generosity. In that moment I recognized that Carol – and others – really *did* care for me, and I recognized that there really was hope. It’s not that my situation suddenly changed, except that a light suddenly came on in the midst of the darkness, and I could see what was already there in a new way. It was an act of generosity that did it. And my heart burned with gratitude.

Living gratitude. That’s our stewardship theme for our annual campaign this year. Because there is so much for which to be grateful. Even in the midst of darkness, there is light. Even in the midst of death, there is new life. Even when there isn’t a whole lot to go around, someone is generous. And for these blessings, and so many more, we are thankful.

Those disciples at Emmaus were on the receiving end of Jesus’ generosity. So are we. We have received so much; like Jesus’ love. We’re all here because at some point we have been touched by the love of God in Christ.

Maybe it was a mentor who took you under his or her wing, and helped you discover gifts and abilities that you didn’t know we had. Perhaps that’s why we’re grateful.

Maybe it was the way in which the church offers us an extended family. There are times when our own homes don’t always feel like welcoming places. For many of us, it was especially in our teen years. But there was this extended family that we had through the church: other homes where we could hang out; other adults who were sometimes like surrogate parents. Perhaps that’s why we’re grateful.

Maybe it was music which warmed your heart. Or a life changing week at camp. Or reading something that you’d never seen before in the Bible. Or a blessed moment of prayer. Perhaps that’s why we’re grateful. We have freely received these and so many more blessings from God. We’ve all been on the receiving end of God’s generosity, offered to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. No wonder there is gratitude burning in our hearts.

But the blessings abound even more when *we* are the generous ones. That’s what I’ve found over the years. As wonderful as it is to be on the receiving end of someone’s generosity, it’s even more wonderful when we get into the habit of being generous ourselves; we actually experience even *greater* blessings that way. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). I use to think he meant, “It is *better* to give than it is to receive; you *ought* to be giving more than receiving.” And what Jesus meant as an invitation to experience a blessing became instead a burden; an oppressive commandment: I felt guilty if I didn’t give.

That’s what happens when you give out of a sense of obligation, rather than a sense of gratitude. When I go through the motions of being generous because someone told me that I *ought* to do this, it’s a burden. When I give because I have this gratitude in my heart and I *want* to be generous, then it’s a delight; then it’s a blessing.

I was well into adulthood before I fully got my heart and mind around this approach to generosity. But when I think back on it now, I realize that my parents tried to encourage it within me as a child. They tried to encourage this attitude of gratitude; this sense of giving as a blessing. And they did it by giving my siblings and me an allowance. With no strings attached. We were expected to do chores around the house, but nothing was ever said about the allowance being payment for doing those chores. And while Saturdays were the day for both receiving allowance and doing chores, there were lots of times when the allowance was given in the morning, and the chores weren’t finished until the afternoon. It was so neat to just receive that one dollar bill each week, apparently just because my parents loved us and were generous toward us. And I could use it to buy baseball cards, or comic books, or maybe even go to a White Sox game; because a kid could get into Comisky Park for just 75 cents back then. $1.00, freely given, and I could do whatever I wanted with it; no strings attached.

Well, there was *one* string attached. I had to put a dime in the collection plate every Sunday. I received that dollar on Saturday, and 10 cents – 10% – was given to God on Sunday. It’s called a tithe and it’s an ancient biblical practice, but I didn’t know that yet. All I knew was that it was kind of fun to have my own offering envelopes and to put that dime in, and then have 90 cents – almost the whole dollar! – to spend as I pleased.

Except for one Sunday…You see, in the church basement, there was a Coke machine. And it dispensed those little 6.5 ounce bottles of Coke that cost – you guessed it – a dime. Every Sunday I walked past that Coke machine, and every Sunday I thought, “Oh my, a Coke would taste *so* good.” And one Sunday the temptation was just too great: and I tore open my offering envelope, and put the dime in the slot, and out came an ice-cold Coca-Cola.

Right at that moment, who should come by but the Sunday School Superintendent. Who happened to be my mother! But she was real cool about it. She didn’t get mad or anything. She just said, “That’s OK Bruce, you just have to share that Coke with everyone else.” Have you ever shared a little bottle of Coke with an entire Sunday School?! Mom got a bunch of those tiny Dixie cups, and we poured out a bit of Coke in each one, and everyone was on the receiving end of what appeared to be an act of generosity on my part.

Now, this is the point at which I should say that my heart was so filled with gratitude because I could share what I had with so many. The truth is, I was so bummed that I got just a tiny little swallow of Coke for my dime that I never pulled that stunt again!

So…I kept giving my tithe every Sunday. And, of course, the amount increased as my allowance increased. And then it increased some more once I started receiving a pay check. The neat thing about a tithe is that anyone can do it; because it’s not a set amount, it’s a percentage. Generosity doesn’t necessarily mean giving God a huge chunk of change. It means giving God our first and our best – some small percentage, no more than 10% – right off the top. And the cool thing is that God entrusts the rest to us to do with it as we please. But wait, it gets even more cool than that. Because, more often than not, that remaining 90% is enough to meet our needs for that week. Not necessarily our *wants*, but our needs. And when we get into that habit of generosity, and you see the amazing ways in which God provides, we find that there is gratitude burning in our hearts.

Gratitude begins when we receive the generosity of others. Gratitude deepens when we are generous ourselves. And in such moments of generosity – both receiving and giving – we may see things that were already there; seeing them, as if for the first time. Like seeing my mother’s love and wisdom in the way she handled the Coke incident. We tend to overlook such virtue in our parents. But it’s there. Sometimes it takes an act of generosity for us to see how grace abounds in those whom take for granted.

Like seeing new possibilities in discouraging situations. I’ve been raising funds for the endowment of Disciples Peace Fellowship. The endowment income sends summer interns to our camps and conferences to lead workshops on justice and peace issues. After the last General Assembly the gifts were just pouring in, but then it seemed like someone turned off the spigot. And I’d been feeling discouraged. But Friday – out of the blue – I received a pledge of $7500, and all of a sudden it seemed like our target might be doable after all. That donor and his gift had been right in front of my eyes, and I hadn’t seen it coming. But acts of generosity are like that: they help us to see new possibilities that were there all the time.

Like seeing the Risen Christ. He was there with them all along. But the two disciples walking to Emmaus didn’t see him. Until he took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And there was gratitude burning in their hearts.

Generosity comes not out of a sense of obligation, but out of a sense of gratitude. So I’m not going to tell you that you *ought* to be giving more to the church, or to charity, or to your kids, or to anyone else. What I will tell you is this: God loves you very much. With every act of kindness that anyone does for you, God is telling you how much God loves you. You can feel it in that little warm spot, right here. It reminds us that the Risen Christ lives, today, within our hearts. Thanks be to God.