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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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REFORMATION

October 25, 2015

“Extravagant Generosity”

(Exodus 36:6)

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“And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning . . . Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: ‘No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.’ And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work” (Ex. 36:6).

COLLECT: Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

When you think of God's ancient people in the desert, what do think of? Their grumbling against him? Their hoarding of the manna against his command? The golden bull incident? Not a very good history. But here in Exodus 36, we get a different portrait of God's ancient people, a good one, a remarkable account of their generosity.

You'll remember the story, how Joseph was sold into Egyptian slavery by his brothers. Eventually he flourishes and even becomes a trusted assistant to Pharaoh. Famine brings the rest of the family to Egypt, and, over the generations they increase. Exodus 1 says "the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them." Later, a new Pharaoh ascends to the throne in Egypt and says to his council, "The Israelites have become too numerous for us." He's worried about Egyptian culture and traditions and loyalty. (It sounds like the concerns of Germany today, with over 10,000 refugees streaming in every single day. Where do you put them all? Will they assimilate or with time will they try to Islamasize Western Europe?) In any case, Pharaoh's solution is to oppress and enslave all those Israelites in Egypt. The Egyptian taskmasters become brutal, and the Israelite slaves become brick making machines. In desperation, they cry out to God and God hears the sounds of their suffering and their prayers and with a mighty hand and the extra persuasion of ten plagues God delivers them from slavery into freedom, from Egypt into the wilderness, from despair into hope.

When they need direction, God guides them with a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. When they

grumble about being hungry, God feeds them with manna. And when they complain about being thirsty, God gives them water from the rock. And when they need order and instruction, God gives them the Ten Commandments, which also teach them what it means to live within the covenant. When the people turn their backs and radically disobey their Creator, God calls them back, forgives them, and loves them still, and renews their relationship. As God and the Israelites travel together in the wilderness, his generosity becomes their lifeline. Without his resilient love, we can only imagine what would have happened to them. After all, the book of Exodus is replete with examples of how they fail as the people of God. They grumble. They murmur. They complain. They disobey. They try to tell God what he should do and when he should do it. They prostitute themselves to other gods. They even forge a golden calf and tell one another, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” They mess up again and again, and earn the reputation for being a “stiff-necked people.” So our overall impression of them is not a good one.

But today, in our text from Exodus 36, we are given a different picture of our ancestors in the faith. It seems at this particular moment, the Israelites are profoundly aware of all that God has done for them. This takes place shortly after the golden calf incident so they may be related. Maybe they realize how fortunate they are that God is giving them yet another chance. Maybe they realize that if they were God they would have washed their hands of these people long ago, but they discover time and again that God will not wash his hands of them. Though unlovable, God still loves them. After the golden calf fiasco, God renews the covenant and promises once again to be their God and to make them his people.

That’s extravagant generosity, and in our text today we see God’s people responding to that generosity with their own extravagant generosity. It’s time to build the Tabernacle, the tent of meeting where God would promise to locate himself for them, to be mercifully and tangibly present

for them. Through the sacrifices within the tabernacle, God would deliver them from enemies more menacing than just Pharaoh and his henchmen. Through the sacrifices he would deliver them from sin and death and the devil. They would learn they needed that even more than freedom from Egyptian slavery.

But to build the tabernacle and equip it for service would require a lot of resources. So Moses says to the people, “Let whoever is of a generous heart bring to the Lord an offering.” Notice, nothing is mandated, nothing required. He doesn’t lay on them a guilt trip. He simply invites them to respond to the Lord’s generosity with their own generosity. He appeals to their memory of the past and to their hope for the future.

Can you imagine? All Moses says is, “Let whoever is of a generous heart bring an offering to the Lord” and the congregation goes wild. The men and women go back to their tents, collect their gold, their bronze, and their silver, and bring it all back. Those who have the gift of weaving weave rich tapestries of blue, purple, and crimson fabrics. Those who are gifted with woodworking begin construction. The people come morning noon and night, offering their treasures, their gifts, their talents, their very selves in response to God’s faithfulness to them. Walter Brueggemann writes that they were so thankful that they went “completely beyond the usual calculations of prudence and caution.”

The usual calculations of prudence and caution. Isn’t that what we always do, whether buying a coffee maker or making a thank offering to the Lord . . . the customary calculations of prudence and caution. But the ancient Israelites throw all that to the wind and praise God with their treasures. They don’t give for the recognition and applause. They don’t give out of some sense of obligation or begrudging duty. They don’t give to try to manipulate God.

According to the text their motivation is gratitude. They were realizing that life itself is a gift from God. The free air they breathed, the clean, cold water they drank; the

love they shared; the crusty bread that satisfied their hunger, the warm shelter on frigid nights, all of it came from God. So it's only right and fitting to respond with generous gratitude. And the people gave and gave and gave, morning, noon, and night.

You know what happened as a result? Moses actually had to ask them to stop. Can you imagine? The artisans came to Moses and told them they had way too much. "Would you please restrain the people from giving any more!" My goodness! May there be a day when I get to preach that kind of stewardship sermon here. "Your giving is totally out of control! Will you knock it off already?" But that's actually what happens in this story, and what's motivating it is gratitude, not to Moses or to Aaron, but to the God who rescued and forgave them.

I think we can see that happening all over Scripture. I'm thinking of that poor widow, for example, who gave her last two mites. Extravagant generosity! Martin Luther once said, "Never measure your generosity by what you give, but rather by what you have left."

I'm thinking of little Zaccheaus, chief tax collector, rejected by everyone else, but not by Jesus. In response Zaccheaus says, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have swindled anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount!" Extravagant generosity . . . at least it was for Zaccheaus!

I'm thinking also of that woman who broke the neck off the alabaster jar and poured out the precious perfume on Jesus' feet. Extravagant generosity!

And I'm thinking of Martin Luther again who was constantly giving room and board in his home to poor university students and other family members in need. He had a generous spirit, so much so his wife Katarina had to take over the household finances so they wouldn't go broke. She confronted Luther repeatedly and urged him not to give everything away.

Luther also reformed how we view our offerings to the Lord . . . never as a sort of bribe, never to grease the

skids on God's forgiveness, never to bale a person out of purgatory, never to manipulate God. If you want to be generous, let it be in gratitude for God's own generosity.

Extravagant generosity. Think of the beautiful churches sprinkled across the Wisconsin countryside. Most were built by immigrant farmers of humble means, but also the colleges, the hospitals, nursing homes and social agencies. Our ancestors didn't live extravagantly but they built the framework that still impresses and inspires us.

Author Nelson Searcy tells a story on the topic of generosity. His son was having a birthday and wanted a specific toy that happened to be the hot item that year. Searcy went all over the city to find it, paid far more for it than he should have, worked late into the night to assemble it, and finally wrapped it up and presented it the next day. Of course, the child was ecstatic. Watching his son play with it brought out the child in the dad and after a time Searcy asked if he might try it for a minute. His son said, "No daddy. It's mine." Searcy thought to himself "I found it, I bought it, I assembled it, I gave it, I'm much larger than he is and can take it away, or buy ten more if I wanted . . . and you're going to tell me it's yours?" He writes, "I couldn't help but think I treated God the same way my child had just treated me. How often have I taken the resources and gifts God has given me and set about using them for my own purposes and enjoyment with little regard for his ultimate ownership?" (The Generosity Ladder, p. 23). James writes, "Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father" (1:17). Everything good in our lives comes from God. But we prefer to think it's ours, we earned it, and whatever we give to God we call a charitable donation. But God is not the charity. He's the Giver. And he gives us so many as well as the responsibility to manage them.

Take for example a man who works from age twenty-five to sixty five and makes \$25,000 each year. He never gets a raise or a bonus, just \$25,000 a year. By age sixty five, this man will receive a million dollars. He will manage

a fortune! How will he do it? How will you?

When making an offering to the Lord, what's the right amount? C.S. Lewis wrote, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditures exclude them." I for one would die a happy man if I were known at the end for being generous. It's a nice word. But it hurts to be generous. It pinches. And if it doesn't hurt, if it doesn't impact our lives, then it's probably not generosity we're talking about.

Again, all we have comes ultimately from God's own generosity. Can you see God's generosity in his creation? Think about it. God could have created a purely functional universe. The only plants would be ones that animals and humans needed to eat. No need for decorative flowers for example or fall colors. But roses and lilies and trees that seem almost to glow this time of the year are examples of God's extravagant generosity. All the birds could have looked alike, I suppose, but they are beautifully diverse because God is extravagantly generous.

That God's Son should die on a cross out of love for us to redeem and save us - could there be anything more generous than that? And that God should freely give you all the blessings of his death and resurrection in your baptism . . . that he should daily and richly forgive all our sins and give us the assurance that he will raise us from the dead and give eternal life to us and to all believers in Christ. Extravagant generosity! For let's be honest, our history isn't all that impressive either. We've been a stiff-necked people too. We've grumbled. We've murmured. We've complained. We've tried to dictate to God what he needed to do. We've let other things take God's place for our devotion and love. And yet God keeps calling us back, keeps loving us and forgiving us. When God gives such gifts, he does not give reluctantly, or under compulsion. No, God is a cheerful Giver, the most cheerful Giver in the universe.

So today, I ask you to dig down into your spiritual depths and remember God's overwhelming generosity towards you. Remember what belongs to God. Remember that in Jesus Christ, God went all in to deliver you from the very real enemies of sin, death and the devil. Remember the home God is preparing for you in heaven. And then, let whoever is of a generous heart make an offering to the Lord. Amen.