

WHO WANTS A LARGER WORLD?

1 Corinthians 9:24-27
Mark 1:35-45

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sermon for closing of Stewardship Campaign

TEXT: Proverbs 11:24 “The world of the generous grows larger and larger.” (*The Message*)
PURPOSE: To encourage generosity that draws us into a world as large as the love of Jesus.

The theme for our Stewardship Campaign this year has been, “the world of the generous grows larger and larger.” The phrase comes from the Book of Proverbs, and is actually Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the verse as found in his wonderful rendering of the Bible known as The Message. It is most likely true that generosity enlarges our world. But I feel a need to ask: Do we want our world to be enlarged? Might we be more content with a world shrunken to manageable size? Allow me to offer a few illustrations of this dilemma.

Monday night was a tough night at our cold weather shelter. Lindy was the night manager, but I was hanging around, as is my habit on Mondays. We had to eject a veteran with a severe mental disorder because he was acting in a threatening way and refusing to settle down. His behavior rattled everyone there, guests and volunteers alike. After Lindy came home, she got a call from her volunteers around eleven o’clock because a newcomer had showed up seeking shelter. Because we don’t admit people that late, she instructed her volunteers to turn him away. But a few minutes later, she got another call because a typically troublesome guest was raising a ruckus. She decided to go back in to straighten out this guy. Finally, she came home again, and the two of us crawled into bed about 12:30. With both of us lying there awake, each full of emotions about the vulnerable people who are part of our lives this winter, I said, “I wish it was only the two of us in this bed.” She responded, “Yeah, it is a little crowded in here.” The world of the generous gets larger and larger. But who wants to lie awake feeling crummy about people who are homeless?

Here’s another enlarging of our world. Our church hosts what is called the “First Class”. It’s an English language program for the newest refugees to arrive in our community. These days, most of the students are refugees from Nepal. They are Hindu, which means they have religious restrictions on what they eat. They have never seen western food, so they are rather wary even about the foods that they can eat. But they use our food pantry on a weekly basis, so our pantry staff has had to make up special bags for them, and even purchase foods that we usually don’t give out, such as rice and lentils. Wouldn’t our world be more manageable if hungry

people were not individuals we get to know who have distinctive food preferences just like we do? And besides, before the Nepalese people starting coming to our church, who even knew there was a crisis in Nepal that resulted in a large refugee population? The world of the generous gets larger and larger. But who wants to deal with needy people who are picky about what we offer them?

Let me bring this issue closer to home. We have a confirmation class of four remarkable young people. Lots of you know that too many young people complete confirmation programs only to disappear from the life of their church. We have developed a program that seeks to integrate our students into the life of our church, and to demonstrate the attractiveness of the Christian way of life. We grow every aspect of the program from scratch, and we draw it out over two years. This approach takes much more effort than just working through a book in a classroom setting, but it seems to be accomplishing its goal.

Last weekend, for instance, Jean, Shelly, and Laurie took our four students to New York City for a whirlwind experience that included a visit to the World Trade Center site, a program at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Sunday worship at a church in Harlem, and, the kids' favorite, a romp through the M&M store in Times Square. The world of the generous grows larger and larger. But do we really need to invest so much energy in forming the faith of four teenagers? Wouldn't it make more sense to set up a program that requires a more manageable investment of the church's human resources?

Here's just one more example. Our church has a partnership relationship with a church in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. Some of us visited there in the summer of 2007, and forged deeply transforming personal relationships. Nowadays, Zimbabwe has been very much in the news as a country with a despotic president, a tumultuous election, the world's worst inflation rate, dreadful food shortages, and an outbreak of cholera. Wouldn't it be easier if we could read those news articles and think of Zimbabwe as just another messed up developing country? But now, its Rudo, volunteering in a program to help teenagers with AIDS, and Annamercy, whose husband does work that disturbs the Mugabe government, and MacDonald and Judith, whose teenage daughter Bridget died last May, and Nolian, who can't find insulin for her diabetic son, and John, sending us crafts to sell so he can feed his family, and a woman who reached out to Faith last week asking for help to keep her child in school. Try taking all those people to bed with you. The world of the generous grows larger

and larger. But who wants to worry about a bunch of people living in a country overwhelmed with troubles beyond our imagining?

Let's shift our focus to Jesus. In today's gospel story, Jesus healed a man of his leprosy. No doubt, Jesus would have been thought of as big-hearted enough without dealing with lepers. Lepers were complicated. Caring about them in his day would be comparable to caring about people with AIDS in our day, or even, caring about sex offenders. The story recounts that Jesus touched the leper, which he didn't need to do, since, in some other situations, he was able to heal people from a distance. But in that society, touching the leper made Jesus as unclean as the leper was. The world of the generous grows larger and larger. But who wants one's generosity to make one unclean? Isn't it just smart to set some limits to our generosity so that we don't get caught up in the troubles of those we are trying to help?

The issue is legitimate. It is not good stewardship to use up our resources or wear ourselves out being generous. But while answering the question of whether we want a larger world deserves to take account of practical considerations, it is fundamentally a question of faith, not one of practicality.

One thing for sure, our answer has to start with the generosity of God. God's generosity extends to the unloved as well as the unlovely. God's generosity has no problem meeting not only every culture's, but even every person's, special needs. God's generosity goes way out of its way to bring anyone into the life of faith. God's generosity knows every single person by name, and broods over each one as a mother broods over her child. God's generosity is perfected in the gift of Jesus, which is a giving that surely enlarged the world. Everyone is a receiver of God's generosity. As Jesus said, the rain falls on the just as well as on the unjust. But the life of faith calls us to move beyond receiving what God gives to passing it along. We reveal a generous God to an anxious world by means of our generosity, which we in faith know is nothing more than what our accountants call a "pass-through." Faith reminds us that we are not generous with what we have, but with what we have received. Faith recognizes that God's generosity has already enlarged our world to the measure of the love of Jesus. The only way we can shrink our world is to shrink our faith.

I'll be honest: there are days when I do wish that my world wasn't as large as it is. But all it takes is for me to consider the people I would not have met, and the experiences I would not have had, if I had sought comfort in a smaller world, and I am

once again rejoicing in the world generosity has made for me to live in. Consider how First Church has been blessed by a world enlarged by generosity just in the past few weeks. The Nepali refugees wanted to watch the inauguration of President Obama, and a few of us joined them for a webcast of the event in our chapel with their excited voices speaking in their native languages nearly drowning out the historic words coming from our nation's capital. Our Confirmation Class participated in our winter social event with people affiliated with this church who live at Havenwood. The connections between youth and older adult amazed the kids and lifted the spirits of our wise older adults who know that every generation of youth is the future of the church. Two Sundays ago, after a month of learning and preparation, the children of our church assisted in the distribution of holy communion, and all who received Christ from their hands experienced extraordinary spiritual abundance. This week, a team of people helped one of our shelter guests get into inpatient treatment for his alcoholism. A man who recently was deep in despair now is full of gratitude and hope for a better future. Over the course of this past month, we have prayed with, and then celebrated with at least three of our parishioners as they have moved toward recovery from serious illness. And out in our Assembly Room, people purchase whimsical critters made from discarded soda cans and we get to send hard currency to the crafters who are our friends in Zimbabwe.

It is events like these which shape the contours of a world enlarged by generosity. It is events like these which make being part of this church such a joy. So, in spite of, or perhaps even because of, the challenges, demands, and occasional aggravations involved, it turns out that we do want to live in a world enlarging to match the span of the love of Jesus. We might think there is some benefit to retreating into our private world, into a place of safety, sheltered from the storms of life. But that small and sheltered world cannot hold the abundance of blessings that come from following Jesus into the places where his love dares to go.

The world of the generous grows larger and larger. Right now, this community of faith, the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, faces a choice more stark than it has faced in many years: whether to retreat because we believe that the challenges of an enlarging world are more than we can handle, or whether to jump into that enlarging world with a generosity as unlimited as the love of Jesus. Each one of us contributes to the direction we will take as a community. Certainly, the pledges of financial support we make during this campaign add up to a mandate pointing us one way or the other. But more profoundly, each way that each of us realizes the blessings of living in an enlarged world contributes to the stock of generosity which

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shapes us as a church of Jesus Christ. May God help each of us recognize the extent of God's generosity poured out for us, and may we rejoice to live generously in a world as large as the love of Jesus.