

Luke 4:14-21

THEME: Anointed to bring good news to the poor

SUBJECT: Good news

TITLE: The Paradox of Generosity

Third Sunday after Epiphany

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Messiah Moravian

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People were waiting in line at a beautiful old funeral home to pay their respects to a man the whole town had come to love and admire. Some of those who stood in the four-inch-deep snow had never met him. But he had touched their lives, and they felt compelled to pay tribute to one who had practically become the father of the whole community.

During the long wait, people began to chat. The subject was always "Walter." "I only met him once," commented a young woman shivering from the cold, "but he changed my life. You see, I came to this town with my husband and three kids. I hadn't been here three weeks until my husband took off and left me and the kids alone.

"Why, I was so scared I thought I'd die. I didn't have much education and hadn't planned to work until the kids were older. My neighbor heard about my situation, and she called Walter. He didn't even come over, but sent word that he had a job I could start the next week and a warm apartment that would be free until I could get on my feet. It was four months before I could begin to pay rent.

"Two years later, I went to him to make arrangements for payment on the back rent. You know what he said? He looked over the top of his reading glasses and said, 'Thank you, but I never intended for you to pay for those three months. You just go out there and find somebody in need and help them.'

"So I did. I went straight to my pastor and asked if he could suggest somebody who needed help. And it felt so good to give instead of receive, I just kept on helping them. Walter taught me how good it feels to give."

The paradox of generosity is simple: giving we receive, grasping we lose. In general, the more generously people give of themselves, the more of many goods they receive in turn. Sometimes they receive more of the same kind of thing they gave - money, time, attention.

More often and importantly, generous people tend to receive back goods that are even more valuable than those they gave: happiness, health, a sense of purpose in life, and personal growth.

Generous financial givers are happier people. While money cannot buy happiness, giving it away actually associates with greater happiness. Generous givers actually tend to enhance themselves personally by reducing what they spend on themselves. By caring for other people, those who give generously end up increasing the quality of their own lives.

An older man standing in line at the funeral home had gone to school with Walter. He said Walter had been a POW. One Sunday he stood up in church and asked if he could say a few words. He told what he'd been through, and how he'd come to realize that the only important thing in life was God, his family, and helping other people.

From that day on, he lived the way he thought Jesus would live, *if* Jesus had been rich. He said he knew he could never do it, but he would try to out give God. He said giving was the best reason for living he'd come across.

Walter discovered the truth many wisdom teachers knew and taught. An ancient Hebrew proverb reads, "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but ends up impoverished." A Hindu proverb holds, "They who give have all things, they who withhold have nothing." And Jesus taught, "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."

In the gospel reading for today, Luke gives us Jesus' reason for living:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The year of the Lord's favor, the year of Jubilee meant the cancellation of all debts and the restoration of freedom to those indentured by debt, and the restoration of land confiscated to pay debt. Jesus begins his ministry by announcing the liberation of the destitute, the restoration of their freedom and dignity robbed by economic and social forces beyond their control.

If you are struggling with faith, and who isn't or who doesn't from time to time, you will not resolve your struggle as long as you think God is a problem to be solved through abstract reasoning. Any God reducible to what we can see, think, imagine, is an idol of our own making.

Ultimately, God is a mystery that cannot be unraveled, a mystery that questions us, demands a response, challenges us to decide what we are to do, what we are to make of our lives. Luke insists the mystery of God questions and challenges us most persistently in the faces of the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed.

By giving ourselves to those in need, by giving in such a way that they are transformed into generous people, we receive the more valuable good: the gift of faith.

