

“ROOTS AND WINGS”

4) “Lifestyles of the Extravagantly Generous

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It was a piece of vintage American television, a program that captured the imagination and awestruck envy of many who tuned in each week to watch. Hosted by Robin Leach, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” created enough of a stir with the American public to enjoy a run of eleven years—from 1984 to 1985. As you may recall, the introduction for each episode provided a brief summation of the agenda...

“Welcome to television’s unchallenged authority on wealth, prestige and success. It’s another dazzling “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.” Meet the stars of show business and big business. Discover how life’s winners live, love and spend their fortunes. Enter their dazzling world of luxury on privileged tours of the fantasy palaces they call home.”

The promised “privileged tour” would then unfold as it explored the world of billionaires, royalty, and, of course, the stars of television, film and the music world. I must admit, it was a bit shocking to consider the opulence with which some chose to surround themselves. Not only was it shocking, but I think that it is fair to say that it was also, appalling to contemplate such excess in a world where so many are forced to live with so little.

Nevertheless, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” was a program that clearly captured the interest and imagination of the American public—for reasons that I suspect were mixed—reasons that likely ranged from envy to outrage.

I reference this television program this morning as a backdrop to my intended topic: **“Lifestyles of the Extravagantly Generous.”**

While I realize that this is a topic that is not likely to be considered worthy of television’s interest, I believe that it is certainly worthy of our interest this morning. I say that because I happen to believe that the lifestyles of those who choose to be generous, those who dare to be extravagant in sharing their resources, provide some important clues to a life that matters; a life of purpose and passion, a life of meaning and significance.

The same cannot necessarily be said about those who cling to their wealth and their fame as a means of defining their worth and their purpose as human beings. While there is often a stunning amount of glitz and glamor on the surface of their stories, a look beneath the surface often suggests a far different picture—one in which their wealth, power and prominence fails to provide them with the peace, the security, the joy that they had assumed it would. Instead, to their amazement and disappointment, they find that having all their marvelous things is not enough to keep them from a deep sense of emptiness and

despair. It is, of course, a familiar scenario that we sometimes read about in the newspaper or the tabloids—the scenario of fame and fortune that leads in a downward spiral, one that leads to excess, disappointment and despair.

Our lesson from Luke’s Gospel provides us with a hint of this scenario. In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus tells the story of the wealthy man who had a dilemma on his hands.

He had so much that he didn’t know what to do with it all. So, he decided that he would tear down his existing barns in order to build bigger barns and thus, keep everything that he owned.

He then concluded that once this plan was in place, he could then retire, relax and relish all the fruits of his labors. In his own words, he would, “eat, drink and be merry.” But, according to Jesus, there was only one problem with this well-conceived retirement plan—the man wouldn’t live to see it. That night, his life would be taken from him and the question left dangling—**“And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”**

Now this story, of course, is a parable, a story that Jesus made up. It didn’t literally happen in exactly the way that Jesus tells it. But, I think that it is safe to suggest that it is a story that does indeed, happen all the time, a story that speaks a timeless truth to those who, in the words of Jesus, **“store up treasures for themselves and are not rich toward God.”** The lifestyles of the rich and famous are not necessarily all they are made out to be.

Our focus, this morning, however, is not upon the “rich and famous,” but upon the “extravagantly generous.” What are the qualities, the characteristics of those lives that choose to share generously a portion of what is theirs?

In order to answer that question, I suggest that we take a look at our second scripture lesson—the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has been teaching to an overflow crowd when the disciples approach him with a concern. They are worried that, with dusk beginning to settle, the crowd should be dismissed so that they could get something to eat. Their request is met with a somewhat surprising and succinct command of Jesus: **“You give them something to eat.”**

Being practical, however, the disciples were not dissuaded. “We have no more than five loaves and two fish” to offer, they said—unless of course we go into town and get “take out” for five thousand. Jesus then gives them the instructions to have all the people sit together in groups of fifty each. When that was accomplished, Jesus took the loaves and the fish, “blessed and broke them,” and gave them to the disciples to share with the crowd. After the feast, the left-overs were gathered up—enough to fill twelve large baskets.

Now, some of us have heard this story dozens of times. It is often referred to as the “miracle” of the feeding of the five thousand. And while I wouldn’t disagree that it was, indeed a miracle that took place, I am inclined to believe that this miracle was one that involved the active participation of those present. I am inclined to believe that this miracle invited each of those in the crowd to share the bits and pieces of the food that they had

brought with them for the greater good of all. In other words, this may well have been the first “pot luck” in recorded history—deserts over here...salads over there...main dishes right here.

Now, while it is not possible to determine what actually took place, I believe that this “pot luck” theory is worth considering. If, for no other reason than it beautifully illustrates the fundamental choice that each one of us must make—the choice to live according to a theology of scarcity or a theology of abundance.

The disciples, being ever practical, were operating out of a theology of scarcity. They didn’t believe that there was enough. They advocated a dinner break so that everyone could fend for themselves and take care of their own needs. Nothing exactly wrong with that. It seemed like a practical and useful idea.

But if my theory holds, Jesus saw it differently. Jesus understood that, in all likelihood, there was more than enough food in the pockets of the people to feed everyone present. He was operating out of a theology of abundance, a theology that was willing to trust that they already had enough, in fact, more than enough to satisfy everyone’s hunger. And Jesus, was in fact, correct. There were twelve baskets of leftovers!

My point, I trust, is obvious. Those who are generous, those who are “extravagantly generous,” are likely to be those who operate out of a theology of abundance.

They dare to believe that, not only is there enough, but there is more than enough to go around. They dare to trust that the choice to share what they have for the greater good of all will be a choice that others make as well.

A theology of scarcity, of course, is one that is motivated by fear—the fear that there will not be enough. And that fear, when given free reign, begins to constrict the veins of generosity. It begins to limit the vision of what is possible. It begins obscure the purpose that is fundamental to our health as human beings—the purpose that suggests that it is in giving that we receive.

There are, of course, some churches that are restricted by their fear of not ever having enough. They tell themselves that it is only practical and responsible to assume the worst case scenario when it comes to finances and related matters. That is their way of hedging their bets against the unexpected. I understand that, but the problem is that we can become so good at hedging our bets, in allowing our fears to hold sway and always preparing for the worst that we forget about what it actually means to place our trust in God...about what it means to believe that there is, in the bedrock of reality, more than enough if we are willing to trust and be open to the possibility of generosity.

Do we have enough to fund our budget and accomplish our goals for ministry? I can tell you unequivocally, that yes, we do.

In fact, we have more than enough. As Harry Knapp observed several years ago, one look at our parking lot on Sunday morning and the makes of the cars that are parked there, suggest

that we have more than enough. The critical question, of course, is do choose to trust that there will be enough? Are we willing to share generously and even extravagantly in the conviction that God can and will use us and the gifts that we give to enable us to accomplish the work that is before us?

I'm reminded of the pastor who announced to his congregation that he had some good news and some bad news. The good news, he said, was that they had more than enough money to meet their financial needs. The bad news, he suggested, was that it was still in their wallets and purses.

I have this dream—a kind of fun, little “what if” kind of dream. **What if there was a television program that chronicled the “lifestyles of the extravagantly generous” within our congregation? What kind of story lines would this program uncover? What kind of “juicy tid-bits of generosity would it reveal?**

I can imagine that there are some riveting stories that would come to light. I imagine a few raised eyebrows and looks of surprise when the details of some people's generosity would be revealed. I imagine that it would be quite inspiring to learn of the many and varied ways that people in our congregation choose to be extravagantly generous.

Writing in a recent edition of the publication, “**Leading Ideas,**” Tom Berlin, a United Methodist Pastor in Herndon, Virginia lifts up the importance of generosity within the church. *“When a church focuses on sharing the gospel message, then giving becomes a joy and not a hardship. When a church blesses the poor and the vulnerable, then people are excited to join that mission. For generous people, the combination of intentional ministry, demonstrated results, communication, and trust is a powerful incentive to give. These generous Christians don't just want to give to a church. They want to be a part of something bigger and do something more than they can do on their own. They want to make a difference in the world, in the name of Christ.”*

When a church lives generously—caring about the hungry, housing the homeless, ministering to the sick and grieving—then even people who are not members will spread the word about its good work.”

I believe that Pastor Berlin is absolutely correct. The choice to be generous, the choice to operate out of a theology of abundance and not scarcity, the choice to trust that there is more than enough needed to accomplish our work is a choice that will generate not only the inspiration and interest of many, it will also generate their investment. For these are people who long to contribute to cause greater than they are, a purpose that will long outlast them. They are people who understand that true meaning and significance in life cannot really be measure by what we get—but by what we give.

Sadly, that is a lesson that the Rich Farmer could never quite grasp.

Amen.