

1 Timothy 6:17-19

Life That Really is Life©  
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*What do you love about our church?* (Wait for answers)

*Where do you see Jesus in our church?* (This could relate to a class, a ministry or program we do, a mission effort, or something else.)

Today I'm starting a six week focus on generosity. The scriptures remind us in Galatians 5:22-23 that the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Being generous is a spiritual thing. It is something that flows from hearts that are full of the Holy Spirit. Generosity happens with God's people out of a deep love and gratitude for the extravagant generosity God has shown to us in many ways – the greatest of those, of course, is through the gift and sacrifice of his Son, Jesus.

I asked you to tell me the things you love about our church and the places in our church where you see Jesus because I believe those are the places, the things that show us where generosity is practiced.

Consider the mission and ministry of the baby pantry. First of all, for it to even have been born, it had to be an idea from people who had generous spirits, right? Those people had a heart for others in need and a desire to start an outreach that would be something that would help others, that would make their lives easier, less stressful, more at peace, more joyful.

Those generous hearts came mostly from young Christians – high school students, members of our congregation who were being taught by adults who had very generous spirits. And so In the Beginning Baby Pantry went from being an idea to an actual outreach program that has helped many young families in our community and the surrounding community as well.

Today, those youth are mostly away from Holly, in college. But still, what was begun by them and those adults still is productive today. Volunteers from this church family – people who have generous hearts still work to make giving to others a possibility.

And people in our own congregation, as well as people in the community, and sometimes from our presbytery – have given to the baby pantry. We receive clothes, diapers, money. These all come from people who love God and who want to continue the loving ministry of Jesus Christ.

We see Jesus at work in that ministry and in those people.

We also practice the spiritual fruit of generosity when we bring food for the food pantry that is a generous outreach program at the Baptist church, one that we have the privilege of participating in.

And we have several groups that meet regularly here in our building. Alcoholics Anonymous and Al Anon have been using our building for years now. Many lives have been changed through those organizations.

Paul tells Timothy in our Scripture lesson today to help those who are rich, who have plenty, to not be haughty, or above others, but to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, and ready to share with others.

In doing this, they are storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, he says, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. The life that really is life. Not something artificial. Not something that won't last. But something authentic and real and meaningful.

Many people have discovered life that really is life because of the generosity of people who are involved in AA and Al Anon, people who have struggled with the same issues that others are going through.

They have been willing to share their stories and to give their time for the sake of someone else finding health and wholeness and peace.

There is a story I'm reminded of. One night a little four year old girl was asleep in her room when it started to storm. The thunder and the lightening woke her up and she began to cry for her mom and dad. Her mother quickly got up and went to her daughter's room to comfort and assure her.

"Mommy," her little girl said, "can I sleep in your bed with you tonight?" Her mom, not wanting to start a trend, said, "you know, you don't ever have to be afraid. Jesus is always right here with you, even though you can't see him."

"Yes. I know." Said her daughter. "But tonight I just need someone with skin on."

Sometimes we all need someone with skin on. Someone with skin who is representing Jesus for us.

The Friends with Needs – a small group of people who are mentally challenged, meet here three days a week. We provide a safe place for them to come together and share with one another – having special programs, speakers – or just meeting with someone from our congregation who is willing to spend a little time with them. They get so much joy from the attention and love that you share and they are very appreciative of the space we give to them.

Through your generosity you are offering life that is really life. Jesus with skin on.

It's also true with the nursery, and Sunday School where little children are learning about real life – life that is really life. When you give your time and love to our children, it is like watering them with rich plant food, so they will grow spiritually.

Of course, we are getting that generosity in adult Sunday School as well – with the giving and sharing and hard work of our teacher – Barbara Brown. For we all need nourishment to feed our spirits so those fruits will grow. We all need a little Jesus with skin on. Life that is life.

Some of you may remember the study we did back in 2012 on the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. Extravagant Generosity was the fifth practice.

One of the stories that Robert Schnase tells in the Five Practices devotional book was about the long time church member, who was also a proud grandfather, who stood at the baptismal font with his family for the baptism of his baby granddaughter.

There was also another infant that was baptized that same morning and after the service the two families were back up front by the font so pictures could be taken. The mother of the other family ... a new family that had just joined the church ... had to get something from her bag, so the man who was the grandfather of the other baby, held her infant for her.

While he was holding that other baby, church members came up to greet everyone and several commented on the grandfather with the baby. He kept saying “Oh, this one isn’t mine; I’m just holding him for a minute.”

But the next day, the grandfather called the pastor and wanted to come in to talk. He told the pastor, “I want to change my will to include the church, and I want to talk to you about that.”

The pastor, stunned, asked what it was that brought the man to this decision. The older man, with tears in his eyes, said, “Yesterday, when I was holding the baby of the family who just joined the church, I realized something. I kept saying to people that that baby wasn’t my child, but it began to dawn on me that I was wrong.

That baby is part of my family – my church family – and I have a responsibility for that little one, just as I do for my own grandchild. I’ve been a member of this church for more than 40 years,” he said, “and in God’s eyes I’m a grandfather to more than just my own. I’ve taken care of my own children in my will, but I have realized I also need to provide for the children of my church. I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children.”

Paul writes that we are to store up the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of the life that really is life.

We have learned from way back that the most important commandment of all comes from Deuteronomy 6. It’s called *The Shema*, which, in Hebrew means “Listen up!”

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. <sup>5</sup>You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

When we love the Lord our God with all our heart, we can’t help but have that flow of generosity, of wanting to give, to help to participate in building that foundation for life that really is life – for ourselves and for others.

Because Jesus said the second greatest commandment is to love others as we love ourselves.

He also said, where your treasure is, that’s where your heart is as well. When we focus on things and on building a great wealth for our own benefit only, it can take us over. It can control us. That can begin to be the place where our heart is, instead of open and generous for helping others. When we give out of our plenty, we are not only building a foundation for others to have life that is really life, but we are building that foundation for ourselves and we find we are living the true life that is really life.

Let us nurture and grow the fruit of the spirit in us – that we might be full of generosity, not out of a sense of duty, but out of the love and gratitude for God who has shown us extravagant generosity in sending us his Son, Jesus, our Savior.

How can we be extravagant in our generosity this week?

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