

The Generosity Challenge

“Born to be Generous”

[Mark 10:17-27](#)

In 1973, Merriam-Webster added *affluenza* to the official American dictionary. The word is defined as “the unhealthy and unwelcome psychological and social effects of affluence regarded especially as a widespread social problem: such as ... extreme materialism and consumerism associated with the pursuit of wealth and success and resulting in the life of chronic dissatisfaction, debt, overwork, stress, and impaired relationships.”

A 1998 PBS television special, *Affluenza*, told the story of American consumerism and our insatiable desire to acquire more stuff. PBS defined the phenomenon as “the bloated, sluggish, and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses,” “an epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream.”

Today’s scripture reading, Mark 10:17-27 gives us a biblical example of affluenza. Recorded in all three synoptic gospels, the story of a man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life is our own story. Mark simply says the man was rich, but Matthew says he was rich and young, while Luke says he was a ruler. Putting the three versions of the story together, you can tell the man had everything - money, power, and vitality. And above all, he was a man of sincere faith! He had kept God's commandments since the days of his youth.

Yet, a closer look at his actions reveal something different. It hints at a different reality about this man of high achievement. Mark says the rich man ran to Jesus. In the ancient world, running was not something a person of dignity would do. But, he ran. He not only ran but also knelt before Jesus. Despite all his achievements and despite all his possessions, perhaps he was still feeling empty and restless. Something was missing. He asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Carefully listen to his question again: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Did you hear the way he put it? “What must I do...?” Basically, this man is concerned with what he can or should do to get eternal life, one thing that he does not have yet. In his mind, eternal life is something he can earn, work for, something he can achieve through his effort.

Apparently, he is not aware that his question contradicts Jesus’ teaching. Just a couple of verses before today’s reading, in Mark 10:15, Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” How do little children receive things? What do they do to get what they want or need? Nothing! They simply receive. Receiving the kingdom of God, eternal life in other words, works in the same way. We do not work for it. Instead, we are to receive it.

Jesus said to the man, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Mark says that right before he said these words, Jesus looked at the rich man and loved him. The Greek word that is translated as love here is *agape*, and it means the unconditional love of God for us. This *agape* love is the love Jesus has for the man. And, we realize

Jesus' love for him is not warm and fuzzy, comfortable and comforting, but rather comes across as cold and tough, demanding and unsettling. Jesus loved the man, so he challenged him to give away his possessions and follow him. But, the man could not do it. His success, his status, and his stuff, the things he had earned in life, they were too important to give up. So, he walked away, filled with sadness. His worldview, his affluenza kept him from living into the eternal life he was seeking.

A. J. Jacobs, a New York Times best-selling author, has written several entertaining (and informative) books after conducting "lifestyle experiments." For one book, he attempted to become the healthiest person in the world by subjecting himself to a grueling regimen of exercise/dieting experiments, all following a 53-page list of things he could do to improve his health.

In a more relevant experiment, Jacobs decided to follow the Bible as literally as possible for a year. It is important to note that Jacobs is Jewish and agnostic. For one year, Jacobs attempted to follow every biblical "rule" as literally as possible, including the more famous rules like "Love thy neighbor" and the Ten Commandments, as well the more challenging and oft-ignored rules such as stoning adulterers and not wearing clothes containing mixed fibers. Jacobs also decided to follow the biblical instruction to tithe and committed to giving away 10 percent of his income.

After convincing his wife to join him in giving away 10 percent, Jacobs chose several charities to which they would donate their tithe. Jacobs gave the donations electronically and describes his experience this way:

"The giving was painful. I mean, 10 percent? That would have an impact on our lives. Vacations would need to be scaled back, new furniture would have to wait. It was a huge amount. When I pressed "send" on the donations, my palms wet, my heart rate spiked."

Jacobs was feeling what we have all felt at times. The fear of not having enough. The anxiety that comes from wondering if you have made the right choice and knowing you can't turn back. In the article, Jacobs continues:

"It was a pain mixed with pleasure. When the confirmation e-mails pinged in, I felt good. There's a haunting line from the movie *Chariots of Fire*. It's spoken by Ian Charleson, who plays a deeply religious sprinter in the 1924 Olympics. He says: "When I run, I feel His pleasure." And as I gave away money, I think I might have felt God's pleasure. Which is odd. Because I'm agnostic. I don't know if there's a God or not, but still I felt some higher sense of purpose. It was like a cozy ember that started at the back of my neck and slowly spread its warmth through my skull. I felt like I was doing something I should have done all my life.

If A. J. Jacobs, a self-professed agnostic, experienced God's pleasure in tithing, what does that mean for those of us who already believe in a loving and generous God? How might our relationship with God change as a result of our giving? What would it be like to be loving and generous, reflecting God's love and generosity towards us?

Our gospel story this morning reminds us that the American dream of collecting and accumulating more is not where our true happiness is found. Instead, it is through letting go and giving away that we make room for God in our hearts, and we experience lasting happiness and enduring joy in our lives. Is affluenza the word that defines your life? Do you find yourself feeling unfulfilled despite all of your success and growing possessions? The truth about us is that we surely can be as loving and generous as God because we are created in the image of God. Being loving and generous is our true nature. Remember this biblical truth!

May we be open to the nudging of the Holy Spirit as we take this week's daily challenge and seek to live a life of generosity! Amen.