

## **Pillars of Joy: Generosity**

### **Matthew 6:19-21**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

May 30, 2021

Two things happened in the life of our church this week that make me incredibly proud and grateful to be your senior pastor. The first may sound somewhat mundane. The Leadership Council passed our budget for the 2021-2022 fiscal year beginning July 1. Let me tell you why this is so significant. You all have been so generous in your giving this year. A year ago, we had no idea how FUMC would come through the pandemic crisis. Would people quit giving? Decrease their giving? Increase their giving? As the senior pastor, I was really nervous about what the pandemic would mean for us.

Yet, because of your generosity, we are ending the year in a very strong financial position. That, in turn, enables us to increase our budget to include an across-the-board salary increase for staff for the first time in three years and to hire Shonagh Taruza full-time as our Deacon of Social Justice, Diversity, and Outreach.

So, thank you! And thank you, too, for continuing to be so generous in supporting the needs of our community. The other event I wanted to share with you is a thank you letter I received this week from the Executive Director of the Hope Clinic, Doug Campbell. Over the last year, many different groups and individuals from our congregation have been donating food, personal care items, money, and time to Hope Clinic, and with those gifts, making a real impact on our community. Here is a quote from Doug's thank you letter: "I hope you felt real joy - that you felt cheerful - when you gave to Hope Clinic. The Greek word for cheerful is *hilaros*. God loves a cheerful (hilariously happy) giver. The kind of generosity you showed leads to a happiness that's not defined by our circumstances, but by helping feed the hungry, care for the sick, and point those in despair to a life of hope." At the bottom of the letter, Doug hand wrote: "You all are the best! Thank you for loving your neighbors as yourselves."

We are nearing the end of our sermon series on the Eight Pillars of Joy discussed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and His Holiness the Dalai Lama in their book entitled *The Book of Joy*. One reason I was so struck by the thank you letter from Hope Clinic is that Doug talks about exactly what we are exploring today - the relationship between generosity and joy.

"I've sometimes joked and said God doesn't know very much math, because when you give to others, it should be that you are subtracting from yourself," Archbishop Tutu says. "But in this incredible kind of way ... you give and it then seems like in fact you are making space for more to be given to you." The Archbishop then goes on to give an example from nature - one you may have heard before. The Dead Sea receives fresh water from the rivers that empty into it, but there are no outlets in the sea. So, water flows in and then becomes dank. The sea receives but it doesn't give. "And we are made much that way, too," Archbishop Tutu explains. "I mean we receive and we must give". When we only receive from God and from others, we become self-oriented and often dissatisfied. When we allow God's generosity to flow through us, we not only receive but we grow in gratitude and joy through giving. Again, to quote Archbishop Tutu, "In the end, generosity is the best way of becoming more, more, and more joyful."

I'm fascinated by the fact that generosity is part of almost every religious tradition. "(Charity) is one of the five pillars of Islam, called *zakat*. In Judaism, it is called *tzedakah*, which literally means "justice". In Hinduism and Buddhism, it is called *dana*. And in Christianity, it is called charity."

Of course, giving is at the very center of Jesus' teachings. Our scripture passage for today is from the Sermon on the Mount, a great collection of wisdom and instruction from Jesus. In this chapter, Jesus reflects on what it means to be faithful and to live a full life. He talks about being humble and not showing off your generosity or your spiritual practices. He teaches us the Lord's Prayer, and then says that we should not be dismal and dramatic about practicing our faith. Finally, at the very end of the chapter, he speaks about giving. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Part of why generosity leads to joy is because we give of ourselves and our wealth to the people, places, and circumstances that touch our hearts. When we can offer something of ourselves, of our hearts, and improve the life and heart of another, we can't help but feel joy. And that is true whether you are giving of dollars or of your time or talents or compassion or love.

Interestingly, Buddhism teaches three kinds of generosity - "material giving, giving freedom from fear which might include protection, support in leaving harmful situations, (counseling, or comfort), and, finally, spiritual giving. Spiritual giving includes things like giving of your wisdom, teaching morals and ethics, or helping someone become more self-sufficient and happier".

As a church, we are generous in all of these ways. We give money to the church to sustain our ministries and to mission and outreach projects we believe in. We support sanctuary churches in their work to provide a safe place for undocumented immigrants. We offer comfort and counseling to people in crisis and those who are grieving. We teach our children compassion and ethics through the stories of our faith.

On this Memorial Day weekend, when we name and give thanks for those who have been interred in our Memorial Garden during this last year, we are again reminded that we come from a long history of generosity at FUMC. We remember Stella Steiner who faithfully served pie at our Harvest Dinners for years or Ken Brostrom who worked tirelessly to bring the first black clergyperson on staff back in the sixties. How proud he would be that we have finally reached that mark! We think about the congregation of this church who, back in the depths of the Depression, managed to raise the money to build this building where we worship today and the dozens of mission teams (adult and youth alike) who have traveled across the country and around the world to offer time, labor, education, resources, and love to communities in need.

So, yes, we are a generous church. As we come out of this pandemic and we begin to understand the impact these last fifteen months have had on individuals and communities in Washtenaw County and beyond, I pray we will continue to look for ways we can give of all that God has given to us with a mindset of being in ministry with those we meet rather than ministry to them.

Because ultimately the reason that generosity brings joy is that it connects us to each other. A generous person recognizes that we are all dependent on each other. Over and over again in *The Book of Joy*, Archbishop Tutu teaches that we are least happy and least joy-filled when we turn inward, when we close ourselves to others and only look to fill our own needs, protect what is ours, and strive to accumulate more. “It is when we grow in a self-forgetfulness (that), in a remarkable way, we discover that we are filled with joy,” says the Archbishop. “We have downplayed the fact that actually our created nature is that we are made for a complementarity... You can’t survive on your own. If you say you are going to be truly selfish, in next to no time the person who is totally selfish goes under. You need other people to be human. Because you can’t flourish without other human beings. They give you things that you can’t give yourself, no matter how much money you have. A person is a person through other persons.”

Yet, sometimes recognizing our interconnectedness, our interdependence, and looking at the circumstances and needs of others can leave us feeling overwhelmed and grieved. We may ask ourselves how we can find joy in our lives when so many other people are suffering. I think many of us have reached that place from time to time during the pandemic.

Archbishop Tutu responds to this question saying, “Start where you are, and realize that you are not meant on your own to resolve all of these massive problems. Do what you can... It takes time but we are learning, we are growing, and we are becoming the people we want to be. It helps no one if you sacrifice your job because others are suffering. Give the world your love, your service, your healing, but you can also give it your joy. This, too, is a great gift.”

And so I thank you again, friends, for your tremendous generosity and for all that you have made possible during this year like no other. And I challenge you to continue to grow in your giving, whatever kind of giving it may be. To recognize that though we are one small piece in the whole global community, we are connected to and dependent on all the other pieces. May we give of our treasure here on earth because when we give, joy will follow. May it be so.

Amen.