

With a Generous Heart

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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Well. How are we to understand all the disparate elements of this service? Ready, Willing and Able urge us to timely generosity, yet Ananais and Sapphira stand as examples who support their church financially and are rewarded with instant death. James Taylor, through the choir, assures us that in our darkest times is when the healing presence of a friend is waiting, yet our hymnist avows that it is when our heart is in a holy, rather than a broken, place that we are blessed with love. So many confusing if not downright conflicting messages that it could take some generosity of spirit not to think the preacher has completely lost control.

Hmmm. Generosity of spirit. Maybe that's the answer to seeing how this all fits together. Generosity of spirit moves our hearts into that holy place and generosity of spirit moves friends to our side when we are in need. Ready, Willing and Able urge us to be generous with our money, but what lies behind that is actually a request to be generous in spirit. Each week as we prepare to take the Sunday offering we say these words, "whatever is given in love will be received with gratitude." What lies behind that statement is a hope that it will bring you joy to support this community that may be a home for you or may be brand new for you, but either way is place that reflects what is important in your living. I don't know where that line originated—whatever is given in love will be received with gratitude. It was already part of the service when I arrived, but I love it because it says that generosity of spirit is every bit as important, if not more so, than the generosity of time and money and talents that flow from it. It says that we want you to find joy in being a part of this community and in giving to it in the many ways that you do.

The poet Kahlil Gibran put it this way:

You give but little when you give of your possessions.

It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow?

And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the overprudent dog burying bones in the trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city?

And what is fear of need but need itself?

Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable?

That is some seriously prophetic text. Let me read it again.

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Generosity of spirit is the attitude of having a full well. It is one that allows you to set fear aside and live from your abundance, rather than to live with an unquenchable thirst. It is in this theology of abundance that we flourish. Ready, Willing and Able acknowledge that one reason we give to the church is to move our own abundance, our own generosity of spirit, further out into the world. Yes, what we all pledge goes to benefit us in various ways from keeping the rain off our heads to paying the staff to mop water out of the basement when that fails. But these are benefits only so long as we are advancing the mission of the church—among this beloved community and out into the larger world.

To be ready, willing and able is to inhabit a spirit of generosity and a generosity of spirit. That is key. And it is really what the story of Ananias and Sapphira is about. This story is one of those quirky little gems hiding away and rarely preached. I guess with good reason since on the face of it it says, “give us everything you have or you’ll drop dead.” Ananias and his wife Sapphira are members of the early church, following the apostles of Jesus. It is the community norm not to own wealth individually but to share everything. Members of the community sell off their property as money is needed by the group, and the proceeds are shared. Ananias and Sapphira sell off their property but instead of giving all the money to the community they keep some for themselves, lying about the amount they received. When they get caught in the lie they drop down dead, “and great fear seized the church.” Well, I should think so. Kind of a harsh message for a pledge drive.

But the lesson of this story is not about the amount given, but the spirit in which it is given. Whatever is given in love will be received in gratitude. The death knell for Ananias and Sapphira did not toll in the number of shekels they laid at the feet of the apostles. What mortified them was a lack of generosity of spirit that led them to lie and to stand outside the values of their community, that led them to break their covenant. Just as this story is not about giving *everything* you own, it is not about uncritically buying into everything your community asks of you, but rather about being in right relationship and living with integrity.

Last week I met for the first time with the UUA’s Ministerial Fellowship Committee. The MFC is the body that credentials ministers in our denomination. After completing a somewhat lengthy list of requirements in preparation for ministry, candidates come before the committee for a one hour interview. In that hour they must demonstrate their qualification to be fellowshiped as a UU minister. Coming after what could be anywhere from three to seven years of preparation and up to \$100,000 in debt, the interview carries no little amount of anxiety. Once upon a time the interview was based on being able to answer arcane and useless trivia questions about Unitarian Universalist history and practice.

But by the time I saw the committee as a student twelve years ago the philosophy and practice of the committee was already changing. We are no longer certain that being able to recite dates and names is a good measure of fitness for ministry. Today, after the scandals of misconduct that rocked not only the Roman Catholic Church but also looking at some of our own shortcomings, the emphasis on ministerial preparation has shifted from being a walking database to living a life of integrity.

This matter of integrity is important because being in community is essential to being human, and *here* we are further called into covenanted community, and covenant cannot survive without integrity. But integrity is also a matter of personal well being, deeply connected to generosity of spirit. Our ability to flourish, our happiness, is challenged by falling short of being the people we want to be and know we can be. I talk about that often—being the people we want to be—not because I believe it is the preachers job to tell you how to live, tell you that there is something wrong with you or how you should be different, but just the opposite. I talk about it because I truly believe that you are all you need to be, that you are sacred. I believe that is the recognition of our own sacredness that liberates us, and allows us to live into our own highest selves, to live with integrity. And this, I believe, is the real root of happiness, the liberation from all that holds us back from realizing and embodying that best and truest self.

Generosity of spirit is one of the manifestations of personal liberation, but its practice is also one of the paths toward liberation, one of the ways in which we can embody our values, feel our own worth (not just think it, but *feel* it) and add to our own freedom. As Erwin Raphael McManus, leader of the Mosaic Church, says, “generosity is about being free. The generous are free from the things of this world. While they own possessions, their possessions do not own them. They are free from taking for their own benefit and are free to give, even when it results in personal sacrifice. Generosity is love in action, and love is measured in giving, not taking.”

This is where Ananais and Sapphira suffered death, I think, in that their actions were not those of loving covenant. Acting from fear, they cut themselves off from covenant, from community, from love and from their own freedom. They allowed themselves to be possessed by possessions, and missed an opportunity of generous spirit. But we can't really be too hard on this couple. After all they did sell their land to benefit the church community, and which of us has not faced that moment, perhaps a moment of fear or indecision, perhaps a moment of resentment or uncertainty where we might have done better but something stopped us. These moments come because we are and will remain human despite best intentions, and they do not nullify the fact that you are generous, that at some point in your life, perhaps many points, you have given to another person—you have comforted someone in pain or taught someone a new skill or offered food to someone who was hungry or any of hundreds of actions which you were not under pain of death to do.

I invite you to think of such a time when you were generous in spirit, perhaps beyond what you thought yourself capable of, not just a time when you gave of your money, but gave of yourself, your time, your care, your knowledge, your presence. How did you feel? Did you feel free? Joyous? Did you feel regret for what you gave up or gave away? How you feel about giving is a wonderful way to know if it was true generosity or just fulfilling expectations. True generosity doesn't leave us feeling depleted but filled.

That being said, there has to be a corrective on our impulses of generosity. Too often we are told that to be generous we have to give ourselves away, to painfully deplete ourselves or our resources. That is outside the bounds of covenant and integrity. The generosity of spirit I am talking about leads you into, not away from, mutuality. Generosity of spirit is lived through knowing your own sacred nature, and knowing that you count. Generosity of spirit is lived

through community, letting others know that you see them and appreciate them. It is lived through encountering what is different, those who are different, and not reacting with the impulses of fear that cause us to sneer or belittle to recoil or any of the other many reactions that push people to the margins. Sometimes generosity of spirit means letting others have the win—that's called compromise, a necessary part of being in relationship. Sometimes it means graciously accepting the win yourself. Sometimes it means giving and sometimes it means receiving, but it is always lived out in how we approach the world and those who inhabit it with us.

Approaching the world with a generous spirit, seeking the sacred in others and acknowledging it in yourself, is to live wholeheartedly. It is an attitude that draws you into loving relationship with other people, with animals, with earth itself. Giving of your time, your talents and your money is generous. Giving of your time, your talents and your money and taking joy in that is generosity of spirit. Henri Nouwen said, "Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know that I am moving from fear to love." I invite you always to move toward love, knowing that you are already, inherently, essentially, both loving and generous. May you live from that knowledge and know its blessings.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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