

The Transformation of Giving – Mark 6:30-44

Preached November 7, 2021 – A Generous Life sermon series

Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship. Today we begin a new sermon series called A Generous Life. For the next three weeks, we're going to be talking about generosity. We're going to focus on how we're called to live generous lives and what that truly means for us. One of the things I want to focus on in this sermon series is our why – why are we called to be generous and what kinds of effects does our generosity have, both on others and on ourselves? Today's sermon is titled "The Transformation of Giving," and I use that title because I think it's true and it's true for a few reasons. And we see the first reason in our scripture passage for today.

The feeding of the five thousand is one of my favorite stories in scripture. This story appears in all four Gospels and today's story comes from the Gospel according to Mark. And I love this story both because it gives us an example of the miraculous ways in which Jesus cares for us, and because the story is also really relatable. As the story begins, the apostles gathered around Jesus, and they were catching up with him. They told him what they had done and taught. This story appears in the sixth chapter of the Gospel, and earlier in that chapter, Jesus had gathered the twelve and began to send them out, two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits. He gave them their mission both within and beyond Galilee and the text says they went out and proclaimed that all should repent, and they cast out demons, and anointed sick people with oil and cured them. So, by the time we get to today's story, I'm sure they had a lot of stories to share with Jesus.

After they shared their stories with him, he told them to come away to a deserted place all by themselves and rest for a while. Jesus himself often went away by himself and found time to pray and rest, so it's not that surprising that he would give that same good advice to his disciples. And after everything they had been doing in fulfilling their mission, they were probably ready

for a break. This is actually one of the parts of this story that I find so relatable. The disciples had their mission from Jesus, just like we have a mission here at Northgate to love God, love others, and make disciples. And those missions are incredibly important but living them out every day can take a lot out of you. Even the disciples and Jesus himself needed to take time to rest occasionally. They really needed a break because the text says that many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. Again, it's really relatable. I don't remember how many times I've been so busy and have been talking with and working with so many people all day that I don't even have time to stop and eat. I can fully relate to that.

So, after all this activity, they finally get away on a boat and go to a deserted place by themselves. But it doesn't look like they get much rest because many people saw them and recognized them and hurried there on foot and arrived ahead of them. So, once the crowds beat them there, Jesus came ashore, saw the crowds and felt compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. I think it's interesting that at this point in the story, it says *he* (Jesus) had compassion for them. It doesn't say the disciples had compassion for the crowd. That's a theme we'll pick up on here shortly. Jesus began teaching the crowd and when it grew late, it appears that the disciples are trying to wrap things up. They tell Jesus to send the crowd away so they can go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something to eat. It's worth noting a couple of things here. Initially, just as a reminder, they're in a deserted place. I don't know how close the surrounding country and villages were, but I suspect the crowd would need to do some traveling to get there. Secondly, the text doesn't say, but I don't really get the impression that the crowd is full of people who are independently wealthy and can afford to go buy themselves dinner on the road. Thirdly, I'm kind of left wondering where the disciples'

compassion is for the crowd. We know Jesus felt compassion for them. Instead, the disciples want to send the crowd away.

But Jesus isn't having it. He tells the disciples, "You give them something to eat." On its face, the suggestion sounds unreasonable to the disciples. A denarii was a day's wages and they thought it would cost them two hundred denarii of bread to feed a crowd of people they didn't even know. So, Jesus asks the obvious question, which is how much food do you actually have? That's when they realized they had five loaves of bread and two fish. And ultimately, Jesus took the bread, broke it, blessed it and gave it to his disciples. They took the bread and the fish and somehow it was enough. All ate and were filled and there was even food left over. When I speak of the transformation of giving this morning, one of the first aspects of it is Jesus' work with our gifts. This incredible story of the feeding of the five thousand teaches us a lot of things, and one of the things it points to is how, just like the disciples, we are called to give. Jesus wants us to be generous, even with strangers. And part of that generosity includes trusting that Jesus can make take our resources and totally transform them into something we never would've imagined. It's easy to look at the world around us, at all of the extreme needs here in Irving and in Dallas and to think we can't have much of an impact. But first of all, that's probably not true. We really can have an impact on more people than we imagine. But second of all, that doesn't really matter. Because even though we're humans and we're limited in what we can do, you can't put on a limit on God. And this story from scripture is a perfect example of that. The disciples really didn't even know how much food they had on them to feed the crowd, they just knew it wasn't enough. But Jesus told them to be generous anyway. And once the food was in his hands, he transformed it into a meal. Once we commit our resources to God, no matter how small our gifts, we're not limited by ourselves anymore. We are called to be generous so that God can take our

gifts and transform them into something even better. We should give so that God can use our gifts in transformational ways.

The second aspect to transformation here actually relates to us and our gifts. And one example of this that I'm reminded of is related to my old winter coat. In 2013, I was living in New Orleans with Jack and my then-husband and our dog, Maggie. We ended up moving to suburban Chicago for work and it would be an understatement to say that we were excited about the move, but we were wildly unprepared. I mean, we knew it was going to be cold in Chicago and we even knew it would snow – we had the Weather Channel, so Jim Cantore already told us what to expect. But that doesn't mean we were ready. No, indeed, we were not ready for the sheer enormity of all the winter clothing you need to successfully live in northern Illinois. I still remember arriving in Chicago thinking, "Well, I don't know what everyone is complaining about. It doesn't feel cold at all!" Of course, it was June, but no matter. I figured I was ready. That fall around the first of October I broke out the winter coat I'd been wearing in New Orleans, and I wore it to work. A friend of mine who grew up in Chicago saw my coat and said, "That's adorable. You realize that's going to last you for about one more week, right? That's a fall coat. You need a winter coat." In fact, I'm pretty sure the only member of my family who was actually prepared for a Chicago winter was our dog, Maggie, since she carries around her fur coat with her everywhere she goes. I had no idea there was a difference between a fall coat and a winter coat, but I quickly realized my friend was right, because I was absolutely freezing, so I started shopping for "real" winter coats. I also quickly realized what Chicago natives already know about winter coats: you can either be stylish or you can be warm, but you cannot be both. I finally broke down and went to Eddie Bauer where I purchased the longest, poofiest, ugliest winter coat I could find. It was black and went to the middle of my calves. It had a hood with a

fake fur lining, which I learned was actually useful. I had this crazy idea that the fur lining was decorative to make you look stylish, but when I walked from my bus to my office building when it was -10 degrees outside and blowing snow, I realized the fur actually blocked the snow from blowing right into my face. When I put on all my layers of clothes and my snow boots and put on the coat – I named the coat Big Puffy – I looked ridiculous. And friends, I was finally warm, so I did not care.

Fast forward to 2016 when we moved to Dallas. Packing up your entire house to move cross-country is no small thing, so I fully intended to weed things out before I moved, but that didn't really happen. So, that's how Big Puffy ended up in my hall closet here in Dallas for several years. And every once in a while, I would open the hall closet to put away the fall coats I wear now, and I would see it and think, "Why do I still have that coat? I'm certainly not going to wear it in north Texas." But I hung onto it, mostly because I didn't know what to do with it. Until I talked to my cousin Anna. She is married and has two small children and a third on the way, and she told me she planned to move to Maine this fall. Yes, the state of Maine, with lobsters and brutally cold winters. *That* Maine. And you know what? She is wildly unprepared. Well, I should say she *was* wildly unprepared. Because she is now the proud owner of Big Puffy, the ugly poofy coat. When I told her I have a proper winter coat that is actually rated to withstand temperatures of 30 below, she was elated. And I can't help but think how wonderful it is that this one seriously ugly coat – and I cannot overstate how ugly this coat is – kept me warm through three brutal Chicago winters and will continue to protect my cousin. I felt weird giving it to her because it doesn't feel like much of a gift. I don't even want it. But it's one small item that will help her feel much more comfortable in her new home this winter. It's one small example of

how our generosity, even of something we don't think is that valuable, can be transformative and help others.

Friends, when it comes right down to it, our entire story as Christians is one of transformation. We gather here today on Communion Sunday in the hope of participating in that ancient story, where God continues to do something old and something new all at the same time. And, just like the disciples who came before us, we meet Christ at the Communion table in the knowledge that these simple elements of bread and juice will be means of God's grace that we all need in our lives. At Christ's table, these elements will be enough. Through these elements we will be transformed into the people God calls us to be. We can be transformed into generous people. And we can do so in the full knowledge that God will transform our gifts into something much more than we could ever imagine. This week, as we approach the end of the year, as we get closer to Advent and think about who we are as a church, let's take time to think about ways that God is calling us to be generous. How might God take our simple offerings and transform them into something incredible?