

Extravagant Generosity

They had never led a dissolute life.

Her husband's salary had just been enough for the basic needs. He had been working as a farm-labourer. By the time he celebrated his 50th birthday, he was totally exhausted.

Actually this was 20 years too early. The small amount of money – calling it “a pension” would be a lie – would only just keep them alive.

When he needed to be nursed, she spent five years at his bedside, day and night. The physical strain was one side of the problem. The question, how she could survive without him and his small amount of money, was the other side.

She tried to push away these thoughts.

Hadn't there been an open door whatever had happened in the past?

Had God ever disappointed her?

When her husband died, she was surprised how calm she stayed and that she didn't panic at all. No! She wouldn't allow her fears to dominate her thoughts.

She wouldn't exchange her belief in God for being too hasty.

She wouldn't look for another husband just to have a breadwinner.

Why not do something absolutely crazy?

Why not let go of everything, place herself in front of God, saying: “Here I am! You have cared for me until today. You'll care for me tomorrow as well! I am not going to claw or to cling to anything.

My gratitude, my dignity, my freedom of being generous and of giving will not depend on how safe I feel. You are my God. Don't let me be alone!”

With this prayer in her heart she went to the temple. The two coins she presented as her offering were her last bread. She wanted to share it.

She was happy that no one was around who knew her. So there was no need to justify her gratitude and extravagant generosity.

She didn't hear Jesus saying to his disciples: “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all the others!”

In the fifth chapter of his book “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” Bishop Robert Schnase shares with us the story of a couple who risks being extravagantly generous.

He starts chapter 5 with a sentence from the apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians. “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.” (2 Cor 9:11).

And he introduces to us a young family. The parents Matt and Keri love their church. They had come across the story of the widow which I have just talked about. This story set in motion a whole bundle of thoughts for them... They never had money left over at the end of the month. They only gave little or nothing to the church. How could they possibly give more? It seemed crazy and extravagant.

But they increased their giving and tried to donate 10 percent of their salary. They looked at the way they usually spent their money, made some significant changes, less fast food, less car journeys, less new clothes, but more quality time as a family, and they achieved their goal. They managed to give what they had hoped to give, and at some point even more.

It was a crazy experience: to see the grace of giving in their life. Giving not for the mere sake of giving, but giving because of their growing trust in God, had strengthened their faith enormously. Wiped away were those thoughts of panic, worry, desperation and fear..., and they felt they had come so much closer to acting like the widow in our story. By giving more, they worried less!

Giving had intensified their already strong commitment to the church and to the other people.

And here we come to the next story:

The temptation had been too big.

And the first step to change his position had been much easier than he had thought.

They were under his control: the tradesmen and nomads who needed his permit for the market. The one hand on top of the table received the official fees.

But the other hand below the table only opened the doors.

And this hand below the table got filled more and more.

The fact that his hands hadn't been touched tenderly for ages – except when he paid for some flat tenderness – didn't disturb him any more.

Wasn't money much more stable?

Didn't the money compensate the fact that his house was cold and that there hadn't been any guests for years?

He didn't take notice of the silent doubt that tried to wake him up.

It was a most surprising experience when he realised that his dreams of being part of a community, his dreams of receiving tenderness were still alive, like a volcano under the surface of his skin.

What a release it was when this stranger invited himself into his house, when he sat down at his table, when he transformed him into a friendly host, when he started talking, laughing, when he got infected with life and his house suddenly became a welcoming place!

He couldn't get hold of it.

Am I in the end more than all my money?

Am I in the end more than roughness and calculation?

Am I in the end a human being?

Am I in the end someone who is able to give, who is able to open doors without being paid under the table?

It made him cry when he discovered the kindness and dignity which suddenly appeared when Jesus made himself a guest in his house.

“If God loves me so much that he invites himself into my house and my life – if God loves me so much: Why do I need my hand under the table?”

And for the first time in his life he did something absolutely crazy. He spread his gratitude. He shared his joy of life.

And he observed himself quite unbelievably, how he gave away with a smile on his face what had been up to then the base of his life.

And he observed himself quite unbelievably how he wasn't afraid at all that there wouldn't be enough left for himself.

He heard with half an ear, when Jesus said: "Today salvation has come to this house!" He would have known it without saying!

Giving, Robert Schnase writes, reflects the nature of God. Growing in the grace of giving is part of the Christian journey of faith. Giving is a response Christians offer to God's call to make a difference in the world.

Can you see how close we are here to Zacchaeus?

And we do not only make a difference in the world! I suppose, we make the greatest difference to ourselves.

We give because we love God.

We give because we desire to grow in love of God and in love of our neighbours.

We give because we are serving a giving – and for-giving God...

...just as the father does in our next story.

It was bound to happen: If he was honest, he had always anticipated it. His younger son was too similar to him.

He was rebellious. He always had his own ideas. And he always had crazy plans.

When he had disappeared one morning, gone in the new car, it really wasn't a big surprise for him. He himself had also dreamt of leaving home when he was young, but he never had been courageous enough.

Of course he was worried. He always had this thought in his head: "Hopefully nothing will happen to him! Hopefully he won't forget us! Hopefully all the love we gave him wasn't in vain!"

In the evenings he stood at the window and tried to look beyond the horizon.

His wife had already given up this ritual. She was full of bitterness and frustration.

Every now and again she complained about his ingratitude.

Wasn't she right?

No, he said to himself! I cannot prevent him from going his own ways. No.

But I can continue to love him. And I can continue to keep my heart open for him.

Years later, when he came back, half dead with hunger, the embrace of his father wiped aside all shame and self-degradation.

"Let us not settle accounts!" the father said. "What would it be good for rather than for bitterness and the question of who'd got it right and who'd done things wrong?"

Do you think God is a grumbling book-keeper, writing lists and claiming every single penny? No – so why should I do that?

Isn't love the only thing that makes life beautiful? Come on, let's have a party! Everything else can wait."

Actually he would have had all reason to say: “Why didn’t you listen to me? I have always told you! Now, as it has all gone wrong for you, I am good enough to you just taking you in.”

But instead of these words: What width of heart!
 What persuasive power of love!
 What extravagant generosity!
 What presence of God – as crazy as only love can be
 An open door, as only God can open it.

Giving is always extravagant, Bishop Schnase reminds us. It is life changing and fills us with joy. Giving blesses the giver as much as it helps and supports the mission or the people to whom we give!

The widow giving her last bread -
Zacchaeus who is transformed into kindness by the presence of Jesus Christ –
Father and son who will live together again, because bitterness and calculation had been beaten by the generosity of love
Every story brings light and beauty back into people’s lives.
Narrow mindedness, stinginess and greed, fear and oppression, poverty and hunger, bad conscience and feelings of guilt – everything is expelled at the moment, when God’s generosity becomes the generosity of man.

It is a delight to experience in a congregation that people are not greedy and tight-fisted, that people are not calculating and resentful, that people are not insisting on an excuse and keep prisons locked – but are opening their hearts and hands, forgiving and smiling, learning to forget and hearing themselves say: “Oh, it was a pleasure!”

We do not need to be small-minded. We are God’s children.
We are able to afford something very crazy: generosity in emotions and gestures, we can show the generosity of love; we can live with open hands.
And then suddenly people will feel an incredible relief, burdens are falling, laughter can be heard, praise and gratitude, and tears of joy are no longer hidden.

God’s generosity is the source of our generosity. And we remember this and celebrate it.

God wastes himself and fills us to overflowing with his love and grace. And we don’t have to fearfully worry whether there is enough.

There is always enough bread. It can become bread for the world.

The cup is always full enough, overflowing with the joy of life.

Love gives itself away carelessly – and by doing so multiplies.

Love is extravagant and generous – like God himself is.

And life penetrated by his love is nothing more and nothing less, but: beautiful.

Amen.