

Generosity as Worship
Genesis 8:15-22; Luke 7:36-8:3
Lyle Miller
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Introduction

If you are a person who looks at the bulletin to see what the title of the message is, I'm sorry, because the bulletin tells you that "the title doesn't fit." That's not the actual title, that's a statement of fact. Here's my actual title. It's:

Simon,
the Woman,
the Women,
the Other Women,
Noah,
and the Other Men
Part 2.

I thought that was a little too long to list. But as you see, this is part two of a three-part sermon series that I began 462 weeks ago. So, if you have your notes from April 10, 2005, feel free to get them out.

Does anyone have them? I suspected as much, and I know that we have some people who have joined us since then, so I'll start by reviewing the Luke story, which is the one I used back then.

Simon, the Woman, and the Women

Mark read Luke 7:36-8:3, a reasonably familiar story, with an additional few verses that may be less familiar to us. And since our sermon title has a bunch of people in it, we'll focus on the characters in the story. First, there's Simon. As a Pharisee, it's possible that he was reasonably well-to-do. It was common that the houses of the well-to-do had a courtyard, and very possibly, that's where they were eating.

When a guest entered such a house, common courtesy said the host should do three things. First, give the kiss of peace, a mark of respect that would never be omitted for a distinguished Rabbi. Second, pour cool water over the guests' feet to cleanse and refresh them. And finally, either a pinch of sweet-smelling incense was burned or a drop of rose oil was placed on the guests head.

Simon, based on what we read later, did none of these.

Next, the woman. The NRSV and NIV describe her as a sinner. Peterson's translation, *The Message*, puts it more bluntly. He calls her "the town harlot." That may be stronger language than the Greek suggests, but clearly, she is an outsider.

So what was she doing there? Well, when a Rabbi came to such a courtyard, it was common for the door to be left open and for others to come in and listen to the conversation. Folks reclined on low couches as they ate. It would not have been uncommon to see someone in this place.

But it was uncommon to do what she was about to do. The picture is very vivid as Luke paints it. That the woman responds as she does suggests that this wasn't the first time that she's heard Jesus speak. As she listens, perhaps he repeated some of the words Luke recorded a chapter earlier, words like "Do not judge, and you will not be judged." As she hears him speak, she begins to weep. Tears drip down from her face, on to the feet of Jesus.

What to do now, she wonders? She's not the hostess, certainly not someone who would be prepared for such an occasion. But she needs to do something about these tears. She responds the only way she can think of. Jewish women never let their hair down in public – it was an act of extreme immodesty. But that's what she did. She lets down her hair, and uses it to dry the feet of Jesus. Then, taking the alabaster jar of perfume that she wore around her neck, she poured perfume on to his feet. Another biblical image of footwashing!

But Simon was *not* impressed. The Bible says that he said to himself, "If he only knew what this woman was about, he'd have never associated with her."

Jesus responds differently, "Simon," he says. "I have a story to tell you." He then tells what we refer to as the Parable of the Two Debtors. It's one of the more straightforward parables, and pretty easy to understand. One man owes a lender 500 *denarii*, what converts to perhaps a hundred thousand bucks. Another owes \$10,000 dollars. Neither can pay, and the lender forgives both debts. Which borrower will love the lender more? Pretty logical – the one who owed \$100,000. Even Simon gets that one right.

Then, turning to the woman, but still speaking to Simon, Jesus offers an explanation. "Simon," he says. "When I came here, you didn't offer the barest of courtesies, but this woman, can't stop. You didn't kiss me on the head; she won't stop kissing my feet. You didn't wash my feet; she washed my feet with the only water she had, that of her tears. She dried my feet with the only towel she had, that of her hair. And you didn't put oil on my head; she used the most expensive stuff she had, broke open the bottle and poured it on my feet.

"She was forgiven many, many sins, and she is very, very grateful."

Then, looking directly at the woman, he said, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go. In Peace."

Then we move to the new stuff, in Chapter 8. I can understand why there is a chapter break at this point, but sometimes it's helpful to read directly from one chapter to the next. See, Jesus goes on from this incident, continuing to preach and teach, like Robin Hood with his band of Merry Men. And oh yeah, there were a few women, particularly some whom he had healed. They were from different backgrounds - - one from whom seven demons had come out; the wife of Herod's right-hand man, the keeper of the storeroom and the manager of his household; and others.

But they were very unique women. They not only traveled with him on foot, they footed the bill. Unlike the male apostles, who would travel and teach and preach on their own, these women had to keep silent. At least in voice. For that didn't keep them from furthering the spread of Jesus' message by contributing financially to his work.

So, now we've talked about Simon, the Woman, and the Women. Let's cross them off our list.

Noah

In the book of Matthew, chapter 26, verses 6-12, there is another story of a woman washing Jesus' feet. This time, it is during passion week. Jesus says of her, "She has performed a good service for me. . . . By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

This *remembrance* is similar to what happens in the book of Genesis. Most of us probably feel like we know this story pretty well. It's one of the most remembered stories in the Bible. Even Hollywood has gotten into the act – when the directors of Bruce Almighty wanted to make a sequel, they cast Steve Carrell as a modern-day Noah and asked him to build an ark. And we got Evan Almighty.

But sometimes, we also misremember parts of a familiar story or leave out significant details in our tellings and retellings. For example, how many of each kind of animal did Noah take into the ark?

Most of us would say, "two." And that's correct, according to chapter 7, verse 8. When Noah went into the ark, we think that he took a male and a female of every kind. But according to chapter 7, verse 2, he took *seven* pairs of all the *clean* animals and of the birds. And then in chapter 8, verse 20, when Noah embarks from the ark, what does he do? He takes one of the males and one of the females of all the clean animals and gives them up in an offering. I don't know about you, but if I'm thinking about how to repopulate the earth, destroying 14 percent of my raw material doesn't sound like the logical thing to do.

But our offerings aren't always logical, are they? It's a different sermon series, but I was struck by the notion of setting aside one-seventh of our resources for worshipping God. In the first half of this "Putting God First" series, didn't we just talk about setting aside one-seventh of our days? But I digress.

So even though he has only seven pairs of animals with which to repopulate the earth, he takes from every one of them and makes a worshipful offering to God. Depending on how you view the story of Cain and Abel, this may be the first act of worship that is recorded in the Bible. It's an offering of resources.

And God smells the order. I had to think of this. Have you ever smelled burning carcasses? I'm not talking about just a slab of baby back ribs with barbecue sauce, I'm talking about the whole animal. A bunch of them. It's a pretty distinct smell. The NIV calls it an "aroma." The Message calls it a "fragrance," like you might get at Bath and Body. The NRSV calls it an "odor."

And yet God smiled at Noah's worship. Interestingly, God doesn't make the promise to never again destroy the world by flood until AFTER Noah has made an offering in worship. We could talk about whether that was already part of God's plan. We could talk about whether God's mind is changed as a result of Noah's worship, but those are both beyond this sermon. The important part I want to name is that God is pleased in the worship.

So we have two powerful stories of offering to God in the Bible. There are many others.

And now, we can cross off "Noah."

The Other Women

That leaves us with two groups to talk about, but it seems like we've covered everyone in the text. So, let me read how I made the transition in 2005:

Take a look around. See the faces of those who are here today. (PAUSE) You may have just made eye contact with some of the Other Women.

A well-told story can be very powerful. One of the most meaningful parts of being on facilities and finance for me (I was the assistant treasure back then.) has been to see the response of fellow believers. I hear stories of generosity from time to time. However, so often, we're not comfortable sharing those stories in public. But in the several years I've been involved with facilities and finance, I've been inspired many times. I've often found myself saying, "That's a story that needs to be heard. Perhaps the way *that* person thinks about giving would be helpful to another person."

Then, I went on to describe a process, where, over the previous several weeks, I had sent out e-mails to some people in our congregation, all of them women. I described the worship series we were beginning, and I asked them a number of questions about generosity. I promised anonymity, and I was overwhelmed by their responses. The remainder of that sermon was made up of comments from these wonderful women, many of whom who are here today, and many of whom I continue to see modeling a generosity of spirit that permeates their lives. If you want to read that sermon, I'll see that it gets put online alongside this week's sermon.

There's The Other Women.

Nine years later, I probably have even more opportunities to be moved by stories of generosity, both with pastoring in general, but particularly with the hat of pastor of financial stewardship. I love to talk to people about how they experience God's goodness in their lives, and how that shapes the way they respond. And after the first sermon, I told myself that someday I would give men the same opportunity to share....

The Other Men

So take a look around. See the faces of those who are here today. (PAUSE) You may have just made eye contact with some of the Other Men. And quite frankly, if you didn't make contact with one of the Other Men, it may just be because I didn't contact that particular male. Over the last few weeks, I have had electronic or face-to-face conversations with more than a half-dozen men in our congregation, but I could have easily spoken to many more. I started with a list of specific questions, but we generally let the conversation ramble. And it was a treat. I thank each of the men I talked to; it's been one of the highlights of the past month!

I didn't ask the men exactly the same questions that I asked the women, so naturally, the tenor of the conversations was sometimes different. In some of the responses, from both the women nine years ago and the men in the past weeks, there were hints of some of the perceptions or stereotypes we have about how women and men think about money. For example, with men, there tended to be more conversation about the mechanics of how we handle money, how much we give, and how we go about handling money. In a couple of weeks, we'll hear more of these comments as we talk about Giving as a Spiritual Practice. That's part 3 of the Other Women and Men series – today we are talking about worship.

In our conversations, I rarely asked about how these men saw giving as an act of worship in response to God's goodness, but that aspect often came through loud and clear. For example, one of the men talked about making a conscious choice regarding his offering. "I think the Bible is very clear that we are to give God our firstfruit offering, not the leftovers," he said. "God gave us his first and best, in Jesus, and we are called to do the same."

As a result, this family has changed its giving patterns in a symbolic way. "We used to give our offerings at the end of the month," he said. "We now give our offering on the first of the month. The offering has become more than a symbolic or ceremonial gesture. That practice has completely changed my attitude toward giving. It has given me an attitude of joy and thankfulness knowing that I am giving God my first fruits. It reminds me that all I have is from God, and that I am blessed in so many ways."

This pattern of firstfruits giving is significant. This man has chosen to make it the first check of the month. I've heard Pastor Neil describe making the check to Waterford be the first check he writes after he receives his paycheck, a practice he learned from stewardship educator Lynn Miller.

And I would add as well that one of the youngest men in our congregation gave many of us a powerful teaching last Sunday. He wasn't on my interview list, but Conner Kauffmann had a perfect understanding of firstfruits giving that he shared during the first service. When I asked about putting just the apple core into the offering, he pointed to the basket and said, "That's not the trash bin!" Amen, Conner! That's a sermon title waiting to happen, my friend!

Another man linked his giving to worship this way. "It's part of my expression of thanks for what we've been given," he said. "It's a habit I have developed, to give every Sunday." And when you think about that, it makes sense. There are things we do each week when we gather to worship – we sing, we pray, we hear the word. For this man and others like him, just as it would be unthinkable to gather and not sing, it would be unthinkable to gather and not give.

This particular man also sees giving in worship as a teachable moment. About a year ago, you may remember a sermon that I preached about why we include children of all ages in our worship services, rather than segregating into a separate children's church. One of the reasons for this pattern is that it helps us to teach our children to worship, to tell to the coming generations the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.¹ One of the ways this happens is in giving. "I don't feel comfortable if I'm in church and I don't have that week's offering," this man said. "I know I'd get it done, but I'd feel funny if my grandchildren don't see me participating in the offering."

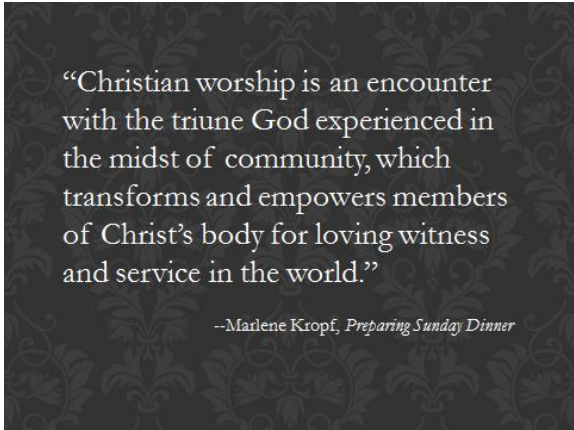
We live in a *me-first* society. The very notion of gathering together on a Sunday morning, including on days like we've had earlier this month, for the purpose of worshipping a God that we cannot see, doesn't make sense to many people in a world preoccupied with ourselves. Giving doesn't make sense either.

Several of the men spoke of the transforming power of giving. Pastor Neil has also talked about the "god-like power of money." Several men talked about giving as a way of lessening that power. The way that we can tell if money has control over us is to try giving it away, said several of the men. If we are able to give it away, it doesn't have power over us. If we have trouble giving, it likely does. That is the struggle of the rich young man in Matthew 19.

¹ Ps. 78:4.

“The concept of ‘firstfruits’ is so counter to society,” said one man, “but it is a joy to be able to help out with things that are needed.” For him, following the particular practice of the tithe is helpful. “Giving 10 percent goes counter to my pattern of frugality, but it gives me a guideline – no questions asked.” If you’re trying to manage your finances, giving 10 percent away makes as little sense as burning 14 percent of your raw materials like Noah, or pouring out costly oil like the woman at Simon’s house.

But this man wasn’t the only one to speak of the particular power of the tithe as a guideline for his generosity. He and others talked about the challenge of what is sometimes called “sacrificial giving,” and we’ll return to that in a couple of weeks. But I liked the way another man spoke of giving. For him, the challenge is not to “give until it hurts.” He is working to “give until it feels good!” To go from living a life of obligation to living a life of joy is just one of the ways we are transformed in our worshipful giving.



“Christian worship is an encounter with the triune God experienced in the midst of community, which transforms and empowers members of Christ’s body for loving witness and service in the world.”

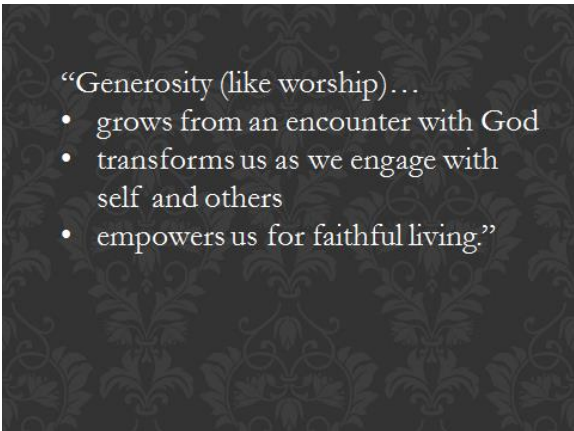
—Marlene Kropf, *Preparing Sunday Dinner*

In the book, *Preparing Sunday Dinner*, Marlene Kropf has a fine definition of worship: “Christian worship is an encounter with the triune God experienced in the midst of community, which transforms and empowers members of Christ’s body for loving witness and service in the world.”²

I believe you can insert the word “generosity” into that definition: “Christian generosity is part of an encounter with the triune God experienced in community, which transforms and empowers members of Christ’s body for loving witness and service in the world.”

Generosity grows from an encounter with God, an understanding that all things come from God, and that all things belong to God, as Neil talked about last week. And of course, the greatest gift that comes from God the Father is the gift of the Son.

To give generously as an act of worship is a practice that can transform us as we engage with ourselves and others. “We do not deserve what we have,” said one man. “That is a gift. And when we can look at our money as a gift, rather than as something we have earned, it makes us open to listening to what the needs around us are.”



“Generosity (like worship)...

- grows from an encounter with God
- transforms us as we engage with self and others
- empowers us for faithful living.”

And when we see the needs and respond with generosity, we are empowered for faithful living. “I consider this my job, to give and to manage my resources for God,” said one of the Other Men. “Money (and I would add that he named time and talents as well) is a gift, and God wants to see what we will do with that gift.”

Blessings to each of you, Other Women and Other Men of Waterford.

² June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, Rebecca Slough, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2005), 39.