

## Living Generously

A sermon on 1 Peter 4:7-11 by Rev. Heather Thomsen Tang

Today we focus on stewardship. Often, hearing the word “stewardship” makes us think of pledge cards and money. And stewardship does involve money. But it’s about something much deeper and more important than money. Stewardship is a way of life. It’s about taking care of the things God has entrusted to us, by living in the radically-generous way of Jesus. In short, stewardship is the Christian practice of living generously. The passage we’re about to read from 1 Peter describes the generous sort of life that we at First Pres want to embody. Let’s listen together to the words from 1 Peter 4:7-11 about generous living.

1 Peter 4:7-11

*7 The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. 8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. 11 If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

About six years ago, I was going about my work day when I got a phone call from Peter Barnes. Six years ago, I was living in Southern California, a recent seminary grad in the process of being ordained at the church I had been serving for several years in Pasadena. Six years ago, my husband Davin was a friend and colleague in ministry. Six years ago, my sister and brother in law, who now live here in Winston, were in grad school in Roanoke Virginia. None of us had kids. And none of us ever expected that one day we’d all be living in WS.

So, six years ago, I got a phone call from Peter Barnes. After an extensive interview process, Peter was calling to let me know that he and the hiring committee wanted to offer me a position on the pastoral staff at First Presbyterian Church in Winston Salem, North Carolina.

North Carolina. To be honest, I wasn’t exactly sure which state North Carolina was on the map. But I knew it was in the South. Well, technically the Southeast, I later learned. And apparently it’s pronounced AppaLAH-chian, not AppalEH-chian, as west coasters usually mispronounce. Now, I *did* know about the rivalry between UNC and Duke. But, all told, to this native west coaster, Winston Salem felt like a long ways away.

I accepted Peter’s offer, and agreed to start my new job a few months later. And six years ago when I moved to Winston Salem, I experienced a generous welcome from the First Pres community. I wonder if many of you took pity on a girl who had just moved across the country by herself. But whether it was pity or something else, what I experienced from so many of you is a picture of the type of love described in this passage in 1 Peter. It’s a picture of our stewardship theme of living generously.

You lived generously toward me. You asked me over for dinner. You invited me to your book clubs and wine clubs and Bible studies. You donated furniture to fill my empty house. You brought meals and took me to dinner at restaurants around town. You invited me to social events so I could get to know other congregants. You showed up on my doorstep in the pouring rain to give me dinner, and to tell me that you lived just down the street and were excited to be neighbors. You reminded me regularly that you were praying for me. You made sure I got to experience the full breadth of southern cooking, and that I learned the difference between the different styles of BBQ. You invited me to sporting events and running clubs. And most importantly, so many of you opened your lives and homes to me. My first several months here in Winston were an example of generous living along the lines of what’s described in 1 Peter 4. You welcomed me in, and you gave me a sense of belonging and home.

This is the kind of generous living that is driving First Pres' stewardship season. We're going to be examining a generous life today. What does it mean to live generously in your day to day, your week to week, your year to year? What does a generous life actually look like? Thankfully, we don't have to look far to find out. The writer of 1 Peter lays this out for us in the passage we just read.

First of all, according to 1 Peter, generous living must be deeply rooted in two things: prayer, and love. Out of prayer and love flow the rest of the Christian life. Prayer and love are the twin pillars of the blueprint of a Christian ethic. Prayer and love are the cornerstones of a generous life.

Peter Barnes just spent five weeks talking about a life that is rooted in prayer and love. How Christians are called to pray for and love people we would categorize as "them," those other people, the other side, the opposition, especially the political "other side" with whom we disagree or hold very different values. Peter spent five weeks challenging us to pray for and love our leaders and governing authorities, even when we disagree with them. The life of a Christian, Peter Barnes told us, should be marked by prayerful submission to and love for God before we pledge allegiance to or acknowledge our love for country. Christian discipleship must be rooted in prayer and love.

Prayer and love. From that foundation of love and prayer, according to the writer of 1 Peter, flow several other things that define generous living. We're going to spend the rest of our time exploring 1 Peter's marks of generous living.

Verse 8 reads: *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.* This verse is about forgiving love. What we see here is that generous living is marked by forgiveness. Think about the pairing of those two words: generous and forgiveness. Extending forgiveness, at least for me, can sometimes feel stingy, not generous. Why is forgiveness so hard sometimes? At times, at least for me, it's because I believe the person who has wronged me doesn't deserve my mercy. If this person doesn't understand the kindness I've already extended to them, why should I go so far as to forgive them? At other times, we can be hurt or harmed so deeply that forgiveness seems out of reach. My wounds extend deeper than my ability to forgive, it seems.

And yet we are called to be generous not stingy forgivers. We are called to extend forgiving love even to those who don't deserve it, or to those who have deeply wounded us. After all, Jesus is the one who models generous forgiveness toward you and to me. Jesus covers over the atrocious depths of our sin, and extends mercy we will never warrant or deserve. He forgives us even though our sin wounded him to the point of death. A generous life is marked by forgiving, generous love.

So we've seen how 1 Peter describes a generous life as one marked by generous forgiveness. But the writer doesn't stop there. Verse 9 reads: *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.* So what we see here in verse 9 is that generous living is also about the practice of hospitality. True hospitality isn't about setting a perfectly decorated dinner table or making sure you've vacuumed before your company arrives (although Davin will tell you that I often spend too much time doing both of those things). Hospitality isn't about the perfectly curated home. Rather, it's about opening our hearts, and lives to others. And that requires generosity in a way that extends far deeper, that asks much more of us, than simply being willing to shell out a few extra bucks to buy the perfect appetizer, or going to Pottery Barn instead of Target to buy the towels in the guest bathroom. Generous hospitality means opening your whole life to others in a way that makes them feel radically welcomed and at home.

My dad was the pastor of the little church my sister and I grew up at. There was a group home right next door the church, and several residents of the group home attended our church. Each year, my parents hosted an open house during the Christmas season and invited the whole congregation to attend.

The folks from the group home were enthusiastic RSVPs for this annual party, which meant that my dad, sister and I were usually responsible for picking them up in our minivan and transporting them to our house. As a late elementary kid and middle schooler, hosting these particular congregants in our home was not something I usually looked forward to. And that's because, in my young and rather selfish mind, I couldn't see past the physical and social differences this group walked through my door carrying. I felt awkward engaging them in conversation. Personal hygiene was difficult for some of them to maintain, and I usually tried to dodge interactions with them to avoid the smell. Karissa and I have a few stories of particularly pungent messes left in our bathroom. In my immaturity, I wondered why my parents invited them, when year after year they created inconvenience and mess for us to deal with. Years later, and I'm sad to say it took me years to realize, but finally I began to see that my parents were demonstrating generous hospitality toward the folks from the group home. My mom and dad were so good about making these congregants feel welcome in our home, and in our family's life. They invited them year after year, and picked them up year after year, and talked to them Sunday after Sunday after church without grumbling, because my parents were demonstrating that they were valuable and loved and accepted, even if they didn't brush their teeth or flush the toilet.

Jesus demonstrates generous hospitality toward us. He sacrificed EVERYTHING – his seat of power at God's right hand, his heavenly glory, even his life, in order to welcome you and me into God's family. The barriers that we walk through the door carrying, mainly, our brokenness and our sin, never prevent Jesus from sweeping his arms wide to welcome us in. Generous living means following in Jesus' footsteps by lovingly opening your heart and home and life to others, even if it requires inconveniencing yourself. Generous hospitality means demonstrating love and welcome to someone else and valuing their time, their interests, and their life just as much if not more than you value your own. A generous life is marked by generous hospitality.

We've talked about how the writer of 1 Peter describes generous living through prayer, love, forgiveness and hospitality. And there's more! In verse 10 we read *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.* Now, most of us have heard of spiritual gift inventories, or we've studied the Myers Briggs or the Enneagram to help clue us into the ways we are uniquely wired. What a beautiful thing it is that God gives each of us different gifts! Even just thinking about this worship service today, it's amazing how many different gifts and acts of service are involved in making this service happen. Michael Dodds contributed his gift of weaving a worship service together using motifs, themes and elements from Scripture that paint a beautiful chapter in God's story about what it means to live generously for God. Our musicians have contributed their gifts and training of playing and singing to offer a beautiful melody to for the Lord, and to welcome our congregation into God's presence through music. Amber has used her leadership skills to guide us in liturgy and prayer. The tech team have contributed their gifts and training to do things I can't even begin to understand: like, how in the world is it possible that you are sitting in your own living room, watching us live here in the sanctuary?! It's a technological miracle! The body of Christ requires a vast array of uniquely gifted individuals, and it is a beautiful thing that we are each given different gifts and strengths! How can you affirm and value the uniqueness of those around you? And, how you can serve others generously out of your own gifts?

The idea of gifts and spiritual gifts in particular can sound overwhelming or intimidating sometimes. I'll bet many of us have had the thought at one time or another, I don't have any spiritual gifts! I can't preach or play music, so how can I serve the church and God's people? But gifts don't have to be super spiritual things like prophesying or preaching. Our gifts can sometimes be understood simply as the things we love, the things we are good at doing.

The months before and after my daughter Ellia was born are a great example of witnessing so many different gifts contributed from so many of you.

Some of you used your creativity and hospitality to throw us a baby shower, thinking uniquely about how to celebrate Davin and me in ways that are unique to us, and to show your deep love and welcome for our soon to be born baby. Others of you shared resources – giving us a crib and a stroller and baby carriers and a changing table and all sorts of other necessities that your own kids had out grown. Others of you offered wisdom from your experience of what the time in the hospital was like, or what having a newborn is like, or were empathetic of that dreaded feeling of watching the sun go down and wondering just how horrible this coming night of no sleep would be. Some shared your love of cooking and baking by making meals after we got home from the hospital. Some mailed gift cards or bought baby clothes so Ellia was stocked with cute outfits and other baby necessities. Others offered the gift of time by coming over to hold Ellia so I could take a nap or a shower. In all of these things, I experienced from so many of you the generosity of your shared giftedness, whether that was the gift of time, food, celebration, encouragement, cute baby clothes, money, wisdom, and many other things.

How are you serving others in your giftedness today? How are you sharing your unique skills, unique passion, unique love on behalf of God and His kingdom? How are you plugged into and serving the church? COVID has provided a unique season for many of us to slow down the pace of our lives. As we are beginning to find a new sense of normal and new rhythms, consider today the invitation to live generously by serving the church out of your unique giftedness. Don't be shy! It is a mark of generous living to share your unique giftedness with God and with His people.

As we approach the conclusion of this passage, we read this: *If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides.* It seems to me that the writer is talking about the *source* of generous living, the fuel tank that powers us to speak and to serve on God's behalf. What the writer of 1 Peter is saying is that God needs to be the source, the foundation, of a generous life. We cannot be vessels of living water if our own well has run dry. If we intend to speak for God, we can only do so if we are rooted deeply in God's word, reading scripture, allowing the biblical narrative to daily shape and reshape our view of the world. If we intend to serve God and others, we can only do so when are rooted deeply in the sacrificial love and service God demonstrates to us through Jesus. God must be the root and the source, the fuel tank, of our generous living. If He's not, our attempts to speak and to serve on His behalf will be futile. They'll fall flat, they'll run out of gas. God must be the source of our speaking and our serving, and whatever we say and do must flow first out of our own deeply rooted relationships with Jesus.

This brings us to the conclusion of this passage. WHY should you and I do this? Why should we strive to live generously? Certainly there can be some benefit, some pleasure, some gain, by keeping my stuff, my money, my resources, my love all to myself or my family. So why be generous? The writer of 1 Peter tells us why in verse 11! *"So that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever!"* Ultimately, a generous life boils down to the most basic, fundamental aspect of Christian life. And that is to worship God. In the end, 1 Peter is saying, a generous life, the life of discipleship, is a life of worship. A generous life glorifies God because of the way it points toward the life of Jesus. That's what worship is: it's telling God's story, pointing toward God's character. What the writer of 1 Peter is suggesting is that ultimately it's really not about you and me, in the end, and how generous we are. What it's really about is how our generous living points toward Jesus, and how generous Jesus is toward you and me, and all creation. A stingy life doesn't reveal Jesus' generosity very well. But a generous life is the kind of life through which others see Jesus. We don't live generously so that you or I or First Pres can be honored. Rather, we live generously because this honors the Lord. And honoring Him is really what it's all about.

The life of a follower of Jesus is a generous life. It's a life that is radically forgiving, radically hospitable, and shares radically out of one's unique giftedness. It's a life that is deeply rooted in God's Word and in Jesus' love, and in prayer. Jesus shows us how to live this radically-generous kind of life. And, in His generosity, He's inviting us to join him in it. Don't you want to take him up on it?