

**Extravagant Hope, Extravagant Generosity** (part 1 of 4 in 2011 Stewardship series)

1 Timothy 6:6-19

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Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

It would be easy for the pastor of a small- to mid-size church to come to work every day and feel totally overwhelmed by the task at hand: there are people to care for, programs to plan, worship services to prepare, sermons to write, classes to teach, forms to complete, bills to pay, teams to organize. The local church pastor is one of the last generalists in our society of professionals: others choose specialties – you don't just teach, you teach English; you are not just an attorney, you are a litigation attorney; you are not just a doctor, you are an oncologist. But not the pastor: unless we are among the *very few* serving on a big staff with lots of other pastors, we are called to do it all.

I admit that there are days when being the pastor at Browns Point is overwhelming, when my vision outpaces my energy and the community's need outpaces my resources. But I am blessed that when I start to feel anxious, I can look at our congregation and be reassured that God is in control. *Nothing else but God's grace* would have increased our worship attendance by 34% in the last year. That's 32 people who are experiencing the grace and love of God in the community of our congregation every week who weren't here 12 months ago. Look around you and think about the magnitude of that growth. A third of the people around you wouldn't have been here 52 weeks ago. *Nothing else but God's grace* would have provided the funds to pay our bills this year while we increased our program during a long economic recession. *Nothing else but God's grace* would have moved 30 busy adults to sign up for a new weekly FaithGroups program that begins this week, where they'll have the opportunity to grow in faith and in relationship with each other. *Nothing else but God's grace* could gather brilliant, energetic children around this altar week after week to learn more about following Jesus. *Nothing else but God's grace* could bring the testimony of the 13 youth whose lives were changed on a mission trip to Oregon this summer. Nothing else but God's grace could bring us together to grow in faith and love on the journey of discipleship. When I am overwhelmed, all I have to do is look around and see evidence *everywhere* of God's grace.

Do we have challenges ahead? Of course we do. But friends, as we sang in our opening hymn, **we are the recipients of blessings without number and gifts without end.** And it isn't just in the numbers we report to the powers that be: God's grace is changing people's lives in our midst. We have a team of loving folks who provide support when people are in need of extra help, or extra time, or just extra care. Our church has sent 200 cards this year to let people know they're being prayed for – and in many cases, we've seen those prayers answered. We've got skilled folks who show up on their days off to create physical spaces where people can come in out of the cold and rain and feel comfortable and welcome. Our church provides funds to families whose electricity would otherwise be turned off, or who have just spent their last dollar on food or gasoline. Our church helps schoolchildren to have healthy meals and all the supplies they need to learn. Our church provides a place of hospitality when people are lost or lonely or afraid; and a hand to hold when life feels especially grim. Our church is a place where lives are being transformed, as people learn about the grace and love of God for the first time and begin to follow Jesus, finding the one true hope in a world that can seem so hopeless. **We are the recipients of blessings without number and gifts without end.**

And so when we read this passage from 1 Timothy this morning, this familiar text about wealth and commitment and what it means to follow Christ, we must admit that despite any financial recession or challenges in our relationships or reports from the doctors in our present lives, we are the wealthy ones Paul is talking about. If we are honest, we know that even those protesting wall street downtown are among the wealthiest people in the world, financially: our median household income in Browns Point is twice that of the nation, 22 times that of our neighbors in Mexico, and 500 times that of most nations in Africa. Most of us have little idea what poverty looks like up close. Most of us have never known hunger or homelessness, have never had to decide whether to buy medication or food, have never had to give children away because we could not afford to feed or clothe them.

We are the wealthy that Paul is talking about: those who are called to **lives of generosity**. “We brought nothing into the world,” 1 Timothy tells us, “and we can take nothing out of it.” Everything we have is a gift from God: the air we breathe, the food we eat, the clothes on our backs, the friends that surround us, the grace that sustains us. It’s all gift. We can’t deny that we are the ones in v. 17, those who are “rich in this present world.” Thankfully Paul doesn’t say here that to be wealthy is to be damned – else there would be no reason for us to be here in church at all, no reason to try to follow Jesus. He doesn’t say, “money is evil! Run away from it! Throw yourselves into poverty!” But he *does* say, “Be careful. Because the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and to put our hope in the things of this world is to set ourselves up for ruin and destruction, piercing ourselves and others with many griefs as we strive to accumulate more and more wealth.”

The question at hand is not whether we *are* wealthy, because we are. And the question isn’t necessarily *why* we are wealthy, because we’ve received grace that we could never deserve. The question is what we will do with our wealth, whether we will make idols of it, or do good with it. And 1 Timothy instructs us to live lives of generosity.

Over the next four weeks we’ll continue this theme of “Extravagant hope, extravagant generosity,” exploring the ways that God has transformed and is transforming and will transform us and our community – and we will ask ourselves again and again, “How will we respond to God’s love?” Will we say, “Yes, I deserve all this!” and keep it to ourselves? Will we buy into the notion that there is not enough to go around and hoard what we have, keeping our church a secret and serving only ourselves? Or will we live our lives in generosity, giving **as much as we can** of our time, our talents, and our resources to the kingdom of God, making generosity a priority in our lives?

1 Timothy calls us to use our wealth “to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” It calls us to look at everything we have as gift: what we *earn* belongs to God, what we *spend* belongs to God, what we *give* belongs to God. Our time is God’s. Our relationships are God’s. It is all gift. And how do we respond to the one who has given us more than we could ever ask? We are called to give to others: to share our time, our talent, our money, and the love and grace we’ve received.

There are many benefits to living generous lives: for one, we avoid the dangers Paul outlines in this letter to Timothy: we avoid bringing pain and destruction on ourselves and others because of our focus on accumulating wealth. We avoid the downfall that is inevitable when we put our hope in things that are fleeting. But this letter tells us that in living generously, we also take hold of “the life that really is life.” *Our generosity is rewarded with contentment.*

A recent study showed that Americans polled, when asked how much *more* money they would need to feel content, routinely said they would need about 20% more, no matter their current income level. Folks who made \$10K a year thought \$12K would be enough. Folks who

made \$100K thought \$120K would make them happier. But there was no income level at which those polled said, "I am content now. I don't need any more." Money does not bring contentment. But 1 Timothy says generosity *does*, because a life of generosity is a life of godliness.

But there's another level of reward to generosity, as well, which is simply the knowledge that you are helping others to find the grace you've already found, to see their lives as gift, to receive the love Christ offers to us no matter where we are or where we've been. Knowing that through our generosity we can offer such grace to others, is a gift in itself. Knowing that we are living more and more like the God who gave himself for us, that we are journeying on toward holiness, is reward on its own. Giving generously re-prioritizes our lives and helps us to see what is lasting, eternal, and of infinite value so we don't waste our energy on what is temporary, illusory, or untrustworthy. Giving generously helps us to live well, to experience the life for which we were created.

And when we give to the church, our efforts are multiplied. Where else can a few hours a week create a safe space for a young person to experience unconditional love, perhaps for the first time in his life? Where else can a few dollars go not only to buying curriculum for children in Sunday School, but also to feeding the hungry in our own neighborhoods? Where else can a smile and a handshake be the jumpstart someone needs to find hope in a life that seems to be going nowhere? Where else is the love of God so apparent, so available, so contagious, as it is here?

As we enter into this season of praying and planning for our congregation and for our families for the next year, let us think about the priorities that our church leadership has discerned for our church in the next year: engagement with the community, spiritual growth for all ages, and ministries with families. Let's imagine what God could do through Browns Point Church in this community, how the streets around us might be transformed with the love of God. Let's envision the lives that might be transformed by the ministries of this congregation, the people who might be sitting next to you *another* year from now, and those who will be fed and nourished in so many other ways. And let's commit to being not just the wealthy people we already are, but people of generosity, people of hope, who believe in the power of God to transform lives. Let us be people who take hold of the life that really is life.

Amen.