



**Sermons from St. Marks  
United Church of Christ  
New Albany, Indiana**



**The Secret is that It's No Secret, People Just Act Like It Is**

**Text: 2 Corinthian's 9:1-13**

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When I was growing up I was a Christmas maniac. I was every parent's truly nightmare in the fact that I could not fall asleep on Christmas Eve because I was so excited about all the presents I was going to receive. And this wasn't cute. In fact, it was downright ugly at times. My excitement was consistently about what I was going to get.

And there was always something else that would happen on Christmas morning. I would race through my gifts and open them like a demon. My excitement level was over the top and when I was done I'd sit back and ponder all that I had received and I'd inevitably be disappointed. No matter how much I had gotten it never seemed like enough.

When I was 17 Christmas wasn't nearly as exciting. By that time my main gift were socks and other equally unexciting articles of clothing. Christmas wasn't nearly as much fun or exciting as it had been. But when I was 17 I had a job, I had wheels, and for the first time I was actually able to go out on my own and going Christmas shopping for my family. I had the money and the ability to do so much more than I had ever done before. I did well and bought my family members really nice gifts that year.

On Christmas Eve, when we exchanged gifts, my family members were delighted with what I had bought them. My Dad commented that I had done very, very well and had purchased very good, very thoughtful gifts.

And that was the first Christmas I wasn't disappointed. I learned that lesson that we all hear but never fully understand until we do it, is that it is more blessed to give than to receive. This lesson was and is a huge lesson; a lesson I continue to learn each day of my life.

Sometimes this idea of giving, of being generous, seems to be a big secret. It's this quiet reality. The big secret is that it's not a big secret, we just pretend that it is.

Today's Scripture text comes from Second Corinthians. I often find St. Paul's two letters to the people of Corinth to be something of primers on how to be a church. In this portion of his second letter the issue seems to be an issue on how to fund the ministry of the saints. This was big issue.

Ancient Judaism had some sense of giving but it often had a lot of fees attached to it. The

Great Temple in Jerusalem was a religious establishment; but it was also, at its core, a business that helped fund Judaism. The problem early Christians had was Jesus' episode at the great Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and decreeing it to be a den of thieves made the people in early Christianity realize that this new church could not be fee driven.

The reaction of Paul is that the ministry of the saints needs to be funded by the generosity of the saints. Or, not. If the saints are not generous than the ministry of the saints will not be funded and not happen.

But I love what Paul does. He doesn't go through a laundry list of what needs to be funded, he doesn't tell the saints that if they don't ante up they won't be able to pay the electric bill, instead he speaks the words that God loves a 'cheerful giver.'

And the Greek word for cheerful implies not just cheeriness, but great cheeriness and enthusiasm. God loves givers who are eager and filled with delight at the prospect of doing so.

In thinking about the whole idea of giving and generosity I had a couple of thoughts about what makes me generous.

The first thing that is true about me when I am truly generous is that it's not what I do but it's why I do what I do. So much about real generosity isn't about the things we do, but it's about the motive behind the things we do. We always have to ask ourselves if we are doing things to serve God or to serve our own egos. I have, in my life, done both.

I learned a huge lesson this past year. My daughter Michelle is a Freshman at Ball State University. I didn't know much about Ball State but the history of the school is amazing.

The school started as a private school and its legacy was several people trying to start a college and name it after themselves. They wanted a legacy of something they had done. Each time the school failed. From 1907 - 1912 it sat empty until a group of local investors reopened it. What made it really take off, however, was several brothers, the Ball Brothers, invested a great deal of money in the school----and then donated the school to the state. The school prospered and ultimately the state named the school after the Ball brothers.

The only people who didn't let their ego get in the way of their generosity turned out to be the people who were honored. Their generosity is still a great legacy not just because of what they did, but because their motives were good.

Why we do what we do is often more important than what we do.

The second thing about generosity is that real generosity comes from gratitude. Gratitude is learning to be grateful for the things we have as opposed to being resentful to those things we don't have.

Later this month we celebrate Thanksgiving. I never truly appreciated Thanksgiving until I

became a part of the United Church of Christ and found myself part of the religious heritage of the Pilgrims and began to understand them a bit more.

Thanksgiving is a day of being thankful----and we base that thanks on the example of the Pilgrims.

By most standards the Pilgrims had little to be thankful for. They had little food, they were ravaged by disease, and the majority of them actually had died.

And they were grateful for what they had. It was meager, but they were truly grateful.

I used to love listening to my grandmother about her growing up. Her family migrated here from Sicily and she was the only one in the family born here. They had very, very little.

Many of the 'exotic' pasta dishes people now spend a lot of money on in fine Italian restaurants had the origins in the homes of these immigrants. They combined pasta with virtually anything they had in the house. My grandmother said that there was always a lot of laughter in their home. They had so little, but they were so grateful.

Today we have our commitment Sunday. Earl preached wonderfully on generosity and giving last week; so it goes today.

For me the first step of my real understanding of this took place at Christmas when I was 17 years old. I wrestle each day of my life with learning to be more generous and more giving. Generosity is deeply ingrained in our spiritual journeys and our lives are constantly filled with growth.

Sometimes our motives are great, sometimes they are less than stellar. Sometimes we are filled with gratitude in abundance, other times we mope wondering why we have so little. It is a journey. As a family of faith, this day, we take another step on that journey together.