



## **I BELONG TO A GENEROUS COMMUNITY**

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer  
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No. 6: The Value of Community  
Scripture: Acts 2:44-45; Luke 10:25-37

There are few experiences more drenched with heaven than belonging to a generous community. I shall never forget my first encounter with such a giving group of people. It happened during my first visit to America when I became part of a church college class in Los Angeles.

These students were not particularly well off but I marveled at the way they not only welcomed me but everybody else who came into the group. We met for prayer two times a week. On those occasions needs would be shared and I watched with wonder as these students opened their wallets and their lives to help one another. I had my first significant lesson in generosity from those dear people. I have never been the same since.

For the past five weeks we have been studying the subject of community which is one of our six core values at Autumn Ridge.

We are wearing buttons that declare **"I BELONG . . . SO CAN YOU."** We long for you to belong. We desire that every person who comes through the doors of Autumn Ridge will find a place to call home. Yet we know that talking about belonging can be rather nebulous so we have been trying to put meat on the bone in describing this community that God calls us to join.



In past weeks we have seen that we belong to a strange community, a hopeful community, a serving community, a united community, a discipling community. Today we declare **"I BELONG TO A GENEROUS COMMUNITY."** We are going to tackle this subject of generosity by asking three questions. There is an outline in your RidgeLines if you would like to follow along.

We begin by asking **WHAT IS GENEROSITY?**

I want to illustrate generosity with this plate of chocolate chip cookies.

I am very fond of chocolate chip cookies.

Sadly my friend here has none.

So I am going to pray that God might give them some cookies.



That is not generosity. Generosity is not a desire that others should be warmed and fed. It is not a resolution that one day when we are better off we will help others. Generosity is a recognition that God has blessed us in order that we might bless others.

In other words **generosity is a lifestyle of sharing.**

Whatever we have, whether it is much or little, we look for opportunities to share it with others.

Second question: **WHY SHOULD WE BE GENEROUS?**

After all if I give more to you there is less for me.

Times are tough. I need what I have.

Maybe the person is in need because of their own folly. We can find a hundred reasons why we shouldn't be generous so let's consider some of the biblical reasons why we should.

We should be generous because **generosity is rewarding.**

Jesus said, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive."** (Acts 20:35)

That word blessed means happy.

Stingy people are miserable people.

Generous people are happy people.

The truth is that giving makes us feel good.

If there was no other reason but self interest we should give.

Proverbs is wisdom literature. It states universal truths which any wise person can experience for themselves.

It is Proverbs that tells us, **"A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."** (Proverbs 11:25)

It goes on to add, **"A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."** (Proverbs 22:9)

The Psalmist adds his own endorsement to generosity, **"Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely."** (Psalm 112:5)

The point is that it is great to give.

Last year was a story about an ordinary couple in Nova Scotia. They won over 11 million dollars in the lottery but within six months every penny was gone.



Not because they blew it but because they gave it away. They said, "At our age we don't need anything."

So they went on an 11 million dollar spending spree.

They took care of their family first and then they began delivering donations to various groups.

These included the local fire department, churches, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, hospitals and organizations that fight cancer and diabetes.

They said that giving the money away "Made them feel good" because "there is so much good being done with the money."

Then we should be generous because **generosity is faith building.**

This works in two ways.

First generosity builds **the faith of the giver.**

In Deuteronomy God gives the Israelites these instructions, "**Set apart for the Lord your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks.**" **(Deuteronomy 15:19)**

It was a tremendous exercise in faith to give the first animal to God because they didn't know if they would have any more animals. It might be the only animal that was born that year and they had given it away to God.

Our natural tendency is to wait until 20 animals have been born and then give the 21<sup>st</sup> to God as an expression of our thanks.

Giving the first fruits to God changes everything.

It recognizes that all we have comes from God.

It is not simply an expression of thanksgiving because conceivably there may be no more money to give thanks for. Rather it is a statement of trust and faith. Then as God blesses us, as he will, our faith grows and we are built up as believers.

Second generosity builds the **faith of the recipient.**

They see God provide for them, often in response to their prayers. During our life we will be on both sides of the generosity equation. Sometimes we will be the giver and at other times we will be the receiver.

Either way God uses generosity to build up our trust in him, our faith in Christ and our love for others.

Then it is good to give because **generosity is God like.**

We are never more like our Heavenly Father than when we overflow with generosity for our God is the great giver. The most popular verse in the Bible emphasizes this truth. It says, "**God so loved the world that he gave.**" **(John 3:16)**

Generosity is God's trademark. Just as Nike has their swoosh. God has the open hand. He loves to give and he wants his people to share his trademark.

Paul tells the Corinthians that "**God loves a cheerful giver.**" **(2 Corinthians 9:7)**

Do you know why?

It is because God himself is a cheerful giver.

And he wants us to be like him.

Then we are motivated to be generous because **generosity is encouraging to others.**

That was the situation in the church of Jerusalem.

Luke tells us, **"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." (Acts 2:44-45)**

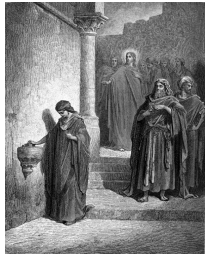
Can you imagine being part of a generous community like that? It would be a foretaste of heaven.

So we are not surprised to find what happened two verses later, **"The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47)**

It was the grace of God that saved them but it was the generosity of God's people that opened the door for the gospel.

Think of the stories we love in the Bible.

There is the one with the boy who gave away his loaves and fishes and the widow who put two very small copper coins into the treasury of the temple.



It was all she had but Jesus commended her.



Then there is that famous parable of the Good Samaritan who gave two days' pay to keep the injured man in the inn for two months and promised that when he returned he would reimburse the innkeeper for any extra expenses. We love these stories because they are so inspiring. They encourage us to be generous.



You parents and grandparents be sure to tell your children and grandchildren great stories about giving. Model generosity yourself.

I know one father who would gather his young children around him each Saturday night when he wrote out the check for the church offering and he would explain to his kids why he was doing this and how the money would be spent. They would pray that the money would be used well and then one of the children would be given the privilege of putting the envelope in the offering bag the next day. His children are grown now but they have never forgotten that lesson of generosity.

Then **generosity is the best way to meet needs.**

It is not the only way. There are other divinely ordained avenues but I believe generosity is the best way because personal generosity is wonderfully efficient and effective.

Recently we had a celebration in the Common Grounds for those involved in the Backpacks for Kids program. It was amazing to hear what has been accomplished.



Backpacks for Kids began less than two years ago. It now involves 13 schools in Rochester. It serves 931 kids and their families each weekend. That is 14,896 meals every month. This program isn't costing the government or the taxpayer a penny. The administrative costs are minimal. This is simply God's people doing God's work in God's way.



There is certainly a role for government in alleviating need, but there is an increasing recognition that when government takes over the work of churches and services groups and volunteer agencies they lose the personal touch and that is a great shame.

### So **HOW CAN WE BE GENEROUS?**

What does generosity look like?

Now some of you are looking at those 4 T's on the message outline and you are thinking, "I can guess three but what's the fourth?" Listen and you will find out.

First we can be generous with **our time**.

This is where it starts. Our time is the greatest gift we have been given. It is even more valuable than money because time is nonrenewable.

Once we spend it we can't get it back.

The Bible tells us to redeem the time, by making the best possible use of it.

The Good Samaritan's first gift to the injured man lying on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho was the gift of his time. He interrupted his day.

I think Jesus is suggesting the man had put enough margin in his life to allow for an interruption like this. Helping hurting people takes a lot of time.

Being a mentor at Next Chapter takes time.

Filling Backpacks for Kids takes time.

Then we can be generous with **our talents**.

The Bible says, **"A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church." (1 Corinthians 12:7)**

God has given each one of us at least one spiritual talent to help build his kingdom.

Maybe your gift is hospitality and you can open your home. Or it is listening and you can visit our shut-ins.

There is no legitimate gift that you cannot use in the service of God. I heard about one lady who likes to make bread. She lives in the inner city. She invited her neighbors, who are mostly immigrants, into her home and taught them bread making and exposed them to the Bread of Life.

Then we can be generous with **our treasure**.

When it comes to money we all think we haven't got much. That is simply not true. Every one of us in this room is in the top five percent of wealthy people in the world. If you want to find out how rich you are in comparison with the rest of the world go to [globalrichlist.com](http://globalrichlist.com)

You put in the amount of your income.

You will be amazed at how well off you are.

Most of us are in the top 1 percent.

Now why has God prospered us so much?

It is not to raise our standard of living but to raise our standard of giving.

Paul writes, **"You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion."** (2 Corinthians 9:11)

What we think we own is really on loan.

Psalm 24 tells us, **"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it."** (Psalm 24:1)

This tells us that God is the owner of our possessions and we are the managers and managers ask totally different questions than owners do.

When I am the owner I ask, "What do I want to do with my stuff?"

When I am the manager I ask, "What does the owner want me to do with his stuff."

Jesus tells us that our money is a test.

God gives it to us to see what we will do with it.

Jesus says, **"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much."** (Luke 16:10)

However, our treasures don't just refer to money.

I was stuck this week by the actions of the church in Jerusalem. They didn't give money, presumably because they didn't have any, instead we read, **"Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to everyone as he had need."** (Acts 2:45)

That verse hit with special force because this week Gretchen and I have been in Los Angeles clearing out her mother's house so my mother in law can move into assisted living. I was amazed how much stuff she had accumulated in 40 years.

I realized that I am just as guilty.

There are 10 bikes in our garage. That's ridiculous!

As we flew back on Thursday night I said to Gretchen, "We have got to give away all that stuff we are not using."

Perhaps we have an extra car in the garage that we can lend to someone who needs it.  
 Maybe our cabin is only used a few weeks each summer and we could make it available to those who can't afford a vacation.

Perhaps like the Christians in Jerusalem we have valuable assets we are not using. We are told in Acts, **"There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need."** (Acts 4:34-35)

We may find ourselves in a similar situation.  
 It might be jewelry or a valuable collection.  
 We don't need it anymore but someone else's life could be transformed with what it would fetch at auction.

So let's look at our situation and see how we can liberate our wealth for the kingdom.

Finally we can be generous with **our testimony**.  
 If we are followers of Jesus we have a story to tell and God wants us to tell that story of how his son has impacted our life. From the earliest days of the church Christians have loved to give their testimony.  
 In the book of Acts Paul gives his faith story three times describing how Jesus has saved him.

So let me encourage you to be generous with your testimony this week. Look for opportunities to explain how God has blessed you.

Perhaps you are a new mother and you are showing off your new baby. You can explain, "We are so thankful to God. We prayed for a child and he gave us this lovely daughter and we are now committing her and ourselves to him."

I began by telling you of my first experience of belonging to a truly generous community. One of the main reasons that college group was so generous was because of the example of an older couple who acted as sponsors.  
 Their names were Frank and Edie Johnston. They didn't have any children of their own so they adopted us.

They built their home not far from the church.  
 They designed it as a two story house.  
 The upstairs was where they lived.

The downstairs was an area that was designed entirely for ministry. It had a big meeting room where young people gathered. That room opened out onto a patio where there was a swimming pool, a barbecue area and a badminton court.

I never saw Frank or Edie in the pool or on the badminton court but I saw hundreds of young people there. On Sunday nights, Frank and Edie would open their home for a meeting called Harvesters where one of the main emphases was Bible memorization.

High school and college students were taught the importance of hiding God's word in their heart.

For 30 years thousands of students spent Sunday nights in their home and it made an indelible impression on us. Frank and Edie are both in glory now but they have left an incredible heritage in my life.

They demonstrated generosity with the gift of their time, their home and their testimony for Christ.

We have now come to the end of our Series on Community but I hope we have come to a new beginning in our understanding of what community means. At Autumn Ridge we primarily experience community in small groups and we would love you to be part of one.

In your RidgeLines you will find a card entitled, **"Join A Community Group."** We are starting up some brand new groups that will just run for a month in order to give you a taste.

If you don't like it you are not committing yourselves for the rest of 21<sup>st</sup> century. But I am sure you will like it.

Fill out this card and drop it in the offering bag or you can stop by the Ministry Center or you can submit this information on the Autumn Ridge Website.

The point is we want you to belong first to God and then to his people. We want to be a community with open hands receiving from God all he wants to give, believing he wants to give us a lot. Then with open hands we give it away, believing we cannot out give God.