

Living Giving: The Grace of Giving - 20th March 2022

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[0 : 00] So if you were here last week, you haven't caught up online, because what I plan to give another talk in this Living Giving series that we kicked off the week before. I wasn't here last week. I was feeling a bit skanky at home.

Wasn't a pretty sight or smell, I can tell you, and Gemma will vouch for that. But we're on the up now, which is good news. So instead, last week, though, Ruth was able to lead us through a time of prayer and reflection on the situation in Ukraine.

And how we might be able to stand alongside their people as they face all that comes with that Russian invasion. In fact, I was speaking to Dave at the end last week as well.

And I think I'm glad we weren't able to stick with that planned service really last week. Because sometimes a bigger picture takes precedence, which God calls us to respond to.

And of course, it's an ongoing situation, which demands that ongoing prayerful engagement and action with. But it seems good this week to resume this Living Giving series.

[1 : 04] We'll chop one off at the end of the series, because Easter's approaching him. So we'll do a three-week one on this. But it's clear, it seems, that, as it were last week perhaps, responding to the needs of others is and always has been a central part of what it means to follow Jesus.

And I say it always has been a central part, because showing practical love in action was a hallmark of Jesus' first followers, the early church, as we call them.

So, for example, in the book of Acts, there's a lovely little summary which the writer Luke gives, describing the life of the early church in the city of Jerusalem.

And he says this. He says, they, the early church, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

[2 : 14] They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

So they were a church which demonstrated their love for God and for each other through, you could say, their heads, their hearts, and their hands.

It was a holistic church in that way. Indeed, there's this somewhat quaint word just at the top of that passage there, which summarizes how they lived, because we're told that they devoted themselves to fellowship.

Now, fellowship is one of those proper jargony Christian words. And I think Lord of the Rings aside, it's only really used in church circles.

I mean, I don't want to get back from the vicar web. I don't say to Gemma when she says, how was your night? It goes, oh, it was a great time of fellowship with the lads. I don't talk in that kind of language about the vic. You know, no, we just say, had a good night hanging out with my mates.

[3 : 18] We don't tend to use the word fellowship as a sort of mainstream word these days. And yet the fact that it appears at the top of this passage, describing how they devoted themselves to fellowship, because it sticks out perhaps as a word, probably worth us unpacking a bit what it means.

And it means a lot more than just hanging out together. So as we tend to do here from time to time, let's dig into the meaning of this word fellowship with the original Greek word that the writer Luke used.

Because the word we translate as fellowship is the Greek word koinonia. If we get Greek this morning, do you want to say after me koinonia? One, two, three.

Koinonia. Cosmic. Now, the root meaning of this word koinonia is that it's all about partnership and participation. It's more than just being in a room with someone.

It's more than just simply hanging out with each other. Now, there's far more involvement, far more connection. We might say far more communion than that with each other.

[4 : 28] And when it says in this passage that all the believers were together and had everything in common, what a Greek word that we translate as common is again, a form of this word koinonia crops up again in the passage.

So what does it mean to have everything in common? Well, we're told. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together. So koinonia is all about sharing. It's about sharing. These early Jesus followers evidently shared their money, their stuff, their time, their food.

They opened and even shared their homes with each other. It was a community commitment to share their life and to share their stuff.

And this idea of church being about sharing was picked up again a couple of chapters later in Acts as it says in chapter 4, it says another little summary.

[5 : 35] All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed any of their possessions as their own, but they shared everything they had. Now, a couple of thoughts on this little verse.

Firstly, it seems, there's real unity there. It says they were one in heart and mind. Which, if you think about it, is a pretty amazing concept.

You know, something profoundly bound them together. One in heart and mind. I don't know where else in life, really, you find you have an instinctive bond with people from the word go.

I think for me, I was struck the other week when I was at a gig in Litchfield and I spotted a bloke a few yards away wearing a West Ham shirt in this gig in Litchfield.

Now, there ain't many of us West Ham fans around these parts, I tell you. So, I saw this guy just over the room. I got a little bit excited, kind of thing. It felt, I found my tribe here.

[6 : 41] So, I was kind of like looking at him as the, you know, clocking him in his shirt as a nightwear. Not in a sort of stalking way, just a little excited way. And then, when he clocked me, I found myself just giving him a little Hammers sign from afar.

A little secret code that West Ham fans have to say, yeah, come on your irons, we're together in this. And then, he gave me one back as well. It was beautiful.

I mean, we never spoke. I'll never know this geezer's name. But for that fleeting, beautiful moment, we were one.

You know, we were together in heart and mind. And I'll never see him again, but we'll always have Litchfield, won't we? So, that's all right. If that's me and a fellow West Ham fan, then how much more are we bound together by something far more important even than football?

You know, we might be a right old mixed bunch. I mean, just look around for a second. Seriously, just look around for a second. It's pretty mixed here. It's a pretty mixed bunch. There are ways in which, yeah, we reflect the community we're a part of.

[7 : 48] But I wouldn't say a strange bunch. It's a mixed bunch between us this morning. But the one thing which unites us, even if we have nothing else in common, I'd say is a shared faith in Jesus, or at least an openness to exploring that faith and what it might mean.

So, of all the things in life which could bond us together with each other, how amazing is that, that that's the one thing we've all got in common this morning?

And that means, I think, that when we're struggling perhaps sometimes, as I know we will all do, to know what to talk about with each other because we all come from different walks of life.

You know, when the conversation over coffee or Coke after the service might feel a bit stunted, or the small talk when we bump into someone we vaguely know from church in the aisle in Audi is all a bit surface and you're just talking about the weather or whatever.

I think I want to say, let's not be afraid to talk about and share with each other about the one thing that we do have in common, to talk about our faith.

[8 : 58] Because that is the thing which gives us, ultimately, our deepest connection. And talking about that in Audi or over coffee, it's not about being all weird and intense and so on.

You know, of course we can chat about the football or TV or our neighbour's best friend's cousin's dog or whatever we want to do, but I think let's not forget that we can also talk about our shared faith.

Which means the questions that we ask each other in that small talk kind of time don't have to be small at all. They can be, you know, how are you doing with God at the moment?

Or if you don't know them sufficiently perhaps to ask that, you say, what's your story? Tell me how you came to faith or what brings you here in the first place? Now those kind of exploratory questions, the shared bond that we have is something special.

And sharing our faith stories in whatever detail we want with each other, I think will help us to become ever more united with each other in heart and mind. But then secondly in this little verse, if you notice it says, All the believers were one in heart and mind.

[10 : 07] No one claimed any of their possessions as their own, but they shared everything they had. Now what's the Greek word which is behind this word shared here?

Yeah, it's the same word, koinonia. It seems because they were united, because they were of one heart and mind, sharing everything they had with each other was a natural consequence of that.

Their unity led to their generosity. Now how did one follow from the other? How does generosity flow out of unity? See, as it says in the next verse, And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all, that there were no needy persons among them.

For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. See, God's grace was so powerfully at work in them.

This extraordinary spirit of sacrificial sharing, this koinonia. Don't think it was something that they could conjure up simply in their own strength, you know, a matter of will or anything.

[11 : 21] No, rather it was God's grace working in them, which enabled them to be that way. What is God's grace? Well, there's a verse which I missed out in the middle, which feels a sin, because it says, With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all. See, they were so aware of the life-shaping impact of Jesus' resurrection, of the game-changing ability of Jesus to overcome even death itself, that when they were united by that bond of faith, suddenly the rest of life came into perspective.

Suddenly their stuff became something to be shared, not shored up for themselves. They understood the grace, the free gift of life that Jesus had given them.

And then that same grace not only gave them life, but shaped their life in a way that they gave in response to God, you know, distributing what they had to anyone in need.

Now, what might that giving, that sharing, look like for us in our day and age, in our culture? Well, I think to help us work this out, how to apply this kind of early church stuff to our lives, it's worth reflecting on the fact, I think, that historical records show that soon after this whole sharing stuff in Acts 2 and Acts 4 was highlighted, Jerusalem, this big city, and indeed the whole of the Roman Empire, all over the Mediterranean, was struck by a series of severe famines.

[13 : 05] Now, in response to this famine, we know that the Apostle Paul, one of the early church leaders, he organized various collections to be made from churches dotted around the Roman Empire so that those who had enough could share with those who were lacking.

And those who were lacking by this stage that this famine was happening included those who were living in Jerusalem. Indeed, there's a letter Paul wrote to a church in Corinth in Greece where he uses the example of other churches in the region of Macedonia in northern Greece to inspire those in Corinth to give generously to those in Jerusalem.

Paul says it like this. He says, And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflow in joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

They gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

And they exceeded our expectations. See that you also excel in this grace of giving. That's a letter in the sort of mid-50s or so that Paul wrote.

[14 : 36] But it's a fascinating little insight, I think, into the life of these early Christians. The people of Macedonia, as it says, were in the midst of severe trial.

Now, Paul doesn't say what that trial was. But he mentions their extreme poverty as well. So it's likely they too were afflicted by this famine. And yet still, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

Which is an incredible thing to say, really. They were rock-bottom poor. Extreme poverty. But it seems that because they knew that their identity, their community, was based on their shared faith in God and not in their stuff or in their money, that gave them so much joy that even in their poverty, even in the midst of famine, they were able to be generous and to give to others in need.

Indeed, it says they saw it as a privilege. See, having money and being rich would seem to be two very different things. How did they get this generous mindset?

Well, the key thing that Paul says is at the top. They responded to the grace that God had given them. You see, as we saw in Acts, our ability to give is a gift which God gives to us.

[16 : 08] It's a free gift of grace which God enables us to then be extraordinarily generous in our lives. And I'd say the gift of giving is a principle which can shape our giving today because I'd say God longs to give each of us the grace to be the people who give.

If we struggle to give, if we struggle to be generous with our money, I don't know what your reputation's like amongst your friends or your family or whatever. If we struggle with that, we've given our money, our stuff, our time, I'm not surprised because it's blooming hard to give stuff away.

You know, we're bombarded, as you'll know better than me, on online society now. We're targeted advertising. You know, you click on one link on Google and Amazon pops up the link, doesn't it? It knows what it's telling you to buy because you showed a brief interest in it.

It sells us the product or the lifestyle that we're already going to find most tempting to buy into. Or we're charmed by this idea that more stuff will make us happy.

You know, you never see someone being miserable when they're buying something in an advert online or on telly. It's always smiles. It always brings value to their lives. So it's no wonder if proper generosity, true generosity, this principle of giving away 10% or more that we were talking about last time, can feel counter-cultural, can feel like a mountain to climb for us.

[17 : 44] And yet God says, look, I get it. I get it. I know how enticing the accumulation of stuff is. I know how appealing it is to try and keep up with the Joneses or whatever.

And Jesus talked about that kind of instinct to accumulate more enough. But in light of that truth, God says, I think, let me help you.

I'm not asking you to do anything on your own strength. Let me help you. Let me give you the grace to give. Because as he says elsewhere, it's in giving that we truly receive.

What do we receive? We receive the joy, the peace, the freedom that comes from knowing that we're doing all we can to help others to live more fully.

And we receive a deeper faith because it forces us to then trust God to provide for our needs because we've already given away from what we had.

[18 : 42] See, the beauty of asking God to give us the grace to give is that we can then trust God to not only fulfill our needs, which we'll need to do, but to prompt us how much to give and who to give to.

Indeed, it seems to me that when we ask God to give us the grace to give, it'll probably give us a different grace to a different person each time. So what do I mean by that?

Well, you'll know as well as me, there are hundreds of appeals for money and more needs in the world than we ourselves could possibly respond to. Even for us here at St. John's, just in this first part of the year, just in 2022, we've had the Samara's Aid appeal for orphans and families in Syria.

We've got Life for Children events next week. There's the opportunity to support the humanitarian needs in Ukraine. There's Books for Children we had a little appeal for. There's Food Bank, Burnt Be a Friend pathway ongoing.

You might have been watching Comic Relief and felt compelled to give for that on Friday night. You know, all that on top of what could be called our sort of bread and butter giving that enables us as a church to do what we do here each week at St. John's.

[19 : 53] You know, all those kind of things that we could give to can feel pretty overwhelming sometimes. And I know, as a church, we need to be careful that we don't overload this expectation on people to give to so many different things.

And yet, I think the solution to that is that when we ask God to give us the grace to give, I would say the Spirit will focus our minds on which specific causes or people God is calling each of us as individuals to give to.

So I'm going to pick on Carol at the back there. Carol Sutton, for example. Samara's aid was obviously the cause she was and is passionate about because I would say God has given her the specific grace to give to it and to mobilize others to give which is brilliant.

for others their passion will be light for children and there's people running a coffee afternoon next week. For others it will be Pathway which gets their giving juices flowing.

For others it will be generous hospitality they'll prioritize opening their home to others put some of their budget into that. For others you'll have signed up to house refugees with you from Ukraine.

[21 : 14] For others it will be whatever you pick the thing that you know that gets you going and makes you think yeah I can give to that. But in asking God to give each of us the grace to give in our own way we can trust God's spirit to between us in our unity to be covering as many bases as possible with the right funds from the right people at the right time.

Now that seems to me to be true koinonia true sharing in practice we share the joy yeah but we share the burden of helping others as well.

And that means for us in our house this principle has been pretty releasing for us really because we've stopped feeling guilty about what we don't give to because I hope that Gemma and I and the kids are beginning to buy into it as well that we're generally in line with what God has already called us to give to and so when you get these charity fundraisers out in the street you know these chuggers these charity muggers or whatever knocking on the door or approaching you in the street saying it's just two pound a month two pound a month come on you can do that can't you my stock answer now is all the best to you I'm going to save your time and mine because we've already worked out our giving thank you and you walk away because I would say God has already given us the grace to give to certain causes which includes here at St. John's but at the same time in doing that relieves the weight of the burden of giving to other causes

God helps us to specialise if you like in our giving and that's why giving is a gift of grace not of guilt now for us just to fill you in how we do it for us each month we put aside some of our allocated giving into an unallocated pot shall we say and we give from that as God prompts us and gives us the grace to give to one off causes as the year goes on so there's a bit set aside each month to respond to people as we feel led and then at the end of the tax year which is coming up we then make sure we give away whatever's left usually split between the charities we've already supported over the year each month and that's how we operate as a church as well the PCC allocate 10% of our money and at the end of the year we work out what we haven't given and then give that away in April as a lump sum it's basically trusting God to be the steward of our giving something which Paul says these churches in Macedonia had mastered because even in their poverty

God enabled them to give to those in Jerusalem who were suffering because of this famine and so to bring this all together really just this morning what I want to suggest in a moment is that we each pray for the grace to give that God would help us to give joyfully cheerfully and in response to the grace that we've been given first through the resurrection love of Jesus praying for God to give us the grace to give it's not that we're committing to anything there and then but we're simply asking God to shape our minds and our hearts that we would then want to give to the things that he points out to us that resonate with our hearts but it is a risky prayer to pray because it's likely if it's answered and I'm sure it will be to revolutionise what we do with our money and our stuff and our time

[25 : 05] I prayed this prayer probably a couple of decades ago now and I meant it and although things have sometimes got tight for us as I said last week God has always faithfully ensured that we've never gone short so from my experience asking God to give us the grace to give is a prayer that works and a prayer which we see God blessing us through but also that we can bless others through as well alright let's stay sitting for this because they want to make us stand up and put us on the spot or anything but if you want to pray for that gift of giving that grace of giving from God I'm going to suggest that we close our eyes so that none of us can see what each other are doing so I suggest that as we sit here if you want to just maybe just hold your hands out flat in that kind of receiving and giving pose and I'll just lead us in a little prayer and if you want to echo that for you then that would be great this is step one almost towards whatever

God does next so dear God we know that you know the hold the worry the importance that money and our stuff can have in our lives and yet we know that you call us to live lives of generous living giving so that our needs and the needs of others can be met between us in full and so we ask acknowledging this tension that you would please give us the grace to give that by your spirit you would unleash in us a renewed spirit of generosity that we would be able to discover the joy that comes from partnering with you and with each other in sharing what we have so that needs can be met and as you give us the grace to give so may we receive both from your provision for our needs but more profoundly that sense of knowing your pleasure your joy your peace your freedom from whatever hold our money or our security has over us but would you give us the grace of giving so that our church our community our world may be blessed because you have blessed us with the ability the passion and a desire to be a blessing to others and if you want to echo that prayer for yourself let's say

Amen and I think if you prayed that prayer you can open your eyes now but having prayed that prayer all I'm going to say is let's just be alert to God's prompting this week and beyond for who or what God churns us up God taps us on the shoulder perhaps to say go on that's one of your things that's the grace I'm going to give you to give to see what God does with that prayer and we'll continue to pick up this story which Ruth is going to help us come back to next week