

Finding Generosity in Our Grief

Luke 6:38; Proverbs 11:25

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During Vacation Bible School this year, I was showing some preschool children some pictures I took in Liberia.

One of the pictures showed a young woman holding her infant child. The picture was of particular interest to me because the T-shirt she was wearing said, "Be Like Jesus."

I asked the children, "What kinds of things should we do to be like Jesus?"

The children responded with answers like "be kind, love others, pray for people, and be helpful."

One child said, "Be generous."

Eventually, a boy raised his hand and asked, "What does "generous" mean?"

I explained that being generous was sharing what you have with others, like the time a little boy shared his lunch with Andrew, a disciple of Jesus, who then gave it to Jesus, who then multiplied it to feed thousands of people.

The children had just finished their meal. So I told them that they had something to eat because other people were generous by providing them with their food.

We then looked at another picture of three hungry Liberian children squatting down to eat leftovers from a big bowl used for cooking food for the students at Ricks Institute.

While in Liberia, I have known people to eat only a cup of rice a day, and even that was due to the generosity of others. Some have gone without food for days.

When Jesus said He was the Bread of Life, he wanted people to hunger for a relationship with him like they desired food when they are hungry.

Generosity is one of the most important words to describe Jesus' life. Jesus' presence among us was an act of generosity. Jesus left heaven to live among us. He said that he came down from heaven not to do his will but to do the will of the Father that sent him (John 6:38).

Part of that will was to live a life of generosity. He came alongside us and suffered with us and for us. It was the will of the Father that Jesus not comes to serve himself, but to serve us.

His generosity was so great that He gave "his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). What greater act of generosity is there than for someone to give away his or her life for others?

Jesus once said, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15).

Being generous is one of the best ways to be like Jesus.

Recently, I spoke with a nurse who told me she had been away from her job for nearly two months. The illness she had was likely contracted in her work environment, but there is no work compensation for those kinds of unproven circumstances.

As the extended illness continued, she ran out of sick days. With no sick days left, there would be no income. With an extended illness, she could lose her health insurance.

Working people usually struggle to ask others for help, but sometimes we must do so to survive. She posted on the hospital’s community board that she needed some sick days if anyone had any to spare.

The hospital makes it possible for employees to give unused sick days to each other in times of need. However, when such a gift is given, it must be given anonymously.

My friend was overwhelmed by the generosity of her colleagues. She received enough days to stay home and recover without missing a paycheck for the entire two months.

One day, while she was still recovering, she received a phone call from a nurse who said she didn’t have any sick days to give, but she had something else. She delivered a carload of groceries her and her husband, who is disabled. Her friend’s generosity brought her to tears.

If we live long enough, we will all experience loss of some kind, loss of health, loss of a job, loss of a friend, loss of confidence, loss of a loved one, loss of status, loss of money, loss of ability. When there is a loss, some people grow bitter, angry, and resentful and never move beyond it.

For others, the loss reminds them of the gifts they had and how easy it is to take the good for granted. We live too many of the good days with an ungrateful spirit.

Sheryl Sandberg is the chief operating officer at Facebook. At a graduation commencement address at the University of California at Berkeley in 2016, Sheryl shared about the lessons she had learned after living through a year without her husband who died suddenly and unexpectedly.

Eleven days before her husband Dave died, they had a conversation about the possibility that life could end early. Ironically, the question one of them asked was, “How would we live if we knew we had 11 days left?” They had no idea that Dave had only 11 days left to live. (<http://fortune.com/2016/05/14/sandberg-uc-berkeley-transcript/>)

Sheryl wanted to teach the graduates an important lesson about generosity. She wanted them to learn to be generous without having to live through the pain she had lived through to discover the spirit of generosity.

Despite having a huge reservoir of sadness with her all the time, she told them that she had a new sense of gratitude that had emerged since Dave's death: gratitude for each breath; for the gift of life itself; for the love of her family; for the laughter of her children, and for the kindness of family and friends. (Ibid)

When we live with a heart of generosity, it is difficult not to live a life of joy and meaning. Sheryl believes one can choose joy and meaning, even in the face of adversity, even with a void so great that emptiness fills your heart and your lungs, and life sucks you under. (Ibid)

She's found inspiration from others who have made this choice in the presence of significant loss, like Antoine Leiris, a journalist in Paris whose wife H  l  ne was killed in the 2015 Paris attacks.

In a Facebook post, Leiris wrote an open letter to his wife's killers two days after the attack. This is what he wrote:

"On Friday night, you stole the life of an exceptional being, the love of my life, the mother of my son. But you will not have my hate. My 17-month-old son will play as we do every day, and all his life this little boy will defy you by being happy and free. Because you will not have his hate either." (<https://vt.edu/commencement/2017-remarks-sandberg.html>)

Sheryl said that it was one of the most touching Facebook posts she had ever read. It was just more thing that she found that had helped her to hold loss and generosity in tension, which she said has been the greatest irony of her life.

In losing her husband, she said she discovered a spirit of generosity.

After missing two months of work, my nurse friend learned to be more grateful for her colleagues and for her health and see how their generosity made a difference in her life.

Isn't that the way it works sometimes?

Sheryl was really saying to the graduates, "Don't wait till that moment comes to cultivate a generous spirit. What if you only had eleven days to live, how would you live?"

Every moment would count, wouldn't it? Every conversation would be meaningful. We would be thankful for every minute. We would be kinder and more loving. We would find something to be grateful for even in the midst of our loss.

We would be more generous with our possessions because they wouldn't mean as much.

We would be more generous with our speech because what we say would mean more. We might learn to be more like Jesus, who lived his life like he only had 33 years to live among us. He knew he didn't have long to make a difference. He knew his life was not his own. He gave it away.

What if we lived that way?

What if we lived with a spirit of generosity?

That's how Jesus taught us to live.

“Give,” Jesus said, “and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38).

This is an incredible promise! What it says is that generous people discover one of the secrets of life. You cannot out give God.

We get when we give.

One of the best ways to deal with loss is to find ways to give and be generous in spite of our grief.

Don't wait until you lose something or someone significant to discover and practice this valuable lesson of life.

Cultivate a life and spirit of generosity each day. Make your life a living sacrifice.

But if you have already suffered a significant loss, a loss that has pulled you under, Sheryl Sandberg says that you can learn to “kick against the bottom, find the surface and breathe again.”

She says she was able to do that with every act of generosity because in helping others she exhaled the toxins of loss and breathed the gift of life that remains. (Ibid)

With each selfless act we do in the name of Jesus for another person, God opens our hearts to the goodness He wants to pour into our lives.

Our generosity becomes the avenue through which we are actually able to receive some of the intangibles of life. You cannot buy joy and meaning, but apparently, you can find these by giving yourself away.

You can find joy and meaning by worshipping the God who gave Himself away through his Son, Jesus.

I think back to the question that child asked in Vacation Bible School: “What does generous mean?”

I think the woman in Liberia with that T-shirt had the answer. It means that we are “Living Like Jesus.”

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