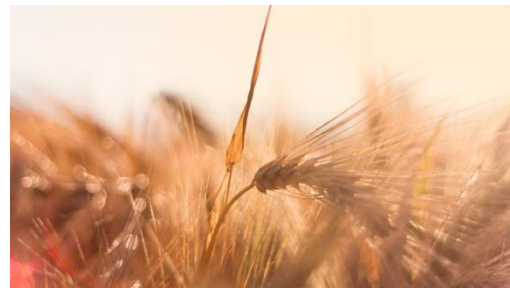


## “Anabaptism@500 - Sowing bountifully”

Ezekiel 40:1-4; 41:1-4; 43:1-7a (August 27, 2023)



Today we come to the third, and last, in a series of sermons from our Anabaptism@500 Bible Study earlier this year. And, just as before, we’ve printed a sheet with the comments we developed, for any who would like to reflect on them during the week. You can pick that up in the foyer after the service.



Today’s passage is about generosity and also about community. And I’ll be saying more about those things in a few minutes. But first I want to share with you a memory from my last year in seminary.

Lindsay and I had been married only a few months. We were poor students. Lindsay was working, but it was only a short-term contract. We had no savings. And no guarantee of a job when I graduated.

At the same time, the school was offering an amazing opportunity. A chance to learn about the holy land, not only from books, but to actually be there and experience it first hand.

One of our professors had lived and studied there. He’d be taking us to significant archaeological sites, places not everyone gets to see. We’d be going with our friends, my fellow classmates, and other more experienced pastors. It sounded great, so we signed up.

But over time we began to have second thoughts. Could we afford this? At the end of the school year our money would be gone. How could we pay for the basics: food and housing. The cautious, practical part of me said, “Maybe we’d better not.” But then someone else said: “I’d really like to see you go.”

That person knew the value of such an experience, and cared about the preparation of pastors for ministry. So indirectly (and anonymously), whoever it was made a loan available to us. “Pay it back whenever you can. No rush. You really ought to go.”

We did. We had a great experience! And so our lives were enriched by the generosity of a stranger. A person of faith, who cared for us.



Generosity is such a lovely gift. A *transformative* gift, actually. Because the memory of that event has stuck with us. And over the years it’s caused *us* to be more generous toward others. It’s a “pay-it-forward” thing. Having been gifted ourselves, we felt it was our privilege to be able to now share some of what we have with others.

Generosity is a characteristic of *God*, part of God’s very nature. We read about that in our passage for today, where Paul quotes from the book of Psalms: “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” (Psalm 112:9)

The writer of James says that “every generous act of giving and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father who made the heavenly lights, in whom there is no inconsistency or shifting shadow.” (James 1:17) In other words, God is the generous source of all our giving.



So I'd like you to take a moment now and think where *you* experience God's generosity.

I know, it's sometimes *hard* to see these things. Especially when we're overwhelmed with our aches and pains, our griefs and our worries, and all the dark thoughts that pull us away from recognizing the goodness of our lives, and the God whose love will never let us go.



Where do you see God's *grace*? Does it not greet us every day with the rising of the sun? With the air we breathe, the food we eat?

There's an old song; maybe you know it: "Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." Counting our blessings gives us something to focus on *other* than our trouble. It helps us not to lose sight of God's extraordinary generosity.



Our scripture uses the image of a bountiful sower. It says the one who *sows* bountifully will also *reap* bountifully. It's a great image for this fall season of the year.

Can you imagine a farmer saying, "I refuse to scatter any seeds"? It may be safer, less risky, that way. But it's not a great strategy for a bumper crop. If there's no seed planted, there's no chance of any harvest.

In his parable of the sower, Jesus talks about a farmer who plants all kinds of seeds, scattering them abundantly upon the earth. Even in places that don't appear to be very promising.

On stony ground. On hard-packed pathways. On ground that's full of weeds and thorns. The farmer scatters the seed, throwing it everywhere!

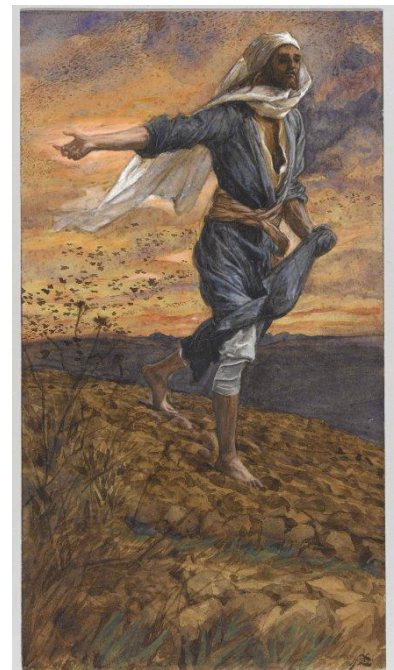
And it's true that some of that seed doesn't amount to much. But, miraculously, some of it *does*! And that's the work of God: scattering seed, enabling it to grow.



In our passage, Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to sow seeds of *generosity*. Their brothers and sisters, far away in Jerusalem, had fallen on hard times and needed assistance. Paul hopes the Corinthians will help.

He asks them to take up a collection, what he calls a bountiful gift (v.5). He wants them to do this voluntarily, not reluctantly or under compulsion.

Their offering will bring a bountiful harvest: hardship relieved, thanksgiving to God! And a change, not only in those receiving the gift, but also in the givers themselves. A kind of blessing that enables us to be more generous with all that God has given.



[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn\\_Museum\\_-\\_The\\_Sower\\_\(Le\\_semeur\)\\_-\\_James\\_Tissot\\_-\\_overall.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn_Museum_-_The_Sower_(Le_semeur)_-_James_Tissot_-_overall.jpg)

Now this is an amazing thing, when you think about it. Because Jerusalem is 3,000 km away from Corinth. And I doubt there were many in the Corinthian congregation who had ever been to Palestine. People there spoke a different language. They were Jewish Christians, not Gentiles. In terms of geography, history and culture they were miles apart.

Some of them might have thought, “Why should we give our hard-earned money to *them*? We have people right here among us who need help. Shouldn’t we look after our own?” Does any of this sound familiar?

When times are tough and finances are tight, we tend to pull in. But the Gospel takes us out of ourselves. It pries us loose from our self-centred ways, and opens us up to the needs of others, near and far. It blesses us with a new heart, and spirit of compassionate care.

So that here, in this passage, we see a bunch of Corinthians on the verge of shipping their worldly wealth to people they’d never met. Kindness shown to *strangers*! All because they’ve come to know the generosity of *God*. And some of that same generosity has rubbed off on them.



Here’s the thing: Generosity builds community. It strengthens relationships. It draws us closer to each other.

When someone shows up here on a Sunday morning with a bag of tomatoes from their garden, or some plums, or apples, or zucchini to share ... doesn’t it strengthen the bond between us? Doesn’t it make us thankful to be part of a caring community? When someone gives you a ride, or drops by for a visit, or takes the time to listen to what’s happening with your life – it strengthens the connection we have with one another. It’s why church is so important, why we value the fellowship of the community of faith.

Today we’re glad to receive some new members into this community. We’re glad to have you, Paul and Phyllis, along with all the gifts you bring. We hope you’ll share them with us, just as we share ours with you. There’s a mutuality in this. A celebration of God’s generous gifting of God’s people. Here, in the church, *all* gifts are valued, and *everyone* has a place.

It doesn’t have to be big and spectacular. Remember the widow’s mite? (Mark 12:41-44) Any gift offered to God in humble gratitude becomes an expression of genuine faith.



Faith draws us out of *ourselves* and builds relationship with *neighbours* near and far. It helped those people in Corinth recognize their kinship with a congregation far away.

This morning Melita introduced our fall “Bucket of Thanks” project. We’re invited to bring simple things like soap, shampoo and toothbrushes to provide relief for people affected by disaster or conflict around the world.



Or consider our Refugee Resettlement Project. A family of five we’ve never met. They had to flee the Democratic Republic of the Congo, like so many, because of political unrest. In South Africa, there’s resentment toward refugees. So they’re not safe there either.

Taking on the responsibility of supporting a family for one year does not come cheap. But God is inviting us to be *generous*. “The one who sows bountifully, will also reap bountifully,” says Paul.

There's a connection between sowing and reaping. It's not a one way street. When we open our lives to *others*, we find that we ourselves are blest. The abundance returns. All our lives are enriched in many different ways.



Of course we *could* keep that seed for ourselves. But Jesus shows us another way. ...

This morning we gather at the communion table. It's a place of sacrifice and love. A place where community is strengthened and relationship restored.



“You know the *generous* act of our Lord Jesus Christ,” writes Paul to the Corinthians, just a few verses earlier. “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Here, at this communion table, we see the generosity of God. A sacrifice of love, a costly gift. Jesus does not hoard the love of God, but comes to share it freely, joyfully, with everyone and all.

And in that generosity there *is* transformation! Having received the gift of God's grace, our lives are being changed. So that *we too* become more gracious, more generous – overflowing even – with the amazing love of Christ.

If you want to reap a bountiful harvest, then you have to sow some seed. What seeds do you hold in your hand? What gifts do you have to share? May our sowing be generous and bountiful! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.