

The Ethics of Giving

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Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church

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Luke 6:37-38

"...for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

All Saints Sunday

Movement 1 – WWJS? (What Would Jesus Say?)

Jesus walks into a church, what would he say? Jesus walks into any church, any place of worship, any Christian gathering place, what would he say? How many times have we considered this possibility in seriousness or in fun? How many times have we gone over such a scenario in our heads and brought others into the perplexing possibilities that such a scene offers? When in the midst of liturgical debate over style and content of worship, when in the midst of ecclesial debate over the form and foundation of the church as an institution more often than not someone seems to reach into the deep corner of his or her rhetorical bag and ask, what would Jesus say if he were to come to worship today? What would Jesus say if he were a member of the church today? Such questions often halts any conversation because it is hypothetical to the depth of which we can only conceive the answers. We don't know what Jesus would say about the music, about the theology, or about the placement of a table in worship, and invariably we would offer answers that would conform to our agenda (as the theologian Tyrell commented, when liberals search for the historical Jesus, they will eventually find themselves looking in a mirror). It is often inappropriate to ask "WWJS" (what would Jesus say) because it does not offer a substantial answer. Yet today I want to ask that very question. Today I want to ask, "WWJS" if he came into church today? What would Jesus say if he came into this church, or another church or any church in the beginning of the 21st century in the United States of America? What would Jesus say?

Let's imagine that Jesus actually walks into worship. No doubt he would show up to worship fifteen minutes early so he can take the necessary time to center, focus, pray, and read over the announcements in the order of worship. No doubt someone would recognize him right away and alert others of the esteemed guest in our midst. I can imagine the scurrying and the worrying that we would all participate in as we get our minds around the reality that Jesus is indeed here. I can imagine the huddle with the organist, with the musicians, with the readers, with the deacons and others as we do everything we can to retool and clean up our worship service so that we show Christ our best. I can imagine someone running out to the Acme grocery store to pick up some more pastries and crackers, and maybe some Kosher food (just in case) and preparing one of the best coffee fellowship times we ever had. We may even put linen on the tables. We would do all that we could to impress Jesus with our charm and friendly nature. We would all say hello, but try not to crowd and overwhelm our Lord and Savior. I would try to offer my best sermon although the alter call would be awkward with Jesus standing right there. How does one call others to Jesus when he is right in front of you? We would be on the edge of our seats, we would be putting our best foot forward, hoping to impress our Lord. After the service, we would hope that Jesus would say in response to the extra effort, to the work and focus we all gave, "you are blessed children of God, and indeed my followers."

But what if Jesus doesn't saying anything except for "thank you," and "could I have another donut?" What if Jesus doesn't offer the reaffirming words that we want to hear, but instead says, "I'll be back next week."? Crap. This means that next week we again have to put our best foot forward, this means that the music again has to be fantastic, that the sermon has to be right on point, and that the fellowship coffee hour needs to again be of the highest quality. We will have a week of lead time to prepare, but will again have to do everything we can to be ready for Christ's literal presence. Again we would do worship extremely well, and again we would wait for the affirming words, the words of blessing, and again Jesus doesn't say much except for "thank you," and "can I have another scone?" and then says, "I'll be back next week." Crap.

Now imagine Jesus doing this week after week. Imagine Jesus coming to worship again and again. Eventually we would stop trying to impress Jesus with our plastered smiles, with our pleasantries and we would start to let our guard down. Eventually we would slip into the status quo, the norm of our style and standard of worship and fellowship (which is a commentary in its own right. Shouldn't we always try to worship as if Jesus were going to be there – shouldn't our worship always be of the highest quality?). Imagine that after a couple of months Jesus starts to become involved with the church, he joins a board, he attends a work day, he goes to meetings, and then starts visiting people at their homes and helps to put together the budget for the next year. Now, instead of just seeing us for an hour and a half on Sunday mornings, Jesus is seeing us outside of worship. Jesus is getting to know us beyond our worshipping, hands flying, voice praising façade. Jesus is getting to know us beyond our coffee and donuts, our music and our liturgy. Jesus is getting to know the ethos of the church, the personality of the church, its strengths and weaknesses. Now let me ask you, after spending months with us, what would Jesus say? What would Jesus say about us as a church?

Imagine this scenario happening in churches across the United States. Imagine pastors across the country bragging, or complaining that Jesus has become a regular member, a regular attendant of worship and the life of the church. What do they hear Jesus saying? What would Jesus say about how we use our resources, about the time we spend in meetings, about the way we give, and the way we pray? What would Jesus say?

Maybe Jesus would criticize the hyper-individualism which is rampant in so many churches. Maybe Jesus would say something about the prevalent attitude in America that one's faith is a personal and private matter. Maybe Jesus would say something about the fractured idea of community that exists in so many churches in our world. Mirsolov Volf writes in his book *After Our Likeness* that the idea of church as a community has been diminished by the ideals of modernity which teaches that the individual is the most important in every situation. He references a study that suggests a majority of Americans going to church are expecting that the church, as an institution, would serve them rather than them serving the church. What would Jesus say to this?

This individualism runs throughout all aspects of the church. We serve on the boards that we feel we want to serve, not where we are called to serve. We go to the church that worships in the way we want to worship, not looking for a community, a spiritual home that strengthens and builds us up as well as offers us somewhere to grow as a Christian. Even our giving reflects our individualism. One article suggests that about 50% of any congregation in the United States does not give to a church or its ministry because they do not care about its growth. Another article suggests that when people give

to missions, it is out of a sense of shame and it is a very small amount (about 2%). (*The Offering-Plate Rules*, syndicated column from Scripps Howard News Service, January 24, 2001; *Who gives Two Cents for Missions? We Do, to Our Shame*, Gene Edward Veith, *World Magazine*, Oct. 22, 2005). What would Jesus say?

What would Jesus say about our prayer life, about our discipleship, about our devotion to the Lord? What would Jesus say to churches in America in this day and age, about who we hope and expect to attract as members, about how people join, and about our expectations that we have of members? What would Jesus say about an institution that in many ways has become a club with rules and expectations for membership? What would Jesus say about our current practices and expectations? What would Jesus say?

Movement 2 – The Standards for Membership

The gospel passage for today in part offers an answer. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus has been walking with his disciples for a while, he has been active in the local synagogue, he has interacted with the Pharisees, he has been involved with the community, has been one of the community. Jesus has begun to make a name for himself amongst the people and just after speaking about the Sabbath, just after healing a great crowd of people Jesus has something to say. In Luke 6, Jesus preaches what many call “the Sermon on the Plain” (similar to “the Sermon on the Mount”) and here Jesus has something to say. Here Jesus is offering something as a corrective to the community. Here Jesus is offering some direction towards how to be the community of God.

He starts by claiming who we should expect to be in our church, our club, the kingdom of God. He starts by listing off those who are blessed by God, those who are going to be the insiders. The poor, the hungry, and the weeping are those who are blessed. The ones whom society assumes that God has forgotten and neglected the ones whom society views as rag-tag and lost are the ones that Jesus claims are blessed. Jesus is reversing the ideals and the expectations of who should be in the church and suggesting that they are the ones we should reach out to first as we look to grow. Imagine a baseball team where the catcher is playing the piano more than he is catching, the right fielders is a know-it-all who likes to offer psychological advice for a minimal fee, the third base player is always a walking dirt pile, the second base player is an emotionally stunted individual who relies on a blanket for support, the shortstop is a dog, and the pitcher is an individual who has no confidence, little sense of hope, and tends to lose his clothes with every line-drive hit (Charlie Brown’s softball team). This is a team that is slated to lose. This is not a team of high powered, high paid players, but according to Christ’s standards, this is the team he would choose. The weak, the hungry, the weeping, and the poor are the ones who are blessed. It is a community of everyone who was picked last for the elementary school kick-ball game. These are the people that Christ brings into the club, the church, the kingdom of God.

Jesus is reversing the standards and the expectations in Luke 6. Jesus is turning around what others would do and expect, and if he were to talk to us, if he had something to say to us, maybe Christ would ask us who we would hope would join the church. Maybe Christ would ask if we would hope that the professor or the student would join, if the executive or the entry-level worker would join, or if the rich or the poor would join. Christ would push and ask who we would hope would join the church, and push our

expectation, reverse our assumptions, and challenging our projections of who would be that good member. Christ reversed our standards for membership.

Movement 3 – The Rules of the Game

Christ reverses the standards for membership and then reverses the standards for living. The reversals don't stop with just who is a part of the church that Jesus calls us to be, but goes on to how we are to be a church. Jesus says in his Sermon on the Plain that we are to love our enemies that we are to bless those who persecute us. We are to loan money to people who will probably not be able to pay us back. We are to give whatever is asked of us. We are to turn the other cheek, to forgive our enemies, and to forgive any debts that are owed to us. We are to be generous to the point that we give an overflowing amount. These are not the standards that we are used to. These are not the patterns of behavior that we expect or teach or practice. Jesus reverses the standards and expectations for how we are to live.

See, in our society and even in the church we are taught to watch out for those who might be against us. We are taught to be cautious around those we do not trust, to be cautious in giving much. We are taught to hesitate with our loans and our gifts. We are taught to raise our fists when attacked. We are taught to save our money and to spend our money on things that would add to our own life. These are the rules of our lives, of our churches, that we all live by. These are the rules we are taught, and what does Jesus say? What does Jesus say to our standards, our expectations and our practices? What does Jesus say to the way we live? He reverses all that we have been taught, he reverses all that we have been programmed to do and think. It is like going to England and driving on the left side of the road, it feels awkward, it feels weird and different. This isn't what we expect. Rick Warren made a bundle with his books, is leading a large church (Saddleback) and by all standards is doing well. We would expect that he would be investing and saving and looking for more and more ways to grow, but instead he has been taking 90% of what he makes and donates it towards poverty and AIDS advocacy in Africa, the United States and across the world. This is backwards, a reverse and not what we would expect.

When men join *Fight Club* (the movie and the book), they are given a set of standards a set of rules and a lifestyle to live. They are called to live this different way of life. When we join the church of Jesus Christ, we are given a new set of rules, a new way to live and they are not rules we would expect. Jesus reverses the rules, the standards and the expectations of what it means to be a part of the church.

Movement 4 – It's Not Just Me and Jesus

Jesus helps to recreate the community. Jesus comes and is with the people and calls them to a standard and an ethic that goes deeper than what has been and continues to be. Jesus calls us to be a new creation individually and as a community. Jesus calls us to be new as a church and a community.

Our worship may be fine. Our bible studies may be fine. Our fellowship may be fine, but Christ is calling us to be more than we are as a community. The first thing we need to do is to see things the way Jesus is calling us to see. No longer are we to look around and see friends and enemies. No longer are we to look around and see other individuals in a place and time. No longer are we to look around and see people based on

economic status, political leanings, race, gender or any other boundary or human limitation placed upon others. No, instead we are to look and see people as children of God. Martin Buber describes the relational change as moving from an *I-It*, an objective relationship that someone would have a piece of furniture, but instead an *I-Thou*, a relationship that is reciprocal, that is a give and take between two individuals. No longer do we see people as “us and them,” but all as people, as children of the Lord. Look around this space and notice the people around you, this is your family, these are your brothers and sisters, and we are a portion of the family of God. It is not just me and Jesus. It is not just you and Jesus, but all of us, a community, and a church gathered and called by Christ to be a community. We are a community that forgives and gives, that loves and works to live. We are a community that is formed and gathered by Christ.

Walter Rauschenbusch was a young German Baptist pastor when he went to serve the Second German Baptist Church in New York’s *Hell’s Kitchen*. He came out of a comfortable life that was focused on the individual’s relationship with God but not much else. He did not think much about the community, the society and the way the church could be a community interacting with society. Yet in *Hell’s Kitchen* he saw families living in abject poverty, families struggling to find enough food to survive, taken advantage of by factories, corporations, powers and principalities. Rauschenbusch was awakened and called the church to look at the people within its borders, its walls and to care for the people. The church was to reject the standards and the practices of the world, to reject the powers, the structures, and the expectations and to take seriously the standards of Christ as revealed through the gospels. The church was not about one’s relationship with Jesus, but how that relationship drove and affected one’s relationship with the rest of the world.

Remember the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* the way George acted when he was given his “second chance” with life. He saw his relationships, his friends, his family members in new ways. His eyes were opened to those around him who were precious, to those that he cared for. He was given new eyes to his wonderful life. Christ is giving us new eyes to our wonderful church. These are eyes that look to the Lord, eyes that look up at God, but eyes at the same time that look to those around us, our brothers and sisters sitting next to us, before us and behind us. These are eyes that look to the cross, and are drawn up the vertical to God and across the horizontal to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are drawn to an ethics of relationships, to a community focused on God and our neighbor. What would Jesus say to the church but that we are a family and we are to take care of each other. We are given new eyes through which we can see the church.

Movement 5 – Growing into our Relationship

We are called to live into our relationships. We are called to live into this community that Christ has called us to be; this community of backwards expectations and understandings. We are called to live into our relationships with others and with God. Volf describes this as moving from living as individuals to living as people who understand the relational nature of God and the relational nature of the church. We are no longer individuals but people called and blessed by God. It is an ethic that we are called to live that challenges us to look to others and to God in all that we do. We don’t make decisions based on what we want, or what we think might be best, but on what God wants and how we can help out others.

In the movie *Mary Poppins*, the title character takes the children to see their father at work. He is a banker who believes that the purpose of money is to earn it and save it. Yet Mary Poppins offers a different ethic and way to think about money. Mary Poppins suggests in her subtle way that perhaps the best thing to do would be to offer the coin to the man on the steps selling food to feed the pigeons in order that he might make enough to eat. Mary Poppins is challenging the boy and girl, and the father, to consider the relationships they have with people around them and how they can live into those relationships in a generous way. It is a different ethic of living and of giving.

The saints of our tradition, the ones in the church who sacrificed much, who have guided us, taught us and led us in our own faith lived with the ethic that Christ calls us to live. They did not look towards their own fame or success, but to doing the will of God and helping others. These were people with their own faults, with their own failings and shortcomings, and yet they were people who were generous with their lives. They lived by Christ's ethic of relational giving and living.

We are given a new ethic to life and living. We are called to consider our relationships when giving. Christ calls us to be generous to a point when our generosity is overflowing, but not out of a sense of obligation, but out of a desire to love our Lord and our neighbor. We are called to be generous in response to the generosity we have received from the Lord. We have been given so much from God, and it is only right that we return what we have received. The call to give is in the relational context of the sermon on the plain.

So this ethical giving is one that gives in response to the action of the Lord and the love we have of our brothers and sisters. We give because we have received much from the Lord. We give not certain, specific amount, but what we feel called to give in response to the grace we have received. We give because we trust that God will stay with us and lead us to live a full life. We give because it is the way we start to love our neighbors. We give because we believe seriously in spreading the love of the Lord. Ethical giving in the church, in the kingdom of God is not one that brags or offers shame. It is not giving that declares amounts are important, but giving that is from the heart, moved by prayer and focused on one's relationship with God and with God's ministry in the church and the world.

We don't stop with giving as we live into our relationships, but it is a start. We start with giving, with forgiving and with loving and follow the leading of the Lord.

Movement 6 – The Fruit-stand Church

What would Jesus say to our church? What would Jesus say to our church if we were to take seriously the words he offered on the plain? What would Jesus say to our church if we were to forgive others, their sins and their debts? What would Jesus say if we were to look at building and developing our relationship with God through prayer, scripture reading, and study? What would Jesus say to the church if we were to focus on our relationships with others; others who are within the church and those who are outside of the church? What would Jesus say to the church if we were to give our gifts, our time, all that we are to God in response to the blessings we have received from the Lord, trusting that with our Lord all would be well? What would Jesus say to that church?

He would point out the fruit that we would bear. He would point out the fruit of reconciled relationships, of new relationships with the Lord. He would point out the fruits

of mature Christians gathering together to worship and to follow the Lord. He would point out the fruits of abundance that we all enjoy. He would celebrate the fruits of our community.

What does Jesus say? He calls us to follow him. He calls us to follow him to becoming this community, this church that is beyond the norm of what is expected. He calls us to follow him to becoming this community that looks to give and forgive. He calls us to follow him to living into the people that we have been called to be. Decide to follow Jesus with your heart and your life, and we will bear fruit for the Lord.

AMEN