November 12, 2017   
Genesis 12:1-2   
Why Generosity?

Rev. Kerry Smith   
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Genesis 12:1-2 New Revised Standard Version

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

A few years ago we got a dog. Now, I have never had a dog before, growing up we had birds and cats and fish, but never a dog. Now, we have a dog. Her name is Lily and she is a runner. If the front door is open, Lily the dog is going to run through it as fast as she can. The good news is that when Lily runs, she always goes to the same place. She goes to visit her friend Roy. Roy is a dog who lives a few doors down and it just so happens that the gate to Roy’s back fence is a little short and our dog Lily can crawl under the fence and go into Roy’s back yard and play. But, something tragic has happened. Earlier this summer Roy’s parents moved to Murphy. So, when our new neighbors moved in, we knocked on their front door and introduced them to our dog Lily who would probably be visiting their backyard soon. For many months Lily has not escaped, but this week she was quicker than I was and she bolted out the front door. She did the same thing that she always does, she visited her friend Roy’s backyard, but Roy wasn’t there. Lily hasn’t figured out that Roy has moved away. Lily did the same thing that she always did and expected the same results, but she was disappointed.

Doing the same thing we always do and expecting the same results. What do we do when we are living life and we are doing what we have always done, and we aren’t feeling the way we have always felt? There are some folks who have always dreamed about being a teacher and when they finally become a teacher they realize that it isn’t a good fit for them. Over time we get busy and we lose touch with why we wanted to do something in the first place. We have this tendency to get so wrapped in moving forward, in achieving, in doing what we said we would do, that when we arrive we realize that we forgot the why that motivated us in the first place. We can get so wrapped up in what we are doing that we forget why we are doing it.

In the scripture that we read today, God calls Abram (this is before his name change to Abraham). I have been teaching Confirmation to our amazing 6th graders and we have been talking about how Abraham is seen as the founding father of three different faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham is a stand in for all the people of God that would come after him. God calls Abram and God blessed Abram. In that blessing God gives Abram his why. God wants Abram to go to that land that God will show Abram. God promises to make of Abram a great nation and to bless Abram and to make Abram’s name great, so that - and here is the why – so that Abram will be a blessing. God blesses Abram so that Abram will be a blessing, and that is what God does for us.

Have you heard that before? Blessed to be a blessing. That is the why. We are blessed so we can be a blessing for others. That is the reason you have been placed where you are right now. That is the reason that you are connected to the people you are connected to and that is the reason that you have been given responsibility over what you have responsibility for. God has blessed you to be a blessing to others. That is why generosity isn’t optional. Generosity is the practice that helps us live into our why. When we are generous, we are doing what we are called to do, we are doing our why.

We know some certain truths about money. We know that we don’t get to take it with us when we die. We know that less is more. We know that giving is good. We know that the love of money is the root of all evil. But money is hard. Jesus talks more about money than any other subject besides the Kingdom of God. One third of Jesus’ parables are about money. Why? I think it is because we struggle with our spending habits more than we struggle with loving those around us. And loving those around us is pretty hard! I know many folks who love others unconditionally but are either living paycheck to paycheck or are in debt. A large percentage of us struggle with how to handle money. As with most things in life, balance is key. Don’t spend it all, and don’t hoard it all away. As John Wesley said, “earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can.”

Paul quotes Jesus at the end of Acts 20:35, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” I know this. I know that God has blessed me to be a blessing. I know that it is more blessed to give than to receive, but I fight against this. I try to ignore this. I like to get stuff. I like to have things and more things. I like to do things and go places. I have to be reminded over and over and over again of this very simple truth that giving is better than receiving. That giving is good. That this is how we are created.

Giving makes us happy. Brain researchers have found that when you get things, nothing happens. When you give things to others, synapses in your brain fire and oxytocin is released. When you give it makes you want to give more, it is addictive. We were created to give; it is our why. Giving makes us happy. We are hardwired to be generous people. John Wesley had humble beginnings but his income eventually reached 1,400 pounds per year. In today’s dollars, that is about $300,000 a year. John Wesley was disciplined and he lived on 30 pounds of the 1,400 pounds he earned every year. He gave away 98% of all that he earned and lived on just 2% of his earnings.

There was a father who gave his little girl two dollars and told her that she could do anything she wanted with one of the dollars, but the other dollar belonged to God. The little girl ran to the candy store, but on the way she tripped and one dollar fell into the storm drain. She got up and said, “Well, Lord, there goes your dollar.”

It wasn’t until I took a Crown financial class that I opened myself up to the idea that everything that I have is God’s. I am the steward of the money and resources that God has given me. It is all God’s, not just the 10% that we give to this church. It reminds me of Jesus’ words to the man who was worried about how to inherit eternal life. The man said that he followed all of the commandments since his youth. The Bible says, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Mark 10:21). The man was shocked and dismayed when Jesus said this and he went away saddened because he had many possessions. The man couldn’t sell what he owned and give it to the poor. The weight of his possessions held him down. Stuff can weigh us down, too, because the more we have, the more we have to give up when God calls us. Generosity, giving, frees us up.

It isn’t our possessions that change the world. It isn’t our house or car or 401K that transform people’s lives. Yesterday as we celebrated the veterans in our lives, I saw people. I saw pictures of dads and moms, brothers and sisters, grandfathers and grandmothers who served in the armed forces. I saw men and women who stood up and said that they wanted to help, they wanted to be a part of something larger than themselves. They realized that they were the ones who were called to make a difference, they were the ones to fight for freedom.

We were created to make a difference, to change our family, our neighborhood, our block, our city, our world. That is why God made us. Do you remember the parable Jesus tells about the man going on a trip (Matthew 25:14-30)? The man calls his servants together and the first person receives five coins, the next person receives two coins, the next person one coin. The person who received five gained five more, the person who received two gained two more, the person with one coin buries it in the ground. The man returns from his trip and asks what happened to the coins. To the person he gave five coins he says well done, to the person he gave two coins he says well done, the person he gave one coin says, “I was afraid,” and he gives the coin back to the master. The master is not pleased.

God wants to know what we did with what we have been given. Did we bury it because we were afraid? Did we bless other people? If we can let go of our fear, if we can open ourselves up to be who we were called to be, then we will see that giving leads to impact.

Today we are celebrating the 76th birthday of this church. This is a church that met for the first time one month before Pearl Harbor. This is a church that raised money all during World War II so they could break ground on this church. This is a church that has seen its neighborhood change and through all of it this church has opened its doors to Boy Scout troops, to 12-step groups, to anyone that needed a space place. I remember going to a La Leche meeting here while I was on maternity leave. This is a church that has always realized that Christians are called to be a light on the hill, the light that shines in the darkness. We are called to be a people of hope.

How do you try and make a difference? How do you make an impact on the people who are in your path? May we remember our why as a people and as a church. May we remember that we are blessed to be a blessing. Generosity matters. Thanks be to God, Amen.