

Legacy Sermon Series
“A Generous Church”
2 Corinthians 9:6-16, Luke 6:37-38
Rev. Joy Laughridge
September 4, 2022

Since the beginning of this year, we’ve been talking about the fact that this is our church’s 70th year in ministry, and next Sunday is the day that we’ve planned for the big celebration. I’m thankful to all the people that have been working hard on the planning and preparation- especially Diana Quinlan who got a group together and has been coordinating and delegating – and next week is going to be special. Old friends and pastors will be here. There will be food and photos. Tony has special music planned for the worship service. It’s going to a great day.

Birthdays, anniversaries, and even days that mark new beginnings like the first day of school or New Year’s Day, are often times when we naturally feel reflective – when we tend to look back at where we’ve been, and we may feel a little extra motivation and inspiration to set new goals or make changes that will help us create the future we envision for ourselves. As we celebrate our church’s anniversary this month, we may naturally find ourselves in that kind of mind space, and if we aren’t naturally feeling reflective about where we’ve been and where we’re going, then the sermon series that we are starting today is intended to help us do some of that kind of reflecting about our past, and present, and future. The series is called *Legacy: Grateful for the Past and Growing for the Future*. In this series we’re going to do some looking back- at our story and our ministry and the things that Lakewood has done well over the years. It’s important to look back, but as we do, it’s important also to remember that our reason for looking back isn’t just to revel in or romanticize the past or to figure out how to recreate it. Our reason for looking back is to find inspiration and encouragement to do and be the church that God is leading us to be *today*. In looking back, we are reminded that God has been faithful which inspires us to trust that God is and will remain faithful to us still. We are also reminded that our spiritual family has been faithful, and we are inspired by their faithfulness to be faithful ourselves and to carry on their legacy.

When I talk about carrying on a legacy or when we think about the Lakewood legacy, different things might come to mind for different people, but I think that there are some characteristics and values that each generation in this church have lived out that have defined Lakewood over the years. In this series we will be looking at 4 of them, and as we think about growing for the future, I know we probably think first about numerical growth, but my sense is that the Lord wants to challenge us to prioritize the *spiritual* growth that produces the spiritual *fruit* that will sustain the spiritual *strengths* of the Lakewood legacy. If we want our church to continue to bear witness to Jesus and the gospel today and for years to come, tending to our spiritual growth is essential. I would even suggest that we can’t expect sustainable numerical growth without spiritual growth and health. The four characteristics that I have identified and would consider aspects of the LPC legacy that we will be looking at in this series are generosity, faithful leadership, caring community, and worship. Today we are starting with generosity which has been a hallmark trait of the people of this church from the very beginning.

If we go back a little further than 70 years to 1951, that is when the Lakewood story begins. The good Presbyterians in Jacksonville saw that the city was growing and saw that the time was right for church planting. In the Inquirer’s class when I talk about Lakewood’s history, I usually tell the story that Jim Bier told me about his father and one of Lakewood’s founding members, John Bier. When the people from the Presbytery showed up with their clip boards to survey the neighborhood to see who would be interested in getting a new church started, they met John Bier over on Duke Road. When he found out what they were doing, he took the clip board and said, “I’ll take it from here.” As it turned out, there was a group that was interested in getting a new church started, and they needed a place to meet, and the

meeting place was provided through the generosity of the Bier and Graham, and Gilliland families. They opened up their homes, and I think one family's home was used as the adult meeting space and one was used for the children. There are other stories about the generosity of those founding members of Lakewood. Most of them I heard from Jim Bier about his father – who gave money for Charles Benz to buy the first church Bible and who donated the table that is in the prayer room for church use. I'm sure others made similar contributions in those early days, and throughout the years, the members of this church have freely given to help build the buildings, to financially support the pastors and staff, and to fund all kinds of mission and ministry.

One of the most recent examples of this church carrying on the legacy of generosity was just about a year ago. We let you know that there were some expensive repairs and maintenance projects that needed to be done around the campus– a new roof on the education building and re-finishing and re-sealing all of these sanctuary windows were two of the most costly projects. At a congregational meeting the session asked you to approve taking out a loan, but within about a month's time, you had given or pledged to give what was needed so that taking a loan wasn't necessary. For various reasons some of the projects have not been completed as quickly as you came through with the giving, but your Session and leadership are trying to be good stewards and get things done as soon as we can. The point, though, is that when we look back, even in our very recent history, we can see that generosity is part of the Lakewood legacy.

Over the years, as the members of this congregation have been generous with financial and material resources, we have been doing something that Christians have been doing since the very earliest days of the church. The early church was known for being a community that shared their personal possessions, and property, and money with each other to ensure that no one went without the things they needed. We read about that in Acts, and in the passage that we read this morning from 2 Corinthians, Paul was urging the Corinthians to give generously because there was an offering that was being collected for the poor in the church in Jerusalem. The Corinthian church had expressed an eagerness about giving early on, but Paul seems to have become concerned that their zeal for contributing to the collection was fading. From what Paul says in chapter 8, you get the idea that they may have been starting to worry – as we sometimes do – that if they gave generously to the poor in Jerusalem, that they would end up without enough for themselves. Paul emphasizes to them that the amount of their gifts is not as important as their willingness to give, and he also reminds them he isn't urging them to give because he wants to see them suffer. He says in chapter 8 starting at verse 13, ***“Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality...”*** Then he quotes Scripture to them, Exodus 16:18, which references how God provided manna and quail equally for all of the Israelites in the wilderness. By quoting Scripture he was teaching them that it wasn't just Paul's idea to make sure that everyone had what they needed. It was God's idea. ***“It is written,”*** he says, ***“The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”*** He continues to encourage them, telling them that Titus and his companions will be coming soon to collect their gift, and in the verses we read this morning he tells them that the result of their generosity three things will happen. They will be enriched and blessed. Others will give thanks to God, and God will be glorified.

Over the years at Lakewood, I think that we have seen that what Paul says is true. Cheerful and liberal giving that isn't motivated by pride or out of fear but offered as a grateful response to God's kindness and generosity has resulted in the givers being blessed and enriched. I'm sure there are many church members from the past and present who could tell the stories of how they have experienced God's blessing in all kinds of ways through their giving. Maybe we'll get to hear some of those testimonies during stewardship season. I know, also, that people have given thanks to God because they have witnessed or benefitted from the generosity of this congregation. When I am able to offer some help to a family or an

individual with money from the Good Samaritan fund, I get to see people's relief and gratitude. This sanctuary that was built and is maintained through your generosity has been a place for generations of people in this community to hear God's word proclaimed, to rest in God's comforting presence, to meet God in worship. The education building has been a place for children and adults to receive a Christian education and has provided a caring and Christ-centered preschool that has supported parents and families for years. All of this ministry, built through generosity, has resulted in countless expressions of thanksgiving and glory to God.

We have considered the past, but now let's shift our thoughts to today and the ministry that lies ahead of us. Clearly, being generous with our financial and material resources is important if we want to go on having a vital ministry. Financial giving ensures that we go on having a physical presence. It supports pastors and staff who can equip the congregation and provide vision and leadership. It supports mission and ministry. When people stop being generous and stop giving, the ministry that congregations are able to do begins to diminish. That is a reality, but generosity that will sustain our witness and ministry, isn't only about giving money or even our time and talents. There is another kind of generosity that draws people in. That makes others feel safe and cared for. It's a kind of generosity that doesn't build buildings but builds and nurtures that relationships that sustain and can grow a church, and it's a kind of generosity that is desperately needed in our culture today. It's the kind of generosity that Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading today.

Do not judge and you will not be judged, he says. When we hear that we may tend to think about judging people's moral decisions, but Jesus seems to be talking about something more than withholding judgement about other people's moral decisions. There are lots of ways that we tend to judge people when we could be much more generous. I listened to a devotional this week and the speaker was talking about this phenomenon. I think there was a name for it, but basically when we look at others and what we perceive to be their faults, we tend to go straight to criticism, but when we consider our own faults we are much quicker to justify ourselves. So if someone cuts you off in traffic, you might go straight to the judgement- they cut me off in traffic because they are a mean, self-centered jerk. That could be, but maybe they are coming home from the doctor where they received a bad diagnosis and they are a little distracted. Maybe they just made a mistake and didn't mean to. In the church, maybe a change is made, and instead of assuming that someone thought about it and intended the change for good, we sometimes have a tendency to assume the worst. The pastor changed the red carpet because she hates people who like red! That is not generosity! It's the kind of judgement that Jesus warns against, and it is destructive to relationships and community. It's destructive to the kind of community and relationships that we want to be growing and nurturing as a church- with each other and with new people that we want to welcome in. The kind of generosity that will sustain and strengthen our church is a kind of generosity that leads us to think the best of others first. It doesn't make assumptions or quick judgements about the motivations behind other people's actions. It takes in people who may look different, or who have different views than our own, and it says there is room for all of us and despite our differences, we can care for each other, and build each other up, and work together, and forgive quickly and easily if we do run into a conflict or problem. This is the kind of generosity that Jesus was talking about, and we need to practice it.

It's easy to celebrate generosity as a virtue and to affirm that it's a good thing and that we want to be generous in all the ways that God would have us to be, but Paul's concern about the Corinthians losing their zeal is a reminder that while it can be fun to be generous, there are times when it can hurt a little because it requires a little sacrifice or requires us to trust more deeply in God and God's promises than on what we can see with our eyes. There are times when we may lose our zeal and our concern for ourselves begins to overshadow our concern for others. Jesus is patient with us in our weakness, but he also wants to help us and strengthen us to do those life-giving things that we find it hard to do. At his table this morning, he promises to meet us. There we are reminded of the extraordinary generosity that

he has shown to us, and that is where we find inspiration and motivation to be generous and to give out of what we have received. Even more, though, Jesus gives us himself – his life, his strength, and his grace as we are joined to him through the sacrament. Today he is with us and speaks to us saying that through him not only can we carry on a legacy of generosity, but we can grow and become even more generous in even more ways that will further God’s purposes. Hallelujah! Amen.