

Good morning and welcome to the Creek! We are very excited to be able to come together and worship God with you this morning - wherever you are at today. It dawned on me while I was preparing this message that although many of you may feel awkward worshipping from home, watching church on your TV - pause for a minute and let this sink in: I am sitting in my living room, watching *myself* on TV. Talk about awkward!

Will you pray with me?

This morning is significant in a few different ways: one is that today begins Holy Week, the week that leads us into Good Friday and then into celebrating Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning. This is certainly one of the most exciting holiday seasons for anyone who is a Christian.

This Sunday also concludes our messages unpacking the Creek's mission, vision, and priorities. Over the last many weeks, we have talked about what it means for us to be "for the 317." We even painted our yards with signs that said "more than a zip code," and we saw those signs met with both excitement and confusion. Folks talked about them online, trying to figure out if they were a new neighborhood crime stopping plan or political propaganda - but many simply recognized a church challenging us to live up to what we profess. Accountability is a powerful thing and placing one of these signs in our yards help us realize that *others notice*.

Over these weeks we talked about the mission of the Creek being to love God, love people and to make disciples. Pulling from scripture, we see Jesus doing these very things, and it stands to reason that we, as his church, need to follow his example.

And finally, we have talked through six of the seven priorities that will be both the tools and the byproduct of loving God, loving people and making disciples. So far, we have looked at worship, gospel, kingdom, scripture, identity, and community. Today, we talk about our final priority - not the lowest priority, simply the last in our list - generosity.

We express the priority of generosity as this: "We share our resources to enrich others and advance God's kingdom." The mantra for this priority is simply, "it is more blessed to give," which comes straight from Scripture: "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" - Acts 20:35.

Now we have it: our final priority as we chase the vision of the Creek, generosity. It's that simple - it is more blessed to give - and when we give, it enriches other's lives and advances God's kingdom. It's a win-win. Drop the mic, race to the restaurant for lunch, it's a wrap.

But is it really that easy? Is it really that simple?

Are you familiar with the name Tony Dungy? Tony was an NFL player turned coach who led the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and then the Indianapolis Colts. He was known for his care for the players and commitment to the team as a whole. He has gone on to start a ministry called "All Pro Dads," he's written a couple books, been inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame - he's sort of a big deal. He coached the Colts from 2002 through 2008, and in 2006 he led the Colts to their only Superbowl Championship since they've been in Indianapolis - they beat the Chicago Bears in Superbowl 41. As a long time Minnesota Vikings fan, I would like to join you for a moment and let those last beautiful words sink in - *the Colts beat the Bears*. Tony put together a team that was able to work together to achieve greatness, and they did! They won the Superbowl, one of the most coveted trophies in sports. Tony is famous for being a great coach, and his performance has been judged by the criteria of helping a team perform at its best - and that success was been achieved by helping the individual team

members achieve their best. Tony would not have been able to win any of these games by himself, but he led individuals to greatness and through their greatness, the Colts became champions.

In very much the same tone, that is what the leadership of the Creek is working to do with our mission, vision and priorities. These are a filter we will use to determine what things we, as a church, should do to impact our community for the advancement of the kingdom of God - but the way the Creek will achieve this mission, vision and priorities is by helping each of us make these priorities in our *own* lives. If success was based on the overall image of the Creek, I think we can grade our effectiveness of generosity pretty well.

Marci, my wife, and I have attended the Creek for many years. I remember sitting in the Family Life Center, many years ago - when it was being used the worship center - and celebrating the fact that lots of volunteers had physically built most of that addition and how there was a little money still owed for it. In the sermon that morning, we were challenged to make an offering that got us out of our comfort zone and that would bless the efforts of the Creek to grown and reach our community. These tubs were placed near the platform and everyone went and placed their offering in those tubs, and by the end of the service, enough money had been collected to pay off the addition. I remember Marci and I looking at each other and being awestruck by the generosity of this church - I had never experienced something like that.

Years later I remember sitting in the worship center, listening to a message about being generous, and that sometime in that message we passed around Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets for a special offering - those buckets came right onto the stage and those funds were handed directly to couple families going through a difficult financial struggle. I remember looking at Marci and being awestruck by our church's generosity, and I'll never forget the look of affirmation on the faces of those who received that blessing.

That message became the foundation for the Generous Ministry of the Creek. The feedback the Creek received from those who received help that week and the feedback received from those who were able to give to those families was incredible. It was so impactful on both fronts that we started our Generous Ministry, a ministry where someone facing a financial valley can apply for assistance and funds that are collected, above and beyond our regular offerings, go straight to the hands of those caught in that valley.

The Generous Ministry started in April 2010 and has blessed individuals and families to the tune of 2.2 million dollars in nearly ten years. Can you stop for a minute and recognize the amount of financial relief that has been felt by your generosity?

When it comes to general offering, the Creek believes so much in being faithful with the financial resources we receive that 13% of every offering goes to support missions locally and globally. That means that for every dollar that comes into the building, 13 cents go to support missionaries and missions' organizations to provide resources for individuals living in and around the communities we are supporting - your generosity is making a difference all around the world!

Each week the Creek collects non-perishable food in the orange bags that belong to our Generous Ministry. Someone coming to church picks up a bag, they take the bag and fill it with food and return it to a collection bin, then families come in and sort the food, separate it and are able to take food home to help make ends meet in the homes of those who are a part of the co-op program.

Every year the students of the Creek collect all sorts of items to help fellow students, many of whom they will never meet. They collect school supplies for School 15 downtown and the Perry Meridian Middle School, snacks are packed for schools to share during I-step testing, school uniforms have been collected, Kidustrial Park supports two children, Stacy and Messy, from Kenya, backpacks are filled, school supplies are collected - our students are generous.

During the pandemic we find ourselves in, the Creek has been challenged to double the amount of food we are collecting for the co-op program and make these resources available to many more in our community who are being hit by financial challenges that we are facing as a community, because of this ugly virus - and we have *more* than doubled our food collection.

When we give it enriches lives and advances God's kingdom, and we are blessed to be part of generous church community here at the Creek.

Recognizing all that we have done as a congregation is a great reminder of the wonderful church I get to serve in. It is humbling to walk alongside such caring individuals. But it made me wonder: if we are such a generous church, why has our generosity not been a more permanent solution for our community's challenges, for the world's challenges? I think God led me to an answer, and the answer to this dilemma is simple one. The answer is *me*.

The answer is me, because sometimes - actually many times - my generosity comes from habit or convenience. My generosity comes when each Sunday I am reminded that one way for me to worship God is to offer my tithe to Him. My generosity comes when I am reminded of the good that comes from dropping a dollar into the orange bucket. I am generous when a student sends me a support letter asking to partner with them in a trip. I am generous when the Creek is collecting Christmas presents for kids, or school supplies, or non-perishable food - it is possible for me to be generous and leave God out of it completely, even though what He wants most is to be on this journey with me.

I can take this dilemma to a whole new level when I bring up the fact that there are weeks I don't have the financial resources to give anything, let alone something above our tithe. What do I do then? To be completely transparent, I hope, or maybe I just assume, that someone else will take care of it. What do you do those weeks?

Will you turn with me to Luke 10: 25? This is a passage many of us have read before, and it's long, so I want to go through it pretty quick. Starting in verse 25 it says:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

Up to this point, this story and this conversation has nothing to do with generosity, but has everything to do with having a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ. The question has to do with inheriting eternal life, and the answer has to do with loving God and loving others - that sounds familiar, doesn't it? Jesus tells the expert in the law, "do this and you will live." Then the expert asks the question that blows the roof off the explanation; the story continues with:

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Now Jesus is able to get to the heart of the question - Jesus is going to make this "expert in the law" forget about the law and begin to understand the motives *behind* the law.

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But

a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus takes this opportunity to teach someone what it takes to have a personal relationship with God. A personal relationship is so much more than following rules and laws, and as a matter of fact, in this example, Jesus describes someone going outside the norm to demonstrate how to have a relationship with God.

In this story, not only is someone in need, but others that have the opportunity to help decide to continue their journey - they decide that whatever it is they are going to do is more important than recognizing the needs of someone else. When someone *does* stop, it's not just a stranger, it is an enemy. The concept of there being a "good Samaritan" was nowhere in the minds of Jesus' audience; in their minds all Samaritans were enemies - certainly not the type of people that would stop and help.

Yet Jesus uses a Samaritan as an example of someone who recognized that another is in need, who took time out of their journey to help someone else, who took money out of their pocket to help someone else, and who used their own donkey to get the person to help and agreed to follow up in the event they had more needs - does anyone get more generous than that?

As Jesus finishes his story, he answers the question "how do I inherit eternal life?" by telling a Jew to go be just like a Samaritan - and not just any Samaritan, a *good* Samaritan.

Jesus uses a story like this to get our attention and to make us think. This story certainly has something to do with loving our neighbors; it has to do with being compassionate; it certainly points out being generous with our time, talents and treasures; it says a lot about our personal relationship with Jesus. Having a personal relationship with Jesus is so much more than being generous at church - it has to do with walking with him so much so that when he challenges you to be generous, you recognize his voice. Jesus strengthens his church when he strengthens the individuals in it. The vision of the Creek, the mission, and these priorities are going to make the biggest impact on the Creek's community when we are striving to understand and live them as individuals - then we come together as a church community and bam - all the sudden we are a church who is "For the 317!"

"It is more blessed to give" - those words from the book of Acts are credited to Jesus himself. Acts 20:35 says, "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

I am certainly not going to dispute the words of Luke, the author of Acts, in this passage, but I am going to point out that (at least in my Bible) other than here, these words are not quoted from Jesus. It sounds like something Jesus would say, and I certainly see Jesus living a lifestyle that demonstrates this truth, but is there significance in these words not being recorded in the gospels?

I think there are two solid responses to this idea. One is that the book of John ends by pointing out that everything Jesus did is *not* captured in Scripture. John says that if everything he did was written down, we couldn't store that book anywhere because it would be so large.

The other idea that makes sense to me is that we are to learn from Jesus' actions and teaching instead of him just spoon-feeding instructions to us.

I have had the honor of going to Zambia twice, and it was the generosity of my daughter that took me there. She was in high school when she traveled there with a high school group - after coming back, she and a friend discovered they had more orphans in that community than orphanages, so they committed to raise funds for three orphanages and a water tower. Over the course of the next three years, I learned a lot about orphans, Zambia, and fundraising. To spoil the surprise, the girls worked with a number of others to raise over \$350,000 and build the homes in Zambia. I was privileged to go break ground on the first house and back to paint the last one. What I learned from my daughter's generosity was incredible, and it has changed my life forever - but my biggest lesson came from the kids I met there, and from the adults who cared for them.

When I have been there, whether doing a VBS with the kids and singing Bible songs or having a meal around a table or traveling eight hours in a van made for seven folks but with thirteen in it - I have experienced a closeness to God that is overwhelming. I have experienced a desire to live in a deprived area because of this presence of God, and I believe it comes because they, unlike us, have to depend on God for *all* they have. They have experienced the presence of God through people who demonstrate their love for them by caring for them and for providing for their needs, because those individuals have been challenged by God to care for them. Jesus points this out in a story from the book of Luke, chapter 21:

“As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘I tell you the truth,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’”

Could it be that she experienced the truth “it is more blessed to give” because from that day forward she learned to trust in God for what she would eat, what she would wear, where she would live - I can't help but wonder if those beautiful people in Zambia understand Jesus in a way I never will be able to.

The gift this woman received is a level of faith that few people achieve. We don't achieve this level of faith because we don't fully give ourselves over to him. The gospel of Matthew tells us where our treasures should lie: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

I'm fearful that many of us are so busy storing up treasures on earth, or saving for retirement, or saving in our emergency fund that we miss opportunities to store up treasures in heaven by really experiencing Jesus Christ.

And this message isn't all about giving money away - being generous is so much more than giving money to someone or something. Being generous is a characteristic of our heart that listens to Jesus and responds to his nudging. It can come in big financial donations or it can come in the form of a card or a text to someone who God lays on your heart. It's about spending time with him so we recognize his voice when he calls us.

In 2019, the average college student graduated with just over \$35,000 of student loan debt. I know a student who interned at a church for a season; part of that internship was being housed by a member of the church. When his internship was over, and it was time to graduate and get a job, the host family made one last offer - if he got a job where he was close enough to continue to live there, he could stay until his student loans were paid off - he lived rent free until he was debt free. The gift they offered him was so much more than free rent; it was financial freedom so that he could serve God wherever God called him - without financial restrictions. Can you imagine that gift? It didn't cost them much, but they heard God's voice and responded - *that* is generosity.

There is one last bible story I would like to look at before we go back into worshipping God. It's a great story from the book of John when Jesus performs a miracle beyond our imagination. Jesus is with a large crowd and he is teaching them; eventually he escapes away from the crowd with his disciples, but the crowd finds him and begins to gather around again. When Jesus recognizes they are gathering around, he asks one of the disciples where they are going to get enough food for all these people. There are five thousand men, not including women and children - *this* is a crowd. The disciples are stumped; they have no idea how they are going to get enough food to feed all these people. I envision them all staring back at Jesus, hoping they are not the one he asks more questions of. But Jesus already knows what he'll do. Jesus has a plan and because he is God in the flesh, he could just feed them - but Jesus doesn't *just* feed them. The amazing part of this story is that he chose to use a young boy, who gives him five loaves and two fish - to feed five thousand. Jesus didn't need to use the boy's fishes and loaves, but Jesus *chose* to use this boy in this story - and here we are, talking about him more than 2,000 years later.

So where is Jesus calling you to be generous? What is he challenging you to do, especially in the midst of this pandemic that has our whole country standing still?

Jesus knows what he'll do - and he doesn't need any of us to do incredible things with this story, but he chooses to - and we don't know where he will use us. We don't know what part of our generosity he will use for his glory, for advancing his kingdom, and what part of that story can include you - if you listen to his prompting and respond with what he calls you to. Maybe he's calling you to call someone you haven't talked to in a while, just to check in and see how they are doing. Maybe he's challenging you to set up a virtual prayer meeting with some friends you know who really like to pray. Maybe it's donating food here at the Creek or somewhere else, maybe it's reaching out to your neighbor, maybe it's donating to the Generous Bucket - I don't know what he's calling you to, but I know he wants you to be generous with your time, your talents and your treasures.

The final priority in the Creek's 317 mission, vision and priorities is generosity. It is sharing our resources to enrich others and advance God's kingdom. This is not a rule or a guide or a goal; this is an opportunity for us to walk with the Creator of all things. This is an opportunity we have to listen to him, to be changed by him, and to reflect him. In changing ourselves, we can help meet the needs of those around us and change the world for his glory.

It's been fifteen years now that Marci and I felt the call into vocational ministry. We were both raised in church and, like many others, got involved when we had kids. It was the children's minister here at the Creek who challenged me to make my relationship with Jesus a priority in my life - and when I did, it changed everything - it brought to light a calling I had received when I was in seventh or eighth grade to be a minister, yet had buried. Marci and I were convinced that our current financial lifestyle and my lack of Christian education would prevent us from answering that call, but then the invitation came - we were invited onto the staff of the Creek. We knew we were supposed to come, but the pay cut scared us to death, my lack of confidence serving in a church scared us, having a brand new baby at home (the fifth) scared us - yet we decided it was where he was calling us, so we jumped in. Right after we jumped, we discovered baby number six was coming, and at that time, the staff didn't have insurance - we were again scared to death.

Money was very tight - on paper we weren't even sure it all worked - but we believed we had responded to the call God gave us. The baby came and he provided medical care and our minds settled a little, then we made it a few months and paid the bills and our minds settled a little more, then one day we were pretty low on diapers for one of the two babies - they were fourteen months apart - and we needed to get to the store and get some. When we went out to the car to go, someone had put diapers on the front step. The next time we needed diapers, there were more, and before long Marci named the phenomenon our "diaper angel." I wish I could recall how many times we were on the brink of running out of diapers and poof! - more arrived.

The burden this lessened on our pocketbook was amazing, but the real blessing was the affirmation from God that he was taking care of us, that he would go through the trouble to burden others to buy diapers and drop them off at our house, just in time for us to need them. And to know what we had friends who listened to him affirmed our decision and gave us more confidence in our calling than nearly anything else that happened...diaper angel or angels, if you are listening, you have no idea how much you mean to us and how many times we have shared that story.

Being generous is not just a challenge from our church. Being generous is not just about being nice to someone a little less fortunate than us. Being generous is a way of life where we experience him in ways that call us to serve others, so that by sharing our resources we enrich others and advance the kingdom of God.

Will you pray with me?