

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 7 & 8, 2015
John Crosby
We Sacrifice
Acts 2:42-47**

So yesterday I'm running a little late because I have to go to the doctor, and I get there and I have one of those times when you look at a person and you're thinking, "Do I know you from the kid's school or the gym or church? Where do I know you from?" It's taking a while, and I'm trying to remain a professionally holy man and all that kind of stuff, and she's very nice and says, "Oh, we've been coming to CPC." And it's like, "Oh, thank goodness! I didn't mess up." So she sends me in to see the doctor and they do all this poking and prodding. The doctor has also started to come here—really, really—and is a friend of my wife's. And she said, "Well, how long has this been like this?" I said, "Well, maybe a week or two, maybe three." And I'm not kidding you, she looked just like my wife! Really?

Hey, we are right in the middle of a series that is about the Church. What you can expect when you're here; what will change if you're not here? And for our pattern, we've been using the first time that the fellowship of Jesus' followers ever becomes a church. It happens right after Jesus dies, raises from the dead, gathers His apostles together, leaves, and then 50 days later, the Church gathers at what's called Pentecost. Here the Holy Spirit comes, and 3,000 people all of a sudden decide to follow Jesus together. So, we've been looking at ways we're like that and ways we're not like that.

This summer, I actually started preparing for this sermon series by meeting with our elder board, and I can't remember what month it was, but every month we do a little teaching time and one month I took a passage from Acts 2. The Book of Acts talks about what happens next, and I turned to Acts 2 and I said, "Let's read this together and you tell me where we're just like that first Church and where we need to grow. Let's go through this together." And so we did, and it starts out this way,

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

And the elders were like, well that's great. That's us! Every week we get together and we talk about the Bible, the teaching of the apostles, and we have fellowship, we have coffee and lemonade, and we have small groups and classes, and we break the bread. That was their way of saying the sacraments—we baptize people and we celebrate the Lord's Supper—that's the breaking of bread and prayer. We pray all the time. We felt like yeah, we're the same church! And then somebody said, "Well, what about this part?"

46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

She said, "Well, I don't think we do that every day, do we? No. And most of us don't even do it every week." And all of a sudden it was like, yeah, but this said they met every day. I don't think you have to meet every day. But what's interesting is that in the modern church, people who are in the core of the church, they come about 1.7 times a month. They think they come all the time and they come about half the time, and that's totally understandable. One week out of the month they're out of town, the other week they have a commitment they have to take care of, but the reality is, that they're not as often together. We have other priorities and sometimes there's a sense of, oh geez, is it Sunday already? That means we're supposed to go to church. We've lost a sense of coming here and actually meeting God in a different way. So there's a difference.

And then another one of the elders pointed this out, and he said,

43 Everyone was filled with awe at the wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

He goes, "I don't see much awe in our church." And I said, "Yeah, yeah, but we're Presbyterians. Presbyterians don't have to do that part, we just sort of sit here." I will say, though, that I don't think you should go to a church because it's awe inspiring next week, or because every week is better than last week. There's a sense in which we can get so excited about the excitement business that we miss the real thing.

Jesus for instance, remember? He turned to the crowds that followed Him and said, "You know, the only reason you're here is because I feed you. You're only coming back so that you can see more miracles. What if the miracles stop and the food cuts off? Will you still come?"

So we went on. And then one of the elders read this,

44,45 All the believers stayed together and had everything in common. Selling their property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

This seems like it's way past the offering plate. Now, I have to tell you, this is a church that gives a lot of money. Five million dollar budget, we probably give another 1.5 for special offerings, Africa, and the inner city, and yet, this seems like it's way past the offering plate.

"They were all together, selling property and possessions so that nobody had need."

That's a different experience, not good or bad, but it's a different experience. And if their experience is different, the experience of those first Jesus followers, it sounds like the results of their gathering were different, too. The elders looked at it and they said, well, there are results. At verse 47 it says,

47 Praising God, they enjoyed the favor of all the people."

In other words, that gathering of people had a great reputation in the city of Jerusalem. People in the city liked that these people were gathering because they were nicer people, and they were better people to be around, and they helped others. People would say, "You should be more that like." I have a sense that that's not the way people describe the American Church. Right now we are suspicious of the Church, or we're cynical about the Church. Or, it seems like same old, same old. Different results back then, but in the same way, in the last verse it said this,

47 The Lord added to their number those being saved.

There was something about this community of people whose lives were being changed that when they gathered together, joy was experienced, that other people saw it, and they had to constantly make room for people who said, "Me too!" or "What's going on here?" Today's American Church is very different, isn't it? Lots of people come to church, but a lot of them are just coming to church. And we're a part of the church called the Main Line Denominations: Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians. Those churches, those denominations are all getting older and older, and smaller and smaller. If the promise of God to that first group of Jesus followers was, "Daily, God added to their number people who were being saved", then maybe God doesn't seem to be trusting a lot of churches with that today.

What does this say to us? I think you're here some of the time just because of habit. But, I think you're also here in part because we believe that where that happened—where they met together and often things happened, and we became more giving people, where that happened—God was at work. And maybe God would be at work here.

Now the key thing we said we were going to do every week was to look at that early church and then look at it from other people's perspectives. So, I'd like today to look at the church from the enemy's perspective. Back then one of the enemies of the early Jesus followers, in about the year A.D. 350, was the Emperor. The Emperor's name was Julian. He was called Julian the Apostate—they didn't like him much. Julian the Apostate. And he describes this early gathering.

He says, "Why don't we realize that it's their (the Christians) benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives, that have done the most to increase atheism (unbelief of pagan gods)?"

Now, that doesn't sound good. But what he's saying, he's a Greek, is that he believes in many gods. He's saying these people . . . they've thrown away all the gods. Is there just one God? They call that atheism. And what's done the most to increased atheism is, benevolence for strangers, care for the dead, the holiness of their lives. And Julian goes on:

"It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans (remember the Jesus from Galilee) support not only their own poor but our poor as well,

that all people see that our people lack aid from us. Teach those of the Hellenistic faith to contribute to the public service this way . . . “

It's disgraceful. So when they looked at this little sect of Jesus followers, the Emperor said, “I don't like them. They are trouble.” Followers of Jesus were changed people and they were different than the culture around them. And they weren't different than the culture around them by saying, “We don't dance, we don't smoke, we don't play cards, we don't go out with girls that do.” That's just being weird. When the Emperor looked at them he said, “They're different than us. They give like crazy! Why don't we do that? They give like crazy. Or maybe they give like crazy people. Why don't our people do that?” I have to tell you, I hope that some of you are here because whatever is underneath, you hope that whatever affected them will affect you. That God might still be at work.

So today I want to take a couple of minutes and teach you something that you think you already know. I want to teach you something that you think you already know. Most Americans are not this. Most Americans are not this. The average American is not this. Now, if you're at Christ Presbyterian Church, you are not the average American—let's face it. You're well above average, but I bet you're still representative of what Americans are like. I'd like to teach you something that you think you already know how to do. I'd like to teach you what it means to be generous. Generous. Not to learn how to give—you all know that. You know, lots of us give lots of money for special occasions, and that's a great thing. But, if I were to ask you, are you a generous person? Are you a generous family? Are we a generous church? What would you think?

When you ask somebody, “Do you think you're generous?” I think most people would feel a little defensive and they'd say, “Well no, I'm not wildly generous, but I'm not selfish. But yeah, I'm pretty generous.” People always get a little defensive. When you are asked if you think you're generous, most people will immediately think of the last thing they gave to, right? They'll talk about “Yeah, of course I'm generous. There was this guy on the side of the road and I stopped and he started to watch and I gave him five bucks. I'm generous.” That feels to me like the “are you generous” question is a lot like the “do you ever help around the house” question, usually asked by one spouse of one gender to a spouse of another gender. Do you ever help around the house? Of course I help around the house! And your mind immediately goes to the last time you helped around the house, right? I'm just saying. I, of course, help around the house. You remember you went to visit your mom three years ago for a month? You remember that? Well the dishwasher was left full and I emptied it. Of course I help around the house. Somebody says, “Are you a mean person generally?” “Of course I'm not a mean person. I didn't run that lady down. I showed her where the hospital was...I didn't take her, but I showed her!” We think of the last thing we did in that direction.

I guess what I want to say to you is that that's different than being generous. Is your life marked by generosity that overflows on a consistent basis that actually changes the way that you live and the other way people see you live? Not a random act of giving. Random acts of giving are fine. We do them all the time, right? Random acts of giving

you are inspired to give. Or you are asked to give. Or you're manipulated to give. Or somebody pitches you a need at the front door. And you give some money or you write a check. I'm all for that, but generosity is different.

I think, actually, generosity is not intuitive. I think that's why Heather (Hammond), down here in the Children's Sermon, was trying to teach the kids how to share because generosity has to be taught. We are not by nature generous people. You have to order your life. So let me tell you, I think that people who become generous are on a journey, and over that journey as they order their lives, three things will happen. They will give more, okay good. But they will not only give more, they will save more. Generous people I think save more. And generous people consume less. They give more, they save more, and they consume less. If you become generous, I think that will happen for you. Would you like that to happen for you? One caveat on that . . . there are some of you in that save more category—you save more money than anybody in all four rows ahead of you. You know if you die four generations from now, you still saved enough. You're a hoarder. And I think your becoming generous is different. But most of us will give more, and save more, and consume less.

Let me make a promise to you as a parent or a grandparent—if you will learn to live generously in front of your children, whether they're little kids or they're young adults—if you will learn to live a generous life in front of your children they, THEY, will have more money to take care of you when you're old and decrepit. So let's become generous before the retirement home because they are going to pay for it.

Generosity is not natural. Even two-year-olds and eighty-two-year-olds need to share. This is why somebody, when I said, "Are you generous?" did this (does a nudging movement), told ya, told ya, told ya. Can I just make one caveat before talking about money in America? I think that in America people see generosity as a good thing. We like generosity, it's a value. And one of the reasons it's a value is because Rodney Stark, this historian, would say, "When Christianity has been in a culture for centuries or decades and has had a profound cultural impact, even when many people move past Christianity or away from Christianity, it still becomes a shadow value in the community that we should be generous." So whether it's the United Way or the local college, we think we should be just. And the way you realize that—Laura and I are leaving for Africa on Friday—you go to other parts of the world that have not had the deep Christian experience and they are not by and large generous societies. The rich have very little concern that they have to change their giving and be generous to the poor. Where here, Americans go around the world and they end up sending money around the world because we believe that's what good people do. That's unusual. But I think, I think we're here because we hope that generosity will impact on us.

What's natural about money in America? What's the norm? If somebody in another part of the world came here and they looked at how Americans treated money, what would they think about us? I think they would think we're crazy. Really, why would you do that? We think it's normal and they think it's crazy. So this person would be writing a letter home to their abuela, their grandmother. And they'd say, "Grandma, you can't

believe this place. In America, you can't believe it, everybody spends more than they make. No, no, really. They spend more than . . . their government spends more than they make. The people spend more than they make. Eighty percent of these people have credit cards and they're uncomfortable with all the money. They are worried about paying it back, but they spend more!" That's crazy. Generous people don't do that.

The second point about money in America is that Americans pay a lot of interest on things that decrease in value immediately. That's not just crazy, that's stupid. I mean, I think you can make a case for paying down a mortgage because hopefully your house will increase. You give money to the broker so that it will increase. You buy that phone, you borrow money for it; it's worth less as soon as you get out of the Apple store, as soon as you drive the car off the lot. You are paying somebody interest for a decreasing asset. As soon as the dress walks out the store, if it's on credit, you are paying for something decreasing in value and we call it normal. That's just the way we live.

The last one for me—mark of the way we deal with money in America—Americans do not feel rich, but we are. How many of you feel rich? No, no, no. Most of you don't feel rich, but you are. We don't feel rich, but we are and at the same time, we feel generous, but we're not. We don't feel rich, but we are, and we feel generous even when we're not. The average American gives 1-3% of their income abroad. I mean they give 1-3% of their income to charity. That's not generous by any stretch.

By now I'm sure that I've offended almost anybody that walked in the door and especially those of you who finally after weeks of prodding invited that person next door to come and they came here for the first time and they're looking at you like, really? Trust me . . . you may be offended, but you're not bored, right? Better to be offended than bored. Let me also say, I'm not trying to get something from you today. I'm not trying to get you to give more to the church. If that were the case, if I wanted you to increase your giving today, I'd have little pictures of our children up on the screens. I'd show images of disasters and say, "Only you can help." I'd put those little starving kids up there and say, "For \$14 a month you can send this kid to Harvard." That's a lie from the pit of hell, right? Sometimes people feel manipulated when we ask them to give and you know why? It's because they're being manipulated. I'm trying not to do that. I'm trying not to do that today. I'm trying to help you become a generous person because a generous person lives with joy and not guilt.

So first, I need to talk to you about what are the myths of generosity, and then, what's the definition of generosity. And I'm telling you flat out, I'm stealing this straight from Andy Stanley. Andy Stanley is down in Atlanta, gave a great talk about this, and I just stole it straight from him. He talked about four myths about generosity. Do you think you're generous? Four myths about generosity. The first one is:

1. Generous people are spontaneous.

They give spontaneously. They see a need and they give to it. We've talked a lot about that. That's what I call random giving. Drive-by giving. Generous people are actually less spontaneous because they are more strategic in the way that they give. They don't give to everybody that asks. They're strategic. Second myth:

2. Generosity is determined by my cash flow.

When I have it I give it, when I don't, I don't. When I have more, I give more. That's a myth. I talked to a couple in the church . . . this next month or so we're going to talk about our pledges and stuff, and so we have a couple of people from the church who talk about their journey of giving so that you have somebody to identify. I said, "Would you do this?" And they said they really thought about it and prayed and they're not comfortable doing it, and I understood that, you know, a lot of people, their idea of terror is just to come right here (points to stage) and speak. Yet, that wasn't it for them. They said, "You know, thanks. We probably give more than we use to, but the reality is for over a decade we didn't give much at all. And we knew that we should. We didn't give much at all, and then all of a sudden we hit the mother lode and we were blessed beyond belief. We were blessed and we started to experience God's blessing financially in a different way and we just, it was like, wow! We have to give. This is fun to give. We became generous people. It's just great." He said, "I don't think you should tell this story, that you should wait to hit the mother lode before you give." I said, "No, we won't tell that story. But the reason we're not going to tell that story is because they're the exception. It's just not usually true. Usually when people get richer, we're all rich, when we get richer, we add zeros to the amount of the checks we give to charity, but it's still a pretty low percentage of what we give. That leads to the third myth about generosity:

3. The amount is what counts.

If you're generous, you've given a lot of big dollars. That's a lie! It's the amount that counts. If you're generous, you're giving a lot of big dollars. That's a lie. That's just a lie. You know why that's a lie? Because nobody knows whether the check you just wrote is generous or not except for you, and maybe your accountant, and maybe God. You may have written a check to the Y and everybody goes "Ohhhh that's great." But you knew that you were doing it just to get somebody off your back. You may have written it out of gratitude for what has happened in the past, but that's not really generous. It's not changing anything else in your life. The amount is not what counts, because that gift is only part of your finances, so let's not let the zeros fool us. It's much more about the heart and the rest of the way I spend my money.

Myth number four. I like this one. This one says:

4. Rich people are generous.

When I first came here, Laura and I became friends with this couple who would say, "John, we're not rich, we are people of means." Doesn't that sound weird? We're people of means. That's what rich people call other rich people—they're people of means.

They're rich. And yet, they are incredibly generous and they've taught me a lot about generosity. I asked him 20 years ago to lead our fall pledge campaign and he did a great job, and I said, "How do you help your rich friends become more generous?" He said, "John, I find that rich people are no more generous than poor people. As a matter of fact, I think that tippers usually stay tippers." People who tipped when they were kids are tipping when they're grandparents. And I have a phrase for it . . . get your mind around this and see if you agree with this. This phrase says that,

Rich people are rich, generous people are generous.

It's not a correlation. And it's not bad. I am for rich people. I am pro rich people. I'm pro every people. Rich people are rich, generous people are generous. Can you say that with me? Rich people are rich, generous people are generous.

Let me just say something to those of you who are young, if you're under 30, this is the part for you. This is the part for you. You need to realize that generosity is so much easier to do when you're starting out than when you are half way down the road. If you want to do this, start it with your allowance. Start it with your first job. Start it before the kids come, and the finance comes, and the mortgage comes. You can become, not effortlessly, but you can become deliberately generous as a 12-year-old easier than as a 72-year-old. It just happens.

Okay, four myths about generosity. Let me define what generosity is. Here's what I think Biblical generosity is about: Generosity is about disposing your assets. It's about the disposition of your assets. Three ways that I think somebody is generous:

1. Generous people are premeditated.

They think about it in advance instead of being driven by emotion. They are far less susceptible to my appeal for you to help with the cause of the week because they have thought ahead of time and that's good. That's good. Generous people are not coldblooded and calculated, but they have thought it through ahead of time, and that leads to the second part of generosity.

2. Generosity is defined by people who have a plan—who have designated.

They have designated how much of their life they're going to save. How much they're going to give to travel. How much of that they're going to give away. They have a plan. And I'd ask you, what's your plan? Or, are you going paycheck-to-paycheck, guilt trip-to-guilt trip? What's your plan to help the poor? What's the plan to generously support a church that you love? What's your plan to be generous? That leads to the third part of the definition of generosity.

3. By generosity the disposition of your assets is emancipated. Emancipated.

I believe that people who are generous are emancipated. They are not possessed by their possessions; they are set free from their culture. They are not possessed by their possessions and they are set free from their culture. That's

the difference between being a good giver and being generous. You are freed from the power of money in your life. Wouldn't you like that?

I still struggle here. We get to the 28th, 29th, 30th of the month and I'm sitting here and I'm a lot more nervous than I am on the 17th. I roll over in the middle of the night sometimes and wonder, what happens if I live too long? What happens if she gets into that grad school? I don't want to pray that she doesn't get into that grad school. I want to free myself from the power of money in my life and I want that for you. Remember? We don't feel rich, but we are. We feel generous even when we're not. I want you to be premeditated, and designated, and emancipated. Freed up because that is the picture of the first gathering of believers. It says:

They sold their possessions, gave to anyone who had need. And in another place it says, "On the first day of the week they set aside their money to give." They had a plan. And they were free from the way the rest of the world looked at money.

Next week, Rich is going to talk about the teaching of the apostles. Remember? Part of the early church is to gather around the teaching of the apostles? That doesn't mean that somebody said, "Would you please turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 12:14?" That wasn't written, yet! When they said they gathered around the teaching of the apostles, that would be one of the apostles standing up and saying, "You know, I remember when Jesus went to Capernaum, and it was a train wreck." "I remember when Jesus went to this woman's house. It was phenomenal." They talked about Jesus, and what they had heard Jesus say, and what they saw Jesus do. And that's how the community learned how to live differently. The reason I know that is because it starts at the beginning of Acts, in Acts 2. "They gathered around the teaching of the apostles." At the end of the Book of Acts, they're all the way over in Greece. The apostle Paul has become a follower of Jesus and has started little Jesus communities all around the Roman Empire and now he's at the end of his rope. He's been called back to Jerusalem. He's going to be killed. He says, "I've got to go back and face the music". In Ephesians—he's in Ephesus—the Ephesians say, "Don't go! Bad things are going to happen. Don't go!" And he says, "I've got to go. God has called me to go." And so he starts to say goodbye to these people that he loved. And he says to them in Acts 20:

"I've lived before you a generous life."

I'm not bragging; I'm just saying. And then he uses the most common verse about money, about giving, in the whole Bible. You all know it. I'm sure you know it. He uses, you never knew this is where it came from, he's just about to go home and die, and he says, "In everything I did, I showed you that by hard work, we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said" (this is the cliché), the most famous words about money, "Remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" You don't believe that, but you know it. It's the most common verse about money in the Bible. Probably when you gave somebody something, that person said, "Oh thank you." And you, in a sort of self-deprecating way, said, "Oh, that's okay. It's more blessed to give than to receive." Trust me, it's pretty

blessed to receive, too. But the reason Jesus said this, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” that Paul remembers at the very end of his life, is because these are the first words out of Jesus’s mouth. Remember how he starts to talk in the Sermon on the Mount? He talks about the blessings. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the pure. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are you who realized that it is better to give than to receive. Now, I have to tell you, I can’t make you do anything. I can’t make you be generous. I can’t make you give. That’s your choice. I just hope you’ll come back. I can’t make you do anything. You don’t do half the stuff I say anyway. I’m just asking, what’s your plan for becoming a generous person? A person from the inside out. Instead of being inspired to give on occasion, can we become a community that’s so generous that people wonder what we’ve been drinking? Can we become so generous that people look at us and say, “I have to get some of that.” Can that still happen again?

As you leave and go out today, take a sheet from the round table in the Great Room. It’s not homework; it’s a little help. It’s a sheet called Taking Generosity Home With You. What’s Your Plan? I exhort you. Just pick up the darn paper. Talk about it at lunch. It’s got some of what I talked about. It has some resources, if you’re interested, in how to start, and then it has this great little article that is titled, “Ten Little Ways to Become More Generous”. It’s this long. Ten Little Ways to Become More Generous. You have not loved; you have not lived, until you’ve done something for someone that they can never repay. I want to become that kind of person. Let’s pray. I’m going to use three phrases when I pray for you. Three phrases, and I’d like you to think which one hits you most. This is the first phrase of the prayer:

In Christ there is nothing I can do that would make You love me more, God, and nothing I have done that would make you love me less.

This isn’t about giving in. This isn’t about being good. In Jesus, there is nothing I can do that would make God love me more, and nothing that I have done that would make Him love me less. Some of you need that. Some of you need the second phrase of the prayer. It says:

God, You are all I need for joy. God, You are all I need for everlasting joy.

Martin Luther said people are born to work for the approval of others and this prayer says God, you’re all I need for joy. And the last phrase of the prayer:

Jesus, as You have been to me, so I will be to others.

As You have been to me. As You have forgiven me, I will forgive. As You have served me, I will serve. As You have brought joy into my heart, I will do that for others. As You have been generous with me, I will be generous with others. Let’s pray.

Lord God, You created us to be generous people, but we hold on tight to what we have because we’re afraid we’ll lose it. Please remind me that in Christ there is nothing I can do that will make You love me more and there is nothing I have done to make You love

me less. God, remind me again this afternoon that You are all I need for everlasting joy. Instead of all the stuff I add; the approval of others, the affection, the things I think I need to be complete. You are all I need for everlasting joy. And Lord God, when I think about this place and this church, when I think about my life, remind me as You have been to me, Jesus, so I will be to others. May it be so in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.

Link to video shown during this service <https://vimeo.com/144379095> | (We the Church, We Are Known)