

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 10 & 11, 2012
John Crosby
The Gen 3 Project: Generate
John 3:16**

Jesus was a master teacher. As I've tried to study Him, I've seen that one of the things that He did *not* do was make lists. He did not make a list of 16 things you should remember, so I'll try not to do that. But on occasion there is a lot you want to cover and you need a little help, so at the end of the pews, yet again, there is a basket. If you don't mind, I would like it if you would pass the basket and everybody in the room, please, take one of the cards, a 3 x 5 or whatever size card it is. If you need a pen or pencil and don't have one, just grab a pen or pencil, too. I'd like to have us do something that is participatory this morning, that you get to take home with you. While that is going down the aisles and before I start, I want to go down a rabbit hole, disconnected to the sermon, for just three or four minutes.

Dan [Pastor Dan Anderson] prayed for our veterans who assure the freedom that we have. I don't think it's amiss for us to make sure that they are recognized and honored. If you have ever put on the uniform of our country and served in some way, would you please stand. [Clapping.] Interesting juxtaposition every four years, Veterans Day coming so close to the national elections, right? Aren't you so glad that the TV has been returned to your control?

I thought of election day in a different way this year as I spent it at a Holiday Inn in a foreign country. For a week we were doing a board meeting there. This is a board that comes from all over the world, World Vision's International Board. They know more about our election than we do. The Presidency of the United States, the government of the United States, is seen all over the world. The way we go, the way the rest of the world goes.

The day after the election, one of the board members from Africa came up to me and said, because they don't quite know the ways of our culture, "Okay, isn't it time now for you to lead the American church?" Clearly he didn't understand the American church or me as he said, "Isn't it time now for you to show how to pull your country together instead of pronouncing how God is blessing your side and how all the demons are on the other side?" Some of us, some of you, are sure that the forces of good have triumphed this last week and that things will get better. Others of you are sure that the election results signal huge peril for the country. If you are like the rest of the country, about 49.5 percent of you feel one way about it, and about 49 percent feel the other way. It's that close.

It seems to me that important as the election was, what is even more important now is for us as the people of God to pray, so before I preach, I would like us to pray for those who lost, for the people who had the courage to run for city council or state senate, for dog catcher or president, and lost. I loved it that Governor Romney said he and Ann would be praying for the President. We need to pray together for those who lead us and I just want to insist that we have the same passion and creativity and faithfulness that we voted with to ask, "How can I use my faith with these principles that I believe in so fiercely to be the very best citizen rather than perpetuate the

eternal war? How can we do that together whether it is about the debt or taxes or the marriage amendment or immigration?" This board member who came up and said, "Isn't it time for the American church....," he walked away from me with bullet holes in his leg because he had been shot in a square trying to bring the voice of freedom to his country.

Lord God, the stakes are great and we are not. We are fallen, fragile, biased people, but You are a great God. You have given us stewardship over this incredible country and the gift of freedom. We pray for those who lost that they will not sorrow, that they will not sour but that they will find new ways to serve. We pray for those who won that they will quit campaigning and start governing with an eye toward all. We pray for ourselves that You would help us be children of peace and agents of reconciliation. It is easy to say. It is hard to do. Help us think the best, say the best, and do the best, so that Your church may bless this place that means so much to the world. You love us, Lord Jesus. Teach us to love one another. Amen.

I was going to say, okay, I'll get off my soapbox but, really, I'm just getting on my soapbox. We would like for the next 20 or 25 minutes to change the narrative. Change is hard for everybody, but we would like to change the story. This is the time of year that we talk about stewardship. Stewardship is important, and we would like to change the way that we talk about it because while it is important to talk about it, I believe it is even more important for us to have a new value in our lives together.

We have talked about how this community inspires all generations to follow Jesus, love one another, and live missionally. Underlying that are some values, the authority of Scripture, the power of grace, the idea that we are all on a journey, that we care for each other. I would like to add another value overtly so that it works its way into our DNA over years to come. I would like us to not only be known but to feel that we are becoming a generous community, that generosity itself would be a hallmark of this community. Instead of being a church known for this or that political view, for this or that theological view, for this or that youth group or student ministry or missions department or whatever, that this community might become known as people who are extravagantly generous. Different! Generous! Crazy stupid generous.

That would be a change in the way we talk about money. How do you get to generosity as individuals or as a community in a time of scarcity? No need for me to tell you, times are hard. Resources are scarce. It's a weird time to talk about being generous in an age of scarcity. Actually, it helps that we have been saying that you don't start the conversation with your wallet or your job or yourself. We start the conversation with God. All this fall we have been saying, if we learn what God is like, that affects *us*. We talked about Jesus saying, "Look at God; look at Me. I am." We talked about the seven *I AM's* as a way to know God and what those implications are for us. I'd like to continue that in this idea of generosity.

Paul writes to a group of young followers of Jesus. They are not even Christians yet. They are people of the Way. They are trying to leave their life of being pagans to follow Jesus, and Paul says to them, "You should be like Jesus. Your attitude should be like Jesus." In very nature Jesus was God, He was the same as God, but He didn't consider equality with God something to be grabbed. Instead He humbled Himself and became a servant. So it is in the very nature of God to be humble. It is in the very nature of God to be a servant. Those of us who follow Jesus

are to become more humble and servants. Got the principle? It ties into the verse we are going to talk about today, the most famous verse in the Bible, the most ruined verse in the Bible. You will see it again this afternoon in the end zone when the ball goes through the uprights. You will see somebody with a crazy hat on and John 3:16 looking you in the face saying,

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Very meaningful, by the way. Not at all! It is one of those verses that has been used so much that we lose its meaning, but may I just suggest to you, that this is the same thing. It is in the very nature of God, says this verse, to love. "For God so loved...." God is love. It is in the nature of God to love. It is in the nature of a loving God to give. "For God so loved the world that He gave...." The very best. He gave His Son. God loves. God gives. God brings life, "...that whoever believes...." would have life. It is in the nature of God to love, to give, to bring life, so that is supposed to be true of us as well or becoming true of us.

One of the first things you could write down on that little card are two Latin words, *Imago Dei*. If I came up to you and said, "You really are an *Imago Dei*," is that a good thing or is that a bad thing? It is a good thing! *Imago Dei* means you bear the image, *imago*, of God. We are God's image bearers. "In the image of God," it says in Genesis, "God made them." Human beings. What does that mean? It means God goes first. God shows us what is important. God says, "Be like that. Be like Me." We are made in the image of God, and we are most like God when we love. We are made in the image of God, and we are most like God when we give. That is the foundation for everything that follows. You are made in the image of God, and whether you like it or not, you are meant to be an *Imago Dei*, an image bearer of God.

Humble servant, loving, giving, life-bringing, that is what how it is supposed to be. How do you get there? I don't feel those things much of the time. How do we get to generosity as a community and as individuals? The best way, of course, is to see it fleshed out in front of us, so I'd like to take, literally, two minutes, three minutes max, to show you two paths to generosity and then ask you, which is more helpful for you? The first one is a very visual path to generosity. It will go up on the screen.

(Video shown: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxyhfiCO_XQ)

Various African children in front of huts, complaining: "I hate it when my house is so big I need two wireless routers; I hate it when you ask for no pickles and they still give you pickles; I hate it when my iPhone reception is bad", when obviously none of them have the money for those gadgets)

Powerful! A good, needed reminder! Path No. 1.

Path No. 2 is a story. Last night I told the story and tried to make it anonymous. I said there was this young pastor and this other person, but I kept saying *I* and *Bill*. Okay, it was about me and Bill. Twenty-five years ago Laura and I were about to leave our first church. I had never owned a home before. We had lived in the manse, and we were moving to Washington, D.C., a most expensive place to live back then. We had nothing, no, we had less than nothing and probably just were not going to be able to buy a home even as Maggie, our second one, was on the way. As I thought and prayed about it, I sucked up my courage and went to a friend, a mentor in the

church, named Bill. Bill and Ann had been close to us, and Bill was a man of means. I sucked up my courage and said, "Bill, would you be willing to lend me enough money to use for part of the down payment so I could qualify for a loan to get the house. Would you be open to doing that, maybe half of the down payment? Would you be open to that?"

We were in his back yard, I remember, and he looked at me and said, "John, I don't make loans to friends," and I thought to myself, "That's why he's rich and I'm not." He said, "I don't make loans to friends, but I'll tell you what. I'll make you a deal. I'll either give you \$10,000 or I'll give you a \$1,000 a month for the next year." Before I could even answer, give me \$10,000 or \$1,000, I was thinking, what if I offend him, maybe I should take the money now, he goes, "If you've got the brains God gave geese, you'll let me give you \$1,000 a month." I said, "That's what I was going to pick." For the next 12 months in the first five days of the month, I would get an envelope containing a check for \$1,000 and inside each envelope a note. "Prayed for you." Month No. 2, "Heard the baby is great. What's the name? Prayed for you all." Month No. 5, Christmas, "Take a couple hundred bucks out of this and get your wife something special." Month No. 7, "I hope your first Easter is great!" Month No. 12, "John, thank you for the privilege of letting us help you on your way to serve God."

Two paths to generosity. I don't think that one is bad and one is good, but we need to be reminded over and over of whom we are and what we have and why we ought to give. That's important, but I don't think that gets to generosity. I think that gets money. Generosity is when somebody moves from guilt to being grace-filled and loving and generous. It is now 25 years later, and I am a different person because somebody was generous to me. It generated something inside me.

Two paths. "For God so loved the world...." God made the first move toward generosity. God made the second move. God made the third move. God set the example through Jesus of what radical, sacrificial giving would look like for the people who said, "I am a child of God." I think that giving can be done grudgingly. I can guilt you or manipulate you, maybe even frighten you into giving money, devoid of love. But generosity, real generosity, is always initiated by love, by having been loved, believing that there is a God and that God is laying the tracks of grace and love and service and generosity for you and me to follow. God loved. God gave. God brought life.

Generosity has very little to do with the amount that's given and it's not even just about money. It's about our posture and our attitude. When we give generously, we are most like God, and yet I live in a world that says, "That's great. That's great," and you've got both hands on your wallet by now. I think you want to be generous but are stopped from being generous, so what I'd like you to do is take that card and on one side, write down the things that stop you from being generous. I'll give you some hints, don't worry. I want you to write down five things that stop you from being generous, all right? Just write them down.

The first, I believe, is *compassion fatigue*. Write the words *compassion fatigue*. Compassion fatigue means it's hard to be generous when every single person on Planet Earth wants something from you. When we know so much about so many needs, when everybody has their hands out, that is compassion fatigue. One of my friends came to me and said, "John, sometimes I feel like a checkbook with legs." Compassion fatigue. Sometimes it ends up that you need to evaluate what you can give. You can't give to everything, but compassion fatigue puts some calluses on the heart and says, "Prove to me that you really need it."

The second reason, I think, we are not generous people is that *we suspect the church*. If you are a person who is visiting us, and you are here for the first time, oh, it stinks to be you because it validates all that stuff, that all they ever talk about is money. They just want our

money. Probably sometimes it is because we don't share the story well enough of what we want to do with this money that we are excited about getting. Some of it though is suspicion of what churches do with the money; those private airplanes, those TV shows, those big houses. My father was a great, great guy. He really was, but he told me that he would pay for every cent of my legal education but not a penny for seminary because he said, "I know those religious people. Don't become one of them."

The third thing that stops generosity in the Kingdom of Heaven is *tough times*. This may be a big surprise to you. This is a tough time in our country. It is a tougher time in our world. Tough times make it harder to be generous. Let me just make sure that I am clear about that. If you are out of a job, if you have had to take a substandard job, if you have lost your house, if you are worried you can't put the kids through college, if you have been squeezed by this terrible economy, those are tough times that cannot help but affect the way that you give. But for the 93 percent of the rest of us, tough times mean that I am living my life in a way that I am not able to be generous. My financial house is not in order. You are over credit carded, over in debt, over housed, over kid gifted, over retiremented, over whatever, so that you are *under* generous. Tough times just expose that. Are you having as much fun as I am?

No 4, I think the fourth thing that stops generosity is that *it doesn't seem like it could make a difference*. The church has a \$5 million budget. What will it mean if I give another \$1,000, more than I've ever given? That means nothing. There are 1.2 billion children in the world who live in poverty, and 700 million of them live in abject, crushing, stupid, life-depriving poverty. So many! What I mean to say about it not seeming to make a difference is that when we don't have generosity in our spirits, we lack imagination about what a difference we could make. We confine generosity to the checkbook. We evaluate people by what they have.

So, compassion fatigue, we suspect the church, tough times, no difference, the fifth stop is *your stop*. What is your stop? You know. It probably isn't listed yet. Is it just not the right time? It never will be. Is it mistrust? How it is going to be spent? Is it pride? Nobody is going to tell me what to give. What is it for you? If I haven't written it down, *you* write it down because until we figure out what is stopping us from becoming more generous people, and there are hundreds of people in this church who are very generous but I want to ask you, what is stopping you from becoming a *more* generous person? *More* like the image of God.

Flip the card over. I feel like Jesus doesn't leave us with the stops. Jesus offers ways to increase the generosity of your heart. To increase the generosity of your heart means that generosity becomes a default, and that is always unexpected, right? Generosity isn't the annual United Way drive where you've already figured out how much you are going to give. Generosity is unexpected. It is like when Jesus does His very first miracle at a wedding. The master of the banquet comes up to the bridegroom and says, "Wow! This is unbelievable. Usually you serve the very best wine at the beginning and when people are plastered, you give out the cheap stuff. But this is the best wine ever. Who got you this wine?" Jesus is unexpectedly generous. He gives the very best, and He offers you some **ways to become a more generous giver**.

First, He says, **compassion moves**. Two words, compassion moves. Love does, but compassion moves. A guy who is crippled comes up to Jesus and says, "Do you want to help me?" It says in the text, "Filled with compassion," Jesus says, "I do want to heal," and He healed him. We need to keep soft hearts because only compassion moves us to generosity. Duty

moves us to giving. Compassion and soft hearts, move us to generosity. World Vision taught us this phrase, "Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God." That means my heart needs to be broken again and again and again because I get compassion fatigue. Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God so that I can see the excitement of generosity. I'm at this board meeting and one day the president [of World Vision] gets up and says, "We need to remember why we are here. We feed 4 million children around the world. That's great! We probably touch about 95 million people around the world. That's great," he said, "but there are 1.2 billion who are not sure how they are going to get through the year, and we touch a crummy 100 million out there." He said, "This is my goal, 100 million right now; in five years, I want it to be 150 million. I want to see us grow by 50 percent. You know what, 150 million children is 20 percent of all the terribly poor children in the world. I want to be part of that movement. I want to say, 'This is our 150 million. This is our 20 percent. What are you going to do?'" That's generosity. Compassion moves.

Two, **grace responds**. We generate generosity when we have received grace. This is a church built around the grace of God. At the very end of His story, Jesus meets a guy, a little guy, up a tree. Remember Zacchaeus? It's the only time in the Bible where everybody boos Jesus. The good people and the bad people boo Him. Nobody likes Zacchaeus but Zacchaeus comes down out of the tree and has dinner with Jesus and comes out of the house saying, "I'm a changed man. I'm giving away half of my money. Just to show that it's real, if I've cheated anybody, I'll pay them back four-fold." And Jesus says, "Today salvation came into this house." There is a new heart. Grace responds.

Remember the time Jesus is having a very uppity-uppity dinner, and a woman comes in and starts weeping at His feet and washing His feet with her tears. The host says, "Doesn't He know who she is? How can He let her touch Him?" Jesus says, "I know who she is, but you are treating me like some kind of leper, and this woman hasn't stopped loving me since I came in. Who loves somebody more? If you are forgiven a dollar or if you are forgiven a million dollars?" "Well, I suppose the one who has been forgiven the most." Duh! If we really believe that we have been given grace, we respond.

No. 3, I don't think this is all about the big check. A lot of times I don't think it is about a check at all. I think it is about serving in the parking lot or taking care of the neighbor's kids or using your carpentry school skills or rides to the airport or mowing a lawn or whatever. Generosity is sometimes a bit of money but usually it is some **small beginning**. Jesus didn't start big. He started small. Remember when Jesus goes to the temple and looks at all the people putting in their annual pledges, 100,000, 10,000, 50,000, and somebody over here goes, "I can maybe do two bucks." The widow's mite. He said, "She is the one who got it." Small beginnings. Big heart. Small beginnings because God wants to let the small people in on the action, from the two mites of a widow to two loaves and fish from a kid. You know what small beginnings says? It says, "For you, it starts today." Today. Not with a grandiose plan but today. If it's small beginnings, you don't have to wait.

You can start today to be generous because, No. 4., **generosity triggers**. Jesus' generosity triggered generosity in the early followers of Jesus. It says, "They gathered together every day. Once a week they had meals together, and every time they were together they took care of each other." They sold their houses. They gave everything that they had so that they cared for one another, and there were no poor people in the house because generosity is infectious. It triggers that for other people.

Nineteenth century evangelist D. L. Moody was a shoe salesman in Chicago. One day in Chicago he comes around the corner onto Michigan Avenue and sees a crowd up ahead of him. He goes up to see what the deal is. A little delivery boy has come running out onto Michigan Avenue. Somebody tripped the little boy, and he falls. Groceries go all over, smashing all the eggs. Now this is in the days before child labor laws and any kind of job security. This kid is toast. The crowd is going, "Ohhhh, isn't that too bad." Moody comes up, looks at the kid, looks at the crowd, and says, "I feel bad. You know what?" He reaches into his wallet and pulls out a dollar bill and says, "I feel this bad. How bad do you feel?" He puts the dollar in the kid's basket and walks on. Generosity triggers generosity. Other people followed, and soon the little boy was okay.

Compassion moves, grace responds, small beginnings, generosity triggers. May I just say, I wouldn't be giving you the truth if I didn't say that I believe we are less generous than we can be because we have forgotten Jesus' teaching that **simplicity frees**. Simplicity frees and it frees up generosity. You want to be generous but you are chained. What chains you down, in lifestyle or season of life or attitude toward charity or whatever? Simplicity to follow Jesus frees us. The rich young ruler was chained by his wealth. Can you be freed to be generous?

I believe that if this church is going to be known differently seven years from now, I would like it to be about generosity, so that when people see us, they would see grace and generosity in our fabric. You know what? I believe in some ways that generosity is the evangelism of the new age. Right now so many think of Christians as up-tight, repressed, hypocritical, legalistic people. What if as they drove by, people would say, "Huh! They're giving that much? They're that generous?" Then what would they think about our God?

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You have come to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable once again. That You so loved, Father, that You sent the Son that we might have life, life in all its fullness and life in all its generosity. May we follow You in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. Amen.

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.