

Cultivating a Generous Spirit

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June 16, 2019

James 3: 7-18; Luke 6:37-45

A week or so ago, as I sat in my car at a busy, complex intersection, (many lanes, going many directions) I heard a car horn. To be clear, I couldn't NOT hear the car horn. It was so **loud** and so **long** and so **insistent** that it was at first completely impossible to tell where it was coming from—was it behind me, in front of me, was it coming from a nearby parking lot?--because it came from everywhere at once.

Now car horns are a way of communicating—a gentle tap on the horn might remind the driver in front of us to cease their daydreaming and move forward because the light has turned green. Driving on the beltway, a more urgent brief blast of the horn might signal to an unaware driver—don't change lanes, I'm here, we're about to have a collision.

But this horn was no gentle reminder nor even an urgent warning. It wasn't communicating helpful information, it was communicating unhelpful emotion: it was malevolent, it was outraged, it was meant to browbeat and humiliate.

I finally located where it was coming from— across the way, an older gentleman had gotten confused or lost and he was in the wrong lane. He was trying to get over, but in

the steady flow of traffic, he was struggling to do so, briefly holding up traffic. And the car behind him—well, the driver was leaning on the horn with all of the wrath and rage he could muster, which was a lot. The hand that wasn't blaring the horn was giving all variety of helpful directional gestures, and the confused gentleman looked as if he were nearly about to cry. The ceaseless car horn was only distracting him and paralyzing him. He knew he was holding up traffic, he was trying to do something. Finally, someone spotted the problem, kindly let the lost gentleman over, and the driver behind him rushed on in an indignant rage, with a final extended blast of the horn to punctuate his displeasure, as if to say, "I wish you all manner of ill."

And I thought—wow. That was uncharitable. What in the world was IN him, to come OUT in that way? Was the unintentional infraction so egregious and unpardonable that it merited that kind of response?

It was an utter absence of generosity of spirit.

I would define generosity of spirit as striving to readily pardon others, assuming their best intentions, forgiving unintended infractions, choosing kindness when there is a choice to be made between kindness and ugliness. But generosity of spirit is more, it seems, than just acting nice.

It is a way of being and a way of seeing, an intentional cultivation of our best selves. If there is such a thing as a generous spirit, then there is also an opposite. I read a

sermon once by the great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, in which she spoke of “arthritis of the spirit,” an illness that is born of harboring resentments, building up anger, cultivating a righteous and rage-filled protective shell that twists the outlook, the countenance, and the behavior of a person.

Now, it should be said that anyone can become temporarily angry, anyone can feel hurt or resentful, anyone can speak or act unkindly. As humans, we experience every emotion. The Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hahn describes that our mind is like a field, where every kind of seed is planted—seeds of suffering, anger, happiness, and peace, every human emotion. Over time, the quality of our life or the state of our spirit depends on which seeds we water.

Is our anger momentary—or do we cultivate our anger? Is our resentment fleeting, or do we grow resentment? Do we sit in harsh judgment of others—or do we forgive?

This, I think, is what Jesus is seeking to teach in our scripture lesson from Luke’s gospel, that you grow what you water, or you harvest what you sow. Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned, forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you. And it makes sense based upon the parable Jesus tells—can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?

If I am blinded by my anger, how can I lead you out of yours—we'll both fall into a pit of anger. If I'm blinded by unforgiveness, how can I lead another out of that state—we'll both fall into a pit of resentment.

But if I change my behavior—only then I can helpfully impact my neighbor's response.

“Why do you notice the speck in your neighbor's eye (the source of their blindness), but do not notice the log in your own eye (the source of my blindness)?” First take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly—then you can be helpful...then you won't both fall into error.

And Jesus goes on to say, “No good tree bears bad fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor grapes from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure (like anger, resentment, judgment) produces evil. For it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

So, all of that is philosophically good stuff—but how is it practically attained? In other words, how do I make sure that I am storing up the good treasure, watering the good seeds, cultivating a generous spirit?

Well, first, the simple practice of self-care. If I don't remain mindful of my sleep, I'm not my best self. If I don't find ways to exercise or de-stress, I'm not my best self. If I don't process my emotions in a healthy way by talking with a friend or a confidante or a counselor, I risk processing

them in an unhealthy way. If I am practicing proper self-care, I'm watering the good seed, and cultivating a generous spirit.

Secondly, I can make choices about what I consume—what sort of information, and how much of it, am I taking in? What sort of emotions am I swimming in? I went through a period not long ago where I found myself moody and mad—or at least more so than usual. And eventually, I realized: I was listening to news radio on the way in to work and on the way home from work. Throughout the day, from time to time, I was pulling up a news website to see what was afoot in the world. I'd come home, start to cook supper and turn on the news. And I do that to try to stay current, I do it to try to keep my preaching relevant to what's going on in the world...but all the punditry, all the outrage (doesn't matter what your political flavor is, there's plenty of outrage out there, much of it manufactured)—I wasn't able to process it. And even if the news wasn't political, it was often just stressful—a shooting here, a wildfire there, man bites dog, dog bites man. It was making me tired and souring my spirit. I didn't start ignoring the news and being intentionally uniformed...but I did change my consumption: music on the car radio, turn off the TV and read a good book. If I am constantly consuming outrage and negativity—how can I cultivate generosity and positivity?

Thirdly, I can practice perspective taking. If a person says or does something that affronts me, why might she or he be acting as they are? Might things appear differently

from where they stand? Do I assign them malign intentions or innocent ones? To return to the example of the car horn in the beginning of my sermon—what if the other driver had practiced a little perspective taking—“The person in front of me must be lost or confused. I’ve been lost or confused before. They aren’t merely stupid or intentionally seeking to cause harm.” I can even use my imagination to seek a better perspective—my co-worker is being unpleasant: might they be under stress? Worried? In an unhealthy place? How can I reframe my understanding of this situation in the best possible light? It doesn’t make their behavior palatable—but it may make it pardonable.

Lastly, and importantly, I can guard my words. This is deserving of a scripture passage unto itself, because words make worlds. James speaks of the tongue being like the rudder of a ship—what I speak gives direction to my attitude, what I say shapes how others respond to me, I cannot cultivate a generous spirit with ungenerous words. “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?” And for all of you out there who are southern like me, you can’t say whatever you want and then soften it by saying, “Bless his heart.” Unkind words will never grow from good spiritual seed.

As I think about generosity of the spirit, I am struck by these words from our James passage: Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts,

do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Lastly, there is one thing that I will return to as we continue to contemplate generosity. That my generosity is not just an act of will on my part, it is rooted in the generosity of God. God is unfailingly generous, giving and forgiving, gracious and loving. The more fully I know God's generosity, God's forgiveness, God's love—the more I display them.

If I receive and recognize God's overflowing reservoir of grace, it will be ever more evident in my life and my spirit. So this sermon comes with homework: a challenge this week for each of us—where do we encounter God's generosity—how can we become more mindful of it-- and how can we intentionally cultivate a more generous spirit? We can start by laying off the car horn. Amen.