

Generosity is Gratitude, Overflowing

Rev. Dr. Benton J. Trawick

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Luke 18: 18-28, 19:1-9

I cannot claim to have watched all 12 seasons and 279 episodes of the popular CBS television sitcom “The Big Bang Theory,” which ended its run in May of this year. But I’ve periodically enjoyed the show across the years, with its exploration of life, love, and relationships through the eyes of a group of brilliant but socially awkward scientists interacting with their friends, family, and coworkers.

In one of my favorite episodes, Sheldon, the most adorably awkward and entirely self-absorbed of the characters, has been selected to swap presents with his neighbor, Penny, in a Christmas gift exchange.

Now Sheldon detests the very idea of Christmas gift exchanges because they present a veritable minefield of social awkwardness—how do you know what to get the other person? What if their gift to you is more expensive than yours to them and you’ve underspent? Or perhaps worse, what if you’ve overspent, buying them a far more valuable gift than you receive? You’ve lost out in that transaction.

What if you misjudge the level of friendship or relationship—is the recipient merely an acquaintance? A pal? A best friend? A love interest? And how do they see you? If you go with “best friend” or “love interest” and they go with “acquaintance” or “pal,” well, that’s a disaster! In Sheldon’s eyes, the exchange of gifts should be a practical transaction in which two people on equal social footing exchange gifts of approximately equal value and get the entire ordeal over with as quickly as possible.

Determined to game the socially-fraught gift giving system as effectively as possible, Sheldon goes to the local bath and body shop and purchases every gift basket that they have: every size, every possible permutation of potions, lotions, and bath oil beads, every available price point.

He stashes the bevy of baskets in his bedroom, so that when Penny offers him her gift, he can quickly assess the financial value, feign a brief but

urgent bout of gastric distress, slip from the room and return with the gift basket most closely approximating the value and the spirit of the gift he has just received. He can later return all the unused gift baskets, get his money back, and the exchange of gifts will be complete, with no mess, no fuss, and no undue generosity.

The hilarity ensues when Sheldon opens Penny's gift and it is a folded dinner napkin. "Oh," He exclaims in bemused puzzlement. "a napkin...."

"Turn it over!" Penny urges. And when Sheldon turns the napkin over, he discovers it is signed: "To Sheldon, Live Long and Prosper. Leonard Nimoy." Penny, a waitress, has given Sheldon the ultimate gift for a geeky genius: A dinner napkin signed by the actor who played Spock in the classic TV series Star Trek, a virtual deity in the geek pantheon, whom she recently served in her restaurant.

To add to the gift's incalculable value, Nimoy actually wiped his mouth with the napkin, so Sheldon now possesses Leonard Nimoy's DNA. And Sheldon's careful calculus is destroyed. Penny's gift, which has virtually no economic value—a used dinner napkin...is priceless: containing the signature and trace amounts of saliva from Sheldon's lifelong idol.

Stunned, Sheldon stumbles from the room, and after a brief time presumably spent rushing indecisively from one basket to the next, he returns bearing every gift basket he has purchased—the only response to Penny's gift that he can imagine is to give her everything. Penny exclaims, "Sheldon! What did you do? And he laments, **"I know! It's not enough, is it?!?"**

Sheldon has been moved from a carefully calculated, ungenerous response to an utter outpouring of generosity that counts no cost—he simply cannot give enough to convey his heartfelt gratitude.

Now, why devote so much sermon space to a ten-year-old episode of a sitcom? Well, I suppose it is because that single scene encapsulates so well the messages of our two scripture lessons for this morning, with Sheldon's attitudes and actions serving as the lens.

Our first scripture lesson was the encounter between Jesus and the Rich Ruler. The ruler is presumably what society would call a good man, a

decent and righteous man, and his question to Jesus seems at first a reasonable enough question for a seeker to ask: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

But Jesus apparently sees something different behind the man’s question. The ruler has a transactional view of faith or discipleship—think of Sheldon at the beginning of the sitcom scene. In the beginning, Sheldon’s view of the gift exchange is not relational—I care for you, I commit myself to thinking of you, what you might want, what you might need, what might bring you joy or delight.

It is transactional: what does this gift exchange demand? How can I calculate what to do, how to behave—what gift shall I offer in exchange for your gift? And caught up in Sheldon’s behavior and perhaps the ruler’s as well is the implication: what is the minimum obligation? Show me the bar so that I can be assured that I barely clear it. I want to mean it when I say, “Oh, it’s the least I could do.”

Jesus responds to the man’s question, “You know the commandments: Don’t commit adultery, don’t murder, don’t steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Have you ever noticed, by the way, that the ten commandments are basically a no-frills recipe for common decency?

And so, the ruler responds: I’ve been commonly decent—I have kept all of these since my youth. I’ve done what’s required, no more, no less. I just want to be sure that I’m offering exactly the right gift basket to befit the kingdom.

Then Jesus hits the man with the teachable moment—there’s just one more thing. Sell everything and distribute the money to the poor, then come and follow me. Now it is important perhaps to note that Jesus is not giving the man one more requirement, as if the man can simply complete the one additional task Jesus has given him and his ticket will be punched. Jesus is using hyperbole—he is teaching the man that life is not a Led Zeppelin song, you cannot buy a stairway to heaven. You cannot earn the kingdom in the next life (transactional), you discover it through the relationships of this life—how do you care for the least, the lost, the undeserving, the hurting? If you want to get it, don’t try to figure out what

the smallest gift basket you can get away with is—become generous, like God is generous.

The man becomes sad, because he is rich and he wants to retain that. Note the framing of the man's question from the beginning: What MUST I DO? What MUST I GIVE?

Jesus is moving the man toward What MAY I DO? And Jesus says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." It isn't that money is, of itself, bad. It's that people who have wealth are used to earning things, owning things, grasping things— "How much does it cost? I'll buy it."

As an aside, instead of the Rich Young Ruler, Jesus could have as easily used the Smart Young Student—Good teacher, what must I do to earn an A? Or even an A plus? What must I do to prove my deserving? It's the same transactional attitude but with a different currency at play.

Now, in complete contrast to his interaction with the Rich Ruler, we turn to Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector and he has grown rich.

But unlike the Ruler, who is presumably a fine, respected, upstanding citizen, Zacchaeus is a person of ill repute.

In Jesus' day, you were supposed to sneer a little bit when you said "tax collector," and "chief tax collector" would deserve even a bigger sneer. To become rich as a tax collector is like becoming rich off of payday lending and bail bonds—it's a slightly slimy way to wealth. Tax collectors bought the rights to collect taxes for the Roman empire within a certain region. In exchange, they were given the right to impose fees upon those whose taxes they collected, to extract additional costs or penalties as profits. As you can imagine, the poor suffered the most under the system, racking up the most fees. Tax collectors were gifted at extracting blood from a turnip, as the saying goes.

So, Zacchaeus was a wee little thug and a wee little thug was he. In any event, he has heard of Jesus, his teaching, his reputation—perhaps he has even heard that this Jesus is kind to tax collectors and sinners, which would be awfully enticing for someone who is used to being outcast and despised. Zacchaeus climbs up into a Sycamore tree so that he can get a glimpse of Jesus as he passes by.

We recall the story, however. When Jesus comes to the place where Zacchaeus is perched, he looks up and says “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

Now let us pause and recognize what has just happened. In publicly calling him by name—in asking hospitality of Zacchaeus—Jesus **has shown hospitality to** Zacchaeus.

He has named him, honored him, shown grace to him. And the people don’t like it at all! All who saw it began to grumble, and said, “He (Jesus) has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” He has treated as deserving someone who is utterly undeserving.

Now I want us to focus upon Zacchaeus’ response—and do so with Sheldon and his gift baskets in mind. Instead of Sheldon at the beginning of the gift exchange, let’s call him Sheldon #1—instead of the Rich young Ruler—instead of “What must I do to earn, to inherit, to deserve” ...this is Sheldon #2 at the end of the gift exchange, the recipient of an indescribable gift of incalculable value, falling all over himself, offering ALL the gift baskets, “What can I possibly do? It isn’t enough! It can’t be enough!”

Unasked, Zacchaeus bursts out, “Lord!.....half of my possessions I will give to the poor. And if I’ve defrauded anyone of anything (and I’m a chief tax collector—I’ve defrauded lots of people of lots of things) I’ll pay back.... two times, no three times, no FOUR TIMES AS MUCH.”

Like Sheldon #2, Zacchaeus has been moved to his core by amazement and wonder, by his receiving of a gift that is beyond imagining—the gift of being known, valued, seen, understood, touched. Transactional gift giving, transactional discipleship, resides in the head. Relational gift-giving or discipleship resides in the heart! So, Jesus pronounces, “Today salvation has come to this house”...not because Zacchaeus has prayed the sinner’s prayer, or postulated some proper theological concept, but because Zacchaeus has encountered the generosity of God and his own heart, which had been clenched like a fist, has become an open hand. Indeed, he cannot give enough. ALL THE BASKETS!

Now I chose to entitle the sermon today, “Generosity is Gratitude, Overflowing.” As we’ve explored in previous weeks, it is true in terms of

our generosity of Spirit—seeing others in the kindest and most generous of lights. It is true in terms of our generosity of self—given the unimaginable gift of life itself, we share our lives and our talents abundantly with others. And it is true in terms of our generous sharing of resources.

Created in the image of God, we are invited to experience the unrestrained joy of giving as God gives—not in order to get a tax credit—not in order to make a required minimum distribution, not in response to what is deserved, not in order to engage in the careful calculus of which gift basket, ...but to be joyous and gracious and generative and generous! To give like a tree gives fruit...to give like a flower gives beauty....to give like a stream gives water.

How grateful I am for the gift of life! How grateful I am for the beauty and the bounty of God's good creation! How grateful I am for friends and family! How grateful I am for forgiveness and second chances! How grateful I am for music, for food, for sufficiency, for plenty, for astonishing abundance! Does my gratitude overflow as generosity?

There truly are not enough gift baskets in the world.

Amen.