

Advent Lutheran Church
Going All In
September 22, 2024

I Kings 17:7-16 / I Timothy 6:17-19 / Mark 12:41-44

Let me begin with a question: What do people love more than God? Go ahead and start making a mental list.

A few years back, Pastor Scott Hauser wrote an interesting article sharing a list of things that many Christians often love more than God. It includes items you may dismiss, but perhaps should not: football, beauty, and technology. It also contains items that you may be more open to recognizing often become like gods – at least for a season: the American way, attention, and safety.

Whether or not your list is similar to Pastor Scott's, I think you will agree with his assertion that the number one American idol – the thing we most often love more than God – is money.¹

Given our cultural tendency to love money and even to obsess about it, we need to be reminded that this is not God's plan. God in God's great wisdom, teaches generosity as a way of inviting us to live differently.

I recently came across a stewardship booklet written by two well-known pastors and authors: Martin Copenhaver and Lillian Daniel. It features several multiple-choice questions. Let me share one with you. As I do, be sure to choose an answer.

When the preacher begins a sermon on stewardship, your first thought is:

- a. "Did I leave the oven on?"
- b. "I'm so glad my shallow, materialistic neighbor is here to hear this."
- c. "I come here for hope and inspiration, not to have some spoiled brat make me feel guilty for what I have," or
- d. "Does God really care about money? I'll listen just in case the Spirit has a word for me."²

¹ Scott Hauser. "American Idols: The Top 10 Things That We Love More Than God" in Presbyterian Outlook.

² Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver. "Are You Ready to Talk About Money in Your Church?" (2008)

I hope we all know the right answer is D. To help us hear what God has for us this day, I will share a few stories. These are not simply stories of money or giving, but rather reminders of some of the ways extravagant generosity is practiced.

Notably that term is the one championed by the author of the book that inspired our current sermon series. Bishop Schnase explains

Extravagant Generosity describes the practice of sharing and giving that exceed all expectations and extends to unexpected measures. It describes lavish sharing, sacrifice, and giving in service to God and neighbor.

Fruitful congregations thrive because of extraordinary sharing, willing sacrifice, and joyous giving of their members out of love for God and neighbor. Such churches teach and practice giving that . . . emphasizes a Christian's need to give rather than on the church's need for money.³

At this week's Roundtable, Advent members shared stories of some of the big and obvious ways extravagant generosity has showed up here in recent years.

- If you don't yet know, I invite you to ask around and learn the story of the bell tower or the sacristy.
- Or inquire about how any number of smaller but meaningful projects and outreach activities that were not in the budget were funded.

And, in addition to pointing to these gifts by others people reflected on their own experiences. Many shared how they came to know a generous God and in response have become conduits of generosity.

For one person this started making sense only when they shifted from giving God their financial leftovers at the end of the month to giving a tithe as the first thing they paid each month. Another shared about delaying the purchase of a major household

³ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised* (Abingdon Press, 2018), 137.

expense to free up money they then used to be extravagantly generous at church.

I not only learned about your experiences, but also found myself reminded of so many others who have taught me so much about how giving changes the giver. I also reconnected with an understanding that our financial stewardship is at least as much a spiritual matter as an economic one.

In one of the congregations I served, someone insisted on meeting with me on Christmas Eve. To be honest, I was not excited about this interruption on one of the busiest days of the year. I accepted the meeting on the condition it would be brief only to find myself speechless when I was handed a check with more zeroes on it than I'd ever seen before.

In another congregation I learned that there was always a \$5 bill in the offering plate folded in the most unique way – as if the artistic value were as great as the monetary value. Only later did I learn the person who gave this gift was among our most extravagant donors: an unhoused person who always arrived late and left early.

As I studied this morning's Gospel lesson, I was struck again and again by the woman's generous act. One contemporary paraphrase puts it this way: "All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford - she gave her all."

If we are being honest that kind of talk makes most of us uncomfortable as good Mainline Protestants, much less as good Lutherans.

My former pastor, Karl Travis, just published a new book on generosity. In it he relates a number of stories from his years as a pastor as well as from his work as a stewardship consultant.

Pastor Karl relates a story of using one of his go-to ice-breakers to get the conversation going among a group of leaders who were

attending a judicatory meeting.

He placed small packets of M&Ms on the tables and explained that the colors of the M&Ms – red, yellow, blue, orange or green – matched the colors beside questions on the slide he was projecting. People were invited to choose a M&M then answer the question that matched the color of their piece of candy and finally to eat it as a reward. The ice-breaker continued as everyone had the opportunity to answer a few questions.

The first few questions were simple and straightforward but they grew more complex and personal toward the bottom of each slide. The final question was very bold and personal. In fact, he had included the last question just to show how what risky questions looked like. To keep anyone from feeling a need to answer these very challenging questions he coded them black, which meant no one would be called on to answer since there were no black M&Ms.

Except that on this occasion rather than bringing alonging M&Ms, Pastor Karl had let the host secure the M&Ms. HE would soon learn that the host had purchased a Halloween variety, which included black M&Ms.

Rather than ruining his plan, the unexpected appearance of black M&Ms opened the door to incredible vulnerability. Slowly but surely, people began to read and answer some of the questions that were coded black, including sharing their current income and the amount they had pledged to their church's annual giving campaign.⁴ Can you imagine?!?!

Last Sunday more than 75 members and supporters of Advent Lutheran Church gathered for a Day of Discovery. While we covered a lot of ground, it is worth noting that we ended by sharing our wishes – our hopes for the future of this congregation. The kinds of aspirations many of us have never spoken aloud – and if so, certainly not in front of most of the

⁴ Karl B. Travis. *God's Gift of Generosity: Gratitude Beyond Stewardship* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), p.97-99.

congregation. It was a time of optimism but also one of vulnerability.

The list of hopes and dreams was significant and varied. Quite a few of the wishes named aloud before the entire assembly imagined a future with more – more volunteers, more younger people, more families, more small groups, more worship services, and more financial security.

More. Going all in. Extravagant generosity.

I invite you to take some time – later this morning and in the weeks ahead – to reflect on your story of giving to the church and particularly your generosity here at Advent. Give some attention to your past generosity and your current practices, but place your focus on the future.

I wonder what “going all in” would look like for you. How would it change your ongoing giving? How might it impact your thoughts about leaving a legacy, perhaps through your estate?

And I wonder if in the future folks will look back and realize that many of Advent’s hopes and dreams were realized in part because so many people practiced extravagant generosity.

May it be so. Amen.