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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor

Scripture: Acts 4:32-37—Finances

Will you humour me for a moment? I want to invite you to take out your wallet or bill fold. Reach into your pocket or purse and get it. Okay, hold it up so I know everyone is following along. Now, pass it to the person to your right. For some of you that is the person that already controls your wallet! Just pass it to that person to hold. If there is an empty seat just reach out to the next closest person. If you are by the windows lay it on the ground beside you. If you have no one to pass it to, just bring it up to me, I will hold it! There, doesn't it feel good to give up control of that wallet. Let someone else look after it? Now, I want to invite the ushers forward as we take up an offering! I am kidding. You can give the wallets back. Does everyone have it? Take a quick peek inside to make sure everything is still there.

It makes you feel a little anxious though, doesn't it? To give up control of your wallet and whatever is in it to someone else? This thing, this wallet or purse or whatever it is that holds your financial information or credit card or cash, wields some power over us. We can even fall into the trap of worshipping it.

Several years ago, when I was a youth pastor, I took a group of youth for an inner city mission trip to Chicago. Our main purpose was to simply serve the poor in the inner city. When we arrived, our leaders for the week wanted to give us an idea of what it felt like to be poor so they sent us out in the streets of downtown Chicago without our wallets. We had no money, no credit or debit card and no ID. Remember, this would have been back before the days of everyone having a cell phone so we didn't even have that to fall back on. All we were given was a pass to use the "L", the rapid transit system in Chicago. I remember the anxiety I felt as I left that wallet behind and journeyed into a city I did not know. I realized the degree to which my security

was wrapped up in my wallet. One of the key components of the whole exercise was to observe the level to which people share their resources. We were to look for places of refuge for the poor in the community like soup kitchens or free drop in centres. We were also to ask people on the street if they could spare a quarter for us to use a pay phone and then kind of gauge people's reactions when asked to share. It was interesting that when we debriefed the whole exercise with our group afterwards, we were generally surprised that the ones that we thought would be more generous with their sharing of resources, weren't that generous. The ones we didn't think would be able to share anything at all, usually were the ones who came through. We had certain stereotypes of who would share and who wouldn't, based on their outward appearance. We were surprised though. Maybe you have had an experience like this.

As you many of you know, I have a six-month old grandson, Beau. It is amazing being a grandparent and of course he is the cutest, most adorable baby ever. But one thing I have discovered, is that whenever we are with him, the world revolves around Beau. When he is hungry, he cries and right away, his mom, my daughter feeds him. I have tried that with Carolyn, it doesn't work so well for me. When he is fussy, someone picks him up and cuddles him, walks with him and soothes him. The stroke his back and tell him everything will be okay. Again, I have tried that with Carolyn when I am fussy. I don't seem to get the same treatment. When Beau's diaper needs changing, everything stops, so we can change his diaper. It is usually a three-person job. One has the wipes and clean diaper. Another has the cream and then me, I am tasked with holding the "pee pee teepee" in place. It is a very important role.

Have you heard of these things? If you don't know, I will spare you the details. Google it. Let's just say, they didn't have them when my boys were babies! One thing I have discovered is that our lives cannot continue until Beau gets a clean diaper.

Last week, we went on our first road trip with Beau to a family birthday party in Barrie. We had just settled in nicely about a half hour into the trip. We decided to go the scenic back way to have a little more relaxing trip. All of a sudden, Carolyn pipes up from the back seat, do you smell something. Panic ensues as those in the back seat begin sniffing out the source of the foul odor. It's Beau. He doesn't seem to be bothered at all by his predicament. Oh no, we have to stop and change Beau's diaper. Paul, look for a gas station or Tim's. At this stage of his life, it is all about Beau.

Maybe that is why in our society, one of the most important traits that we teach children from the earliest age, beside potty training and sleeping through the night, is the ability and desire to share. To wean them off of the "it is all about me attitude" and focus on others.

Whether or not you have experienced this from the perspective of a parent, grandparent, sister, brother or daycare worker doing the training or you can remember it as something you were taught as a child, we probably all agree that sharing is something that is instilled in us from a young age. Why?

Teaching young children how to share and be generous is a necessity to allow them to integrate into our culture where they have to deal with people and cooperate with certain societal norms and expectations. For example, as much as we would all love to have the road to ourselves when we are driving, we have to learn to share it. To drive on the right hand side and obey roads signs and stop at red lights ensures order and safety is maintained.

Child Psychologists state that one of the most significant ways that we teach children to share is to modelling sharing in our own lives. If you want your preschooler to learn to share, then share with them. If you are snacking on apple slices, offer your child one. Put sharing into action by modeling it with them and with the way they see you share with others because children are always watching, have

you noticed? Not just their parents but also those significant role models in their life such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, coaches and teachers. The way we share and are generous impacts those around us. My children are all now in their twenties and I find they are still watching and questioning what Carolyn and I do with the money and possessions God has given us. Maybe that has been your experience as well.

So, can I ask you, how well do you share? Are you a generous giver with the little things and those that are a little bigger? If you have been with us over the past few weeks, you know that we are in a message series at North Park entitled, *A Generous Faith*.

The premise for this series is that God held back nothing from humanity in order to save us from our sinful condition. He gave the very best he had to offer, his son, Jesus.

Jesus is the epitome of humility, servanthood and generosity. He gave his life on the cross to provide a pathway of redemption for us. All we need to do is accept him as Lord of our life and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, follow the way he has called us to live. The way of a life of a follower of Jesus is to be defined by among other things, generosity. To be a Christian is to live generously.

Generous is defined as showing a readiness to give more of something, than is necessary or expected. Are you a generous person?

Two weeks ago, I talked about being generous with our forgiveness. Last week, Steve MacDouell addressed the topic of being generous with time, talent and gifts and today we come to being generous with our possessions and finances.

Oh you knew we were going to go there didn't you? Some of you just instinctively reached down and clenched a little tighter to your wallet. For whatever reason, when we talk about money in the church, people recoil or become resentful, thinking it is just one big guilt trip. It's not, or at least it is not supposed to be. Here's the thing.

Do a scan through the bible and you will discover that there are about 2350 verses that refer to money and material possessions. That is more than the passages on faith and prayer combined.

Jesus said more about money and things, than about any other single topic. Just think about that. He gave it so much attention so we would be remiss if we skipped by the topic because it was uncomfortable or guilt inducing. Maybe that is our problem. If we better understood what Jesus was saying, it would actually free us up from this control it seems to have over us.

Let me invite you to turn to a passage of scripture that is near and dear to my heart. Of all of the bible, this one has been especially impactful and challenging to the way that I live.

If you have your bibles, turn to the New Testament book of Acts 4:32-37. Let me give you a bit of context before we read it. Jesus has just spent about three years, travelling throughout the Galilean countryside in this 1st century Middle Eastern world. He was preaching and teaching about some pretty revolutionary things. He was addressing some hot topics of the day and what he was calling people to was countercultural. In a Roman dominated world that was obsessed with power, prestige, status, money and material possessions, Jesus comes along talking about a kingdom that he represents. One that is characterized by, among other things, love, compassion, care, sharing and forgiveness. Values that were in stark contrast to the world in that day. And Jesus has the audacity to invite people to leave the old way of life that was robbing them of joy and purpose and follow him. Many do. Then he is killed. He was seen as too much of a threat to the established order.

We know the rest of the story, right? We just celebrated Easter. Jesus resurrects from the dead. He spends some time encouraging his followers to continue to live out the Kingdom values he taught them and then he ascends into heaven and promises to return one day and make everything right.

The book of Acts in the New Testament describes how the early Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit (remember Jesus left them his spirit), are attempting to live out his kingdom values in the midst of a pretty hostile environment.

That is where we find ourselves in,

Acts 4:32-37

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. 33 The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great blessing was upon them all. 34 There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them 35 and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need. 36 For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. 37 He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles.

What is your visceral reaction after listening to that? I find it so amazing. The followers of Jesus, the early Christians were demonstrating radical generosity with their money and their possessions and did you notice the consequence of their actions?

Acts 4:34

There were no needy people among them.

Why?

Acts 4:34-35

There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.

Let me just be clear what is not happening here. People are not selling off all of their homes to support the poor and then roaming around the streets like Gypsies. No, we see all through the book of Acts, references to Christians continuing to meet together in homes. They didn't get rid of all their houses. This was about simplifying their lifestyle. Selling off extra homes or land that they had to support those in need within their community. Another caution. People are not practicing a form of communism here, where all property and resources are collectively owned. No, the wording is pretty concise in the text. The distribution was made as people had a need.

Unfortunately, in our world today, a lot of people can claim to have a need but really don't. In this

situation in the text, there was no selfishness that entered into the picture. If someone had a need, the others were not going to be stingy with what they had. They held everything freely. They held everything that they owned with open hands, ready and willing to do what it takes to lend a helping hand.

Do you know the fundamental flaw that usually accompanies the philosophy of money in our society? It is all about me. Maybe it's like baby Beau's mindset, the world revolves around me. Self-centredness can hide in every financial decision we make. 'I will do what is best for me'. Even money or things that we give away, we have to be careful that it isn't selfishly motivated by how it makes us feel or the way it makes us look.

But there was something different amongst the early followers of Jesus. Generous living and giving was a way of life. It was the norm not the exception. Now that doesn't mean that everything was harmonious. There were some hiccups for sure. All we have to do is turn over the page to Acts 5 to read the story of Ananias and Sapphira to know that some people still struggled with this concept selfless sharing. But overall, this community of faith was distinguishable by the way they shared what they had. Make no mistake about it, this early church was extremely visible, people were watching how they did things. They were watching how they lived together and engaged with others and one of the things that made them stand out the most from the culture around them? It was their attitude towards money. Their generosity. In fact, this is such a major distinctive of the early followers of Jesus, that the author of the book of Acts, is repeating an earlier passage found in Acts 2. Notice what it says about them in,

Acts 2:44-47

44 And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. 45 They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. 46 They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— 47 all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

The author of Acts is repeating the traits and values of this community twice in such a short span because it was significant. All the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. Did I tell you, they shared everything they had? There were no needs among them! It is so awe inspiring, you have to say it twice. The way the followers of Jesus, the church was living was noteworthy. It was drawing attention from those around them.

These early Christians understood themselves to be different from others in their culture and lived together in community nourished by an alternate narrative. Their lives were entangled with the one who gave it all for them, Jesus.

As a result, the way they lived broke down barriers between rich and poor, male and female, slave and free and Greek and Jew. They lived out the gospel through their love and charity, specifically directed towards the poor, the orphans, widows, the sick, prisoners, slaves and travelers. The exemplary moral lives of ordinary followers of Jesus at this time stood out against the rampant immorality of the Roman culture of the day. Their generosity with possessions and resources along with simpler lifestyles marked their lives in a world that was dominated by accumulation and consumption.

Even those opposed to the Christians in this day had to admit that their lifestyle of generosity was appealing. In a report written about these Christians given to the Roman Emperor around 140 AD, it said this;

It has become their passion to do good even to their enemies. Anyone of them who has anything gives ungrudgingly to the one who has nothing. If they see a travelling stranger, they bring him under their roof. They rejoice over him as a real brother, for they do not call one another brothers out of the flesh, but they know that they are brothers in the spirit and in God. If they hear that one of them is imprisoned or oppressed for the sake of Christ, they take care of all his needs. If possible, they set him free. If anyone among them is poor or comes into want while they themselves have nothing to spare, they fast two or three days for him. In this way, they can supply any poor man with the food he needs. This O Emperor... is their manner of life. (Hunger for Life, Dave Blundell)

The early Christians took the way that Jesus called them to live in scripture, seriously. Although they suffered incredible persecution during this period of history, there was also something about them that was so appealing and attractive that thousands of people left their old way of living only for themselves and stepped into the way of life of Jesus. Even though they knew they could be persecuted for it. That is the power of generosity. Amazing.

So, I think the question needs to be asked, what was their motivation? What kept them going? What caused them to live like this? Look back on,

Acts 4:32

All the believers were united in heart and mind.

They were of one heart and one mind. That is a powerful picture of unity in the church, isn't it? They were bound together by the Holy Spirit and their loves, hopes and passions were aligned. What joined them together was not just that they attended the same church, or that they were all Christians. No. This was a spiritual unity and a passionate commitment to the mission Jesus called them to. Community life is never an end in itself. Did you know that? A vibrant community is always a community with a mission. They have a purpose beyond themselves. That is why here at North Park, we are not unified because we all gather in the same room singing the same songs and listening to the same message. No. What brings us together is Jesus and the God given mandate that he has given us.

North Park's Mission Statement:

To inspire, support and mobilize one another to live like Jesus as a transforming and life-giving presence in our families, communities and the world.

Are we all of one heart and mind with this mission?
Are we unified?

And then we have 6 core values that support this mission.

Life Transformation

Community

Living on Mission

Practical, Relevant Faith

Gratitude and Generosity

Grace

These things dictate all that we do to ensure that we are all on the same page and rowing in the same direction. It brings unity of heart and mind, togetherness to us.

Last weekend, our Senior Leadership team and the Elders were all together for meetings on Saturday and Sunday to ensure that we stay committed and laser focused on Jesus first, and then the God given mission and values of this church. One of which is Gratitude and Generosity. Look back at the text.

Acts 4:32

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had.

A natural bi-product of being united in heart and mind was, generosity. Included in the unity of this early church was the generous sharing of possessions. We have to just stop there and ponder this for a moment. Have you ever felt united in heart and mind with someone or a group of people all sharing a common mission or purpose? If you have, then you know that is a special time. For some of you maybe it was part of a team project at work or school where everyone came together and did their best work and produced great results. For others, maybe it was a sports/dance team. Perhaps you overcame some big odds early in the season but things started to gel, everyone pulled their weight, there were no individual superstars and you went on to win the championship. It is such a profound experience that you remember it for a long time after it is done.

For the early church, they were bound by the Holy Spirit. That was the glue that unified them. Their hearts and minds were on the things of Jesus, so naturally compassion, love, selflessness and faith just oozed out from them. When they saw those in need around them, they didn't get resentful. No, they could not help but reach out in generosity. It was second nature.

As Steve mentioned in his message last week, this generosity was not a program for the early church, it was not one more thing that they had to add on to their lives. No, it was part of their spiritual DNA. It was a natural expression of their lives united in Christ. They couldn't help it. Generosity just came to them. In fact, in this short passage in Acts 4, this concept of generosity and sharing is referred to four different times.

This church in Acts did not consider their material resources or their money to be their own. It was given by God to care for their own needs, yes but then if needed, to be shared with others. As a result, there was no needy people among them. Can you imagine? But, it didn't come at a cost. Some sacrifices had to be made. It meant simplifying. Some choose to give up that extra property, or maybe forgo that extra vacation or home renovation or that early retirement, or dinner out at the restaurant so that they could share for the collective good of the community and here is the thing, don't miss it. Instead of resentment, this type of living brought the people closer together. It unified them.

See, we always think that money and things are going to bring us more freedom, don't we? If only I made more money. If only I had a bigger house or better car but what if the opposite is true. What if we only find true freedom and fulfilment when we give things away, generously? Just think about that.

Again, the early church wasn't practicing a form of communism that was enforced on the people. The actions of the early church were a loving and compassionate response to the generosity of God that they had experienced. It was voluntary. But maybe more than that, it was an act of worship and obedience out of gratitude to the one that held back nothing to save humanity. He gave us his son, Jesus and everything that we are and everything that we have comes from him. How can we not share with others?

I wonder if we have the same attitude about our money and possessions today as the early church did. Are we generous givers? Many of you are. I am always humbled by the way that you respond to a financial need. Three years ago, we launched a capital campaign to renovate this space that was badly needed. We set the goal at \$1.6 million. You gave \$80 000 more than that. In the midst of this

capital campaign, God just kind of laid it in our laps a church building at 1750 Huron Street. With a renovation, it cost \$300 000. We have been able to pay all of it off because of your generosity.

We announced a church in Stratford had become available to us at our AGM meeting in February. In just two months, you have already given \$35 000 towards our \$300 000 goal to set up that new space that will be used to proclaim the gospel in the neighbourhood of Stratford.

We had the opportunity to send an ESL team to Ethiopia last year. We needed to raise \$30 000. You gave over \$35 000. You have given well over \$200 000 for the resettlement of Assyrians refugees in London. I am humbled by the way that this community gives above and beyond just our regular budget needs.

But we want to continue to hold this bar of generous giving, high. Why? Well, because we sit in church and we praise God, through music and prayer. We listen to biblical teaching and then we go out into our world and try and live a life for him. We all believe that Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, amen? And we would love for our family, friends and neighbours to experience that hope, am I right?

What if I told you that the period of history in the church where growth happened in the greatest number, when people outside of the church were touched in the most powerful way, was during a time when the church demonstrated unprecedented, radical generosity. It was the hook that brought people to Jesus. They shared what they had and they even sold land so that the money could be given to those in need. How would you respond if I told you that generous giving was their primary evangelistic tool? Can you imagine if it were ours?

We still have people in need around us today, and we still have a lot of things. Do we hold them loosely, looking for opportunities to share? Looking for opportunities to be generous? See, when we truly have experienced God's grace, when confronted with a need or someone asks us for money, we don't get angry. We aren't offended. We sometimes feel sad that we don't have enough to help everyone. Let me give you some practical ways to live out generosity. Giving in little ways leads to habits that will lead to giving in big ways.

You could pay for someone's coffee that is behind you in the Tim Horton's drive thru. You could pick up the tab for someone at a restaurant. You could loan someone your bike or car or step ladder or even your cottage. You could sponsor a child through World Vision, Compassion or some other organization. You can sit down and look at your budget and determine to have more margin. That is spend less, so you can give more. You could start giving to the work of God through this church by tithing regularly as an act of worship. You could give to the amazing work God is doing through our church plant at 1750 Huron Street. You could give to North Park GO- which funds our local and global outreach. Things like World Tailors, ESL, the Lord Elgin Public School Christmas Dinner we sponsor every year. It provides camp scholarships for kids that can't afford to go to our summer camps. You could give to our exciting new church plant in Stratford. There are so many opportunities. Does this pump you up? Do you have some land to sell?!

You know what my prayer is for my life? (Just so you know, this topic is deeply challenging to me as well). My prayer for you and for me and for our faith community? Is that we experience the same unity and oneness of heart and spirit as the early church and that we would be a witness to a watching world by the way we give generously, share radically and care compassionately.

I pray that the staff at Swiss Chalet and Johnny's next door and any other restaurant we pile into after Sunday church service would actually look forward to seeing us, The Christians are coming. Knowing that is when they are going to get their best tips of the week.

I pray that all of us would be like a woman from this church that called me this week. She wanted to know if we had anyone from the church who could help her neighbour. She had a badly damaged roof and no means to repair it. I gently told this woman, yes, we have someone. It's you. I challenged her to look for ways to help her neighbour because she is an expression of the church and Jesus to this woman. Instead of being resentful, this woman from our church began to inquire about ways to help her neighbour. I love that. I love her heart of compassion and care and that she is exploring ways to be generous.

I pray that when people in this city think of North Park Church one of the first things that comes to their minds is our generosity. Generosity with our forgiveness, with our time, talents and gifts and yes, even with our money and possessions. I pray that our generous spirit points people to Jesus like it did in the early church.

That is my prayer for you and for me, for this church. It is your prayer as well?

Points to Ponder

A Generous Faith ~ Finances

Acts 4:32-37

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Discuss the concept of sharing. Do you remember the ways that your parents taught or demonstrated the importance of sharing to you? Is there anything that you find difficult to share? Why? Who have been some role models in your life that have truly modelled this idea of sharing? What are some of the things they did?
2. What hinders us in our culture from demonstrating the radical generosity modelled in Acts 4:32-37? Describe some of the ways that you have seen people share like they did in the early church. What sort of impact did their generosity have on those around them?
3. Why is unity so important in the church? Discuss North Park's mission statement, *To inspire, support and mobilize one another to live like Jesus as a transforming and life-giving presence in our families, communities and the world.* In what ways does it promote unity in "heart and mind" at North Park?
4. Have you ever experienced a time where you were part of a group that was united in heart and mind? Describe the circumstance and the key learnings for you. Have you ever experienced a time when you were part of a group where disunity prevailed? Describe the circumstance and the key learnings for you.
5. Why should we continue to hold the bar of generosity high in the church? What areas of being a generous giver are challenging you these days? What is hindering you from giving the way they did in Acts 4?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for margin in your lives so that you can be freed up to give more to those in need and to the work of God in our world. Pray against those barriers that restrict us from being generous givers.