



From the Pulpit: October 29, 2023

Reformation and Stewardship Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

I Corinthians 13:5; John 3:1–18 Select Verses

The Greatest of These, VIII: Selflessness

This fall we're preaching a sermon series called *The Greatest of These* about Paul's famous description of love in I Corinthians 13. Paul writes:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

A loving person never celebrates a pinched and mean sufficiency, but always a lavish, overflowing extravagance.

When I hear the word 'Generous,' I always think 'Size,' 'Spaciousness,' 'Expansiveness.' A 24-ounce porterhouse is a generous portion. A 52XL men's suit is a generous piece of clothing. A 10,000-square-foot house is a generous domicile. A generous person makes plenty of space in her life for others, from her family to the new friend she meets in Altgeld Gardens.

“it is impossible to be self-centered and loving at the same time.”

In his shapely, fulsome, beloved description of the common concept of Love in I Corinthians 13, St. Paul wants to tell us that Love is not simple and singular but compound and complex. It's less like a round smooth pebble than a multi-faced diamond where each plane sparkles in the sunlight.

“Love is patient,” says St. Paul. “Love is kind,” says St. Paul. “Love is never envious or arrogant or boastful or rude,” says St. Paul. “Love does not insist upon its own way,” says St. Paul. That's the New Revised Standard translation. The King James Bible says, “Love seeketh not its own.” Another version says, “Love is not self-seeking.” My favorite is Eugene Peterson's translation: “Love isn't always me-first.”

All those translations get the point across, but they're all negatives. They only tell us what Love is **NOT**. Let's turn that negative into a positive: “Love is selfless,” or “Love is generous.” Paul doesn't quite say this, but almost: it is impossible to be self-centered and loving at the same time.

I'm a Presbyterian, and the American Presbyterian Church is a daughter to the Church of Scotland, the Mother Church, so Presbyterians always have a huge arsenal of Scots jokes at our disposal, most of them about the legendary stinginess of the Scots.

For instance, we might ask, “What's the difference between a Scotsman and a canoe?” and we answer, “A canoe tips.”¹

Or we might tell the story of the Englishman, the Irishman, and the Scotsman who attended the wake of a mutual friend. At the wake, the casket was open, and the Englishman paid his respects to his friend by laying a five-pound gold piece on the man's chest. The Irishman did the same.

¹A. A. Lerner, in *Scotch, or It's Smart to Be Thrifty*, compiled by Angus J. MacTavish, ed. by F. Gregory Hartswick (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1931), p. 34.

And the Scotsman walked up to the casket, and with tears streaming down his face, wrote a check for 15 pounds and took the two gold pieces for change because that check is not going to be cashed.²

Never a pinched and mean sufficiency but always a lavish, profligate abundance. It's Stewardship Sunday, so I must request your charity, which is just a synonym for "Love"—right?—from the Latin *caritas*, 'esteem' or 'affection.'

The average gift at Kenilworth Union is about \$4,000. That's not an expectation; that's a statistic. The mean household income in Winnetka is \$250,000. It's the 14th richest zip code in America. You know where you stand in relation to that mean.

You also know where the church stands on your list of giving priorities. You've got many other philanthropic obligations, from your alma mater to the Lyric to the Art Museum to By the Hand to the Night Ministry. Your gift is completely between you and God. We'll just be bold enough to ask for something, anything. Give us a dollar a week if that feels good.

At my last church, one of my parishioners was giving \$6,000 a year to the church, which is a nice, nice gift. When a pledge like that comes across John Sharp's desk, he gives the sender a standing ovation. Gifts like that keep this place running like a top.

It was \$6,000 a year for several years running, then one year he sent us a check for \$24,000, quadruple in one fell swoop. When we called to thank him and asked him the reason for his lavish largesse, he said, "Last week, I got my tax bill on my house--\$24,000. I couldn't have my church pledge stay a small fraction of my tax bill." I love the way that guy thinks.

If you take the train to Grand Central to get to your job

²Clarence L. Mortimer, in *Scotch, or It's Smart to Be Thrifty*.

in New York, you might see a 50-year-old guy with a salt-and-pepper beard named Luke Ryan. He's playing "Midnight Special" on his beat-up guitar and singing terribly, off-key, raspy voice, can't hit the right chords with his guitar. The sign behind him reads, "I'm a street musician, too weird to live, oo mean to die. Give me money or I'll play music."³ That's my motto. Give me money or I'll keep preaching. Money makes me stop.

"I got my tax bill on my house—\$24,000. I couldn't have my church pledge stay a small fraction of my tax bill."
—a member's generous pledge

Charles Feeney died on October 9 at the age of 92. They called him the James Bond of Philanthropy. I think that's just another way of saying that he was the GOAT of Philanthropy—the Greatest of All Time.

Charles Feeney grew up in New Jersey. His working-class family had a rough time during the Depression, but then he joined the Air Force and when he was mustered out in the early 1950's, he and a friend started selling liquor and cigarettes and perfume to sailors in their seaports, and then that little homemade enterprise grew into a sprawling network of hundreds of duty-free shops in every airport in the world. He made a fortune.

At the age of 50, he had seven palatial homes in New York, London, Paris, Honolulu, San Francisco, Aspen, and the French Riviera, but then he began having second thoughts about his lifestyle and started giving it all away.

He's given \$8 billion away, including \$350 million to Cornell, his alma mater. That's why they call him the James Bond of Philanthropy.

³Jesse McKinley, "Sampling the Music Beneath as It Prepares to Rise Above," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2002.

He's given gifts to over 1,000 buildings around the world, and his name appears on none of them. He sends his gifts as cashier's checks so that no one will know where it comes from. All this money is raining down on these organizations and nobody even knows where it's coming from, till he finally fessed up that it was him in the 1990s.

For the last 40 years, he has not owned a home or a car, wears a \$10 wristwatch, and prefers buses to taxis. He was married to a Frenchwoman for 35 years and when he got divorced in the 1990s, he gave her all seven homes plus a pile of cash.⁴ Have you ever heard of that? All seven!

In 2017, he finally gave away his last billion dollars, which emptied and closed his Foundation. That's the way to give, when your charity knows neither restraint nor publicity.⁵

Sometimes I tell my brides and grooms about Love's strange arithmetic. Do you know about love's strange arithmetic? The more you give, the more you have. The more you subtract, the more you add. The more you let go of, the more you hang on to.

Shakespeare has Juliet say to Romeo, "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give, the more I have, for both are infinite."⁶

Love's strange arithmetic: the more you give, the more you have. So I tell my bride "forsake many good things you would have enjoyed if you were living only your own life. Put your partner before yourself. I tell my groom "Lose many arguments," because the legendary therapist Ester Perel says, "Bill you can be **right**, or you can be **married**. Which do you want to be?"⁷

Love's strange arithmetic: the more you give, the more you have. It's like the wine at the wedding in Cana, or the five loaves and two fishes at the feeding of the 5,000, enough for two Kenilworths. There is always enough to go around. It's infinite, never a pinched and mean sufficiency, but always a lavish bounty, pressed down, shaken together, running over.

The more you give, the more you have. It works in marriage, and it works in other areas of life, like Church for example.

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⁴Robert D. McFadden, "Charles Feeney, Who Made a Fortune and Then Gave it Away," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2023. Also, Jim Dwyer, "'James Bond' of Philanthropy Gives Away the Last of His Fortune," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2017.

⁵I stole this line from the baseball umpire Bill Klem, who used it in 1951 to describe the legendary player and manager John McGraw, Manager of the New York Giants, 1902–1932, quoted by Daniel Okrent and Steve Wulf in *Baseball Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 49).

⁶William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii, 133.

⁷Esther Perel and Mary Alice Miller, "Letters from Esther #43: Would You Rather Be Right or Be Married?" <https://www.esterperel.com/blog/letters-from-esther-42-would-you-rather-be-right-or-be-married>

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

God of the restless, hear us. Our restlessness shapes the busy-ness we say “yes” to. Let us, even for a moment, be restful instead of restless, trusting our heartbeat to steady in your spirit. Let us pay attention to the task at hand, the work of prayer, seeking your presence with our full bodies, naming to you the worries and joys of our lives. Slow us down, so we can be exactly where we are, doing exactly what we are doing, turning ourselves toward your eternal presence.

In the same way that Christ handed over his life, we hand over our lives to you in prayer, especially as we pray for the burdens of the world: we pray for the people of Ukraine as war continues to hold life at bay. We pray for those in Maine, undone by raw violence. And for those living in Israel and Palestine, we ask with boldness: be restorer of the breach, the one who protects and advises, the one who finds a way through the most impossible of days. For those who cry within collapsed buildings, for those sorting through the wreckage, for those held hostage, for those who feel as if there is no other way, be in the places with no hope, hear the longing for life, and make a way through.

And we pray too, for those we hold most dear, those who are part of our everyday, our community, our home. We pray for the newly widowed who do not yet know how to speak aloud their sorrow. We pray for the ones recovering from hospitalization, and those about to be hospitalized. We pray for those who carry worry in their bodies, worry for the future, worry like prayer a constant. Turn such worry into prayer, shifting and changing and being made sacred, so that our own lives can be held in the deepest of peace by your spirit surrounding us. For students taking tests, for athletes in their sport, for families supporting one another through beautiful days and hard days, let us be at home in our bodies, at home in our friendships, at home in our families, at home in you.

Be with us, O God, as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us: Our Father.... Amen.

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