

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for May 20, 2012 ~ Easter 7B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Today, we focus on the fifth practice of fruitful congregations – extravagant generosity. We do this in the light of Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer as recorded in the Gospel of John and with the echo of the passage that was read to us this morning from the First Letter of John. Simply put, Christ’s people can always afford to be extravagantly generous because he himself has been extravagantly generous toward us. Our generosity is one of the chief ways we bear witness that the theology of those who worship the God and Father of Jesus Christ is a theology of abundance, not a theology of scarcity. We believe that God will always make us rich enough to be generous. And, our generosity is a testimony that we truly believe that to be true.

Throughout history, people who have served as witnesses have placed their hand on various parts of their bodies or sacred objects as a sign of their truthfulness as well as their acceptance of responsibility for the future. One’s testimony not only has to do with what has happened in the past, but has a relationship to the future as well. In a court case, for example, the decision was and still is more significant for the future than for the past. Also, the testimony of one person has not normally been considered sufficient in a court of law. There must be other witnesses and evidence to corroborate the testimony being offered.

We divide the Biblical witness into two “testaments.” It is the testimony of God as well as the testimony of many eyewitnesses to the mighty acts of God. The focus of today’s passage from the first letter of John is upon the relationship between this testimony and the continuation of life. He says that God has testified regarding the eternal life he gives. This testimony has been corroborated by the Incarnate Word, God’s Son, by the Holy Spirit, and by those who have experienced the truth of God’s promise.

“And this is the testimony: that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life. Whoever does not have the Son does not have life” (I Jn. 5:11-12).

Thus, the believer testifies to what God **has done** through Jesus, what God **is doing** presently, and what God **will continue to do** as long as that testimony lives in the believer’s heart. Now here is the crux of the matter for you and me and anyone who claims to be a Christian disciple in this or any age: Does the testimony live in our hearts? Or, does our lack of a living faith and witness suggest that God is a liar? There is a simple wisdom in the trite old question, “if you were charged and tried in a court of law for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” How does the testimony you have received about God affect you and how does it find expression in your own testimony?

J. Allen Blair tells of a Sunday School teacher who demonstrated the importance of living one’s life as a testimony to the Christ within us. The teacher was a pompous, self-righteous man. He liked to dwell on the importance of living a life of obedience to Christ. His own life provided his favorite source of illustrative material on the topic. With head held high and chest thrust outward, he strutted impressively back and forth across the classroom saying, “Now boys, why do people call me a Christian?” There was a momentary silence. Then one of the boys slowly raised his hand. “Yes?” boomed the teacher. The boy responded, “Probably because they don’t know you!”

Christianity, as presented in I John, is more than a set of beliefs or doctrines or rules for living: it reaches down into the very basis and ground of life, our deepest convictions about God and about God’s relation to us, the world, and the way the convictions manifest our trust and witness in everyday life. Do we

approach the people and the world around us with fear and mistrust? Do we center our lives on ourselves, our possessions, our status, our own little world? Do we know the joy and peace that comes from believing *in* the One whom God has sent to give us eternal life? Eternal life is not just out there beyond the sunset. It is experienced here and now by those for whom the testimony lives in their hearts.

People ought to know something about the truth of the witness you have received by the witness you give. A cross-country bus made a scheduled stop at a depot, which was located near four different restaurants. The driver announced, "Folks, we'll be here for 30 minutes. The bus line has a strict policy never to recommend an eating place by name, so I am not permitted to tell you which restaurant of the four you have to choose from here is the best. However, I can say this. While we are here, if any of you should need me for any reason, I'll be at Tony's Diner directly across the street."

Testimony is about the truth we know. When it comes to our faith there is no prohibition against sharing this truth. By the same token, the evidence of the truth within us, exemplified by our actions, ought to provide as clear a witness as did the bus driver's walk to Tony's Diner. Where we can be found on Sunday mornings, where we invest our treasures, and what we can be found doing with our lives during the rest of the week is a sure fire way of finding out whether our faith is for real, or we make God out to be a liar!

Calvary Church has taken a bold step toward the future in launching the search process for a new Rector. You've done that because you believe God *has* a future for Calvary, that God wants Calvary to bear witness to God tomorrow as well as yesterday and today. Perhaps we should talk more about it, pray more about it, work harder to live into it. Your vision is to "Reach up, Reach in, and Reach out to everyone for the spread of Christ's Kingdom." If you let that vision live in your hearts along with your faith in Christ, you accept responsibility for the future. If, on the other hand, you shrug your shoulders, or expect it to be someone else's responsibility to believe that future into reality, in a real sense, you are abdicating responsibility for the good things that might come of it. Either way, each member is responsible for whatever you say and do that reflects on the truthfulness of God's testimony through this particular community of God's people. I doubt that you want your life and witness as a congregation to make God out to be a liar! God has made promises to those who trust the Son of God. Will your actions reveal that you trust those promises to be true or not?

An atheist was harshly denouncing Christianity in a speech. At one point he challenged his audience. "If anyone can prove I am wrong, come to the platform." After a lengthy and uncomfortable silence, an elderly man stood up and walked to the stage. "Produce your proof that I am wrong." chided the atheist. Without a word, the gentleman took an orange from his pocket, calmly peeled it, and ate it. Impatiently the speaker asked, "Well, what is your proof?" The man replied with a question of his own. "How did it taste?" he asked, referring to the orange he had just eaten. "How would I know?" came the reply, "I didn't eat it!" "Exactly," replied the quiet witness, "and I just showed you what I found out about Christianity. I tasted it, and it was good."

Like many of you, I have tasted the goodness of our extravagantly generous God. It is my heart's desire to have my life and the life of my community of faith convey my experience through the testimony of my life, through the mercy and grace of God. May the people of Ashland and beyond always think of God's extravagant generosity when they think of Calvary Episcopal Church.