

## From security to generosity

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; 12:16-21

The denominational Leader worship resource team for our Lenten season starts us off with these words. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.” This is our theme verse from Isaiah 55:8. Of all the scriptures for Lent 2022, our worship resource team kept circling back to this verse. We realized the texts for each Sunday reveal a truth about the ways of God, as well as the many ways God’s people get it wrong.

“Scripture this Lent season invites us to recognize that people think God offers one thing like exceptionalism, but what God really offers is inclusion, which is distinctive.

The world tends to think - scarcity, but God really focuses differently – on abundance. Also, we think power means – control, power over, but God says it is really found in something else – solidarity and power with.

One of the themes contrasts fear & invites us to focus on compassion instead. Another Sunday we focus on receiving instead of earning.

And today we start Lent off with the focus moving us from security, safety - to generosity.

The writers for our Lent series continue - Lent is generally considered a time to reflect on turning from our ways & recommit ourselves to the ways of God as revealed in Jesus. We hope that within this theme of “seeking God’s ways” you will find space and encouragement to explore the ways you and your congregation is being called to greater faithfulness.” This fits right in with our Reimagining work as well as the Advent theme we had – Dare to Imagine.

So, let’s jump into our theme – From security to generosity. The day I started seriously thinking about this Lent series, the Al Jazeera morning news shared good news. A boat load of Rohingya who were fleeing from Myanmar, were taken in by Indonesia. This was unusual. Usually, they give such desperate people some

food and water and force them to go elsewhere. Even though most Rohingya are Muslim – like many Indonesians. But where can they go?

Then Al Jazeera spent a good amount of time, focusing on how countries around the world work hard to keep desperate people out. You know some of the reasons for this policy. We fear terrorists, competition for jobs and loss of jobs. We fear the added national expense of helping immigrants get settled, learn job skills as well as the language. Affordable decent housing is an issue all over the world. And we do not want to have people on welfare for decades. These are just some of the reasons to reject people of who are different. I got angry.

I could not help exclaiming, “Why are so many national leaders not kind or caring? Why don’t they lead – despite all the economic & political realities? Especially in contrast to what is spent on their militaries and other forms of security like cyber & food & medicine & bailing out big business. Plus, nations always have money to pay for weapons. But not to help people who are frantic. And I have a long-term complaint about Muslim countries not taking in many Muslim refugees. So even though this may be a one-time incident in Indonesia – it’s great for those 100 people in a leaky, bad boat.

The reality is, most people don’t want to leave home. But violence, climate change, lack of jobs, bad government, no food, drought and so on, add up to make them desperate. Nations focus on their own security to the detriment of the security of the world. Practically, if our next-door neighbor does not feel secure, we may be affected in some negative way. It’s the same among countries. Look at the US border. The people are not attempting to immigrate because it’s fun or easy. Mostly, they are so desperate and do not have safer, better options. Home is not as it should be! They are willing to take a chance on insecurity and death to have food, safety, jobs, medical care, and security.

Our **focus** statement today is: “As we seek God’s way, we move from prioritizing our

personal security to living with generosity toward our neighbors.”

This is often really difficult! Between races, cultures, nations and any other division we choose. For example, as Rose and I experience the cost of cancer – from a rural perspective, as well as future retirement, it’s very tempting too not be generous. A while ago Rose asked, “Should we tithe out of her retirement income that she is withdrawing?” My immediate response was, “No! We don’t know what US and Canadian taxes will be like in retirement!” And we don’t know where we will be living or the costs. But my conscience bothered me, and I changed my mind. It’s so easy for all of us to find some rational to be less generous because our fears for our own security often control us, even for good rational reasons!

We find ourselves caught between faith and the culture we live in. We live in a culture that depends on consumer capitalism. A rough statistic is our economy is dependent on how much we shop. 70% of our Gross National Product is dependent on us shopping – not producing. We earn money. We acquire, invest, accumulate, & spend. We get attached to things and need more space to store the stuff. Simply by living in this culture we take on the values and the imagination of everyone around us. It’s hard to resist and it causes us to think that our security lies in more and more stuff.

But the Bible tells us in a variety of different ways, “not to conform and do not forget Yahweh.” That’s the repeated warning in the Deuteronomy. Once you find security and a home and jobs in the Promised Land, don’t forget the blessings of Yahweh! Offer your first fruits to the Almighty who saved you – always! “Then you and the religious leaders, and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you & your household.” Giving is a form of witness! We are to move from an attitude of scarcity to generosity. Stop building bigger barns, larger accounts, & savings to save for a rainy day. Jesus had a parable about a rich foolish man in Luke 12.

It’s important to notice this value goes all the way back to Old Testament times. We can wonder about the Israelites, who had just harvested their first crops. Did they doubt this way of God to give away some first fruits instead of storing them for their future needs?

We hope they remembered the wilderness story of manna – to only collect it for one day. But when they collected for two days, except before the sabbath – it spoiled. Wanting just a little more than they needed – was not God’s way!

Throughout the Bible we find this persistent message. Trust in God – not yourself or some thing or another idol. The Israelites were told to not make political or economic alliances with other nations. (Is 31:1-9) Instead, they were expected to trust God for their security above all else. We must remember - the Almighty says he is a jealous God. (Ex 34:14)

2 Cor. 6:14 tells us, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?”

Basic Bible teaching is, God wants us to depend on Him for our security – not anything else! God’s way is to release in order to receive. We do not see or receive the blessings of big-heartedness until we move forward into it, giving of what God has given us, & seeing our way of security transformed into God’s way of generosity. And it’s not just about money.

In the book, *The Joy of Not Working*, by Ernie Zelinski, he says, “If I had a lot of money, then I would be happy; then I could enjoy my leisure time; then I would feel good about myself; then more people would like me.” He concludes, “If you have any of these thoughts, you are ruled by money & fear.” And a fear of scarcity and a lack of security. This gets in the way of God’s value of generosity in all its forms. A car ad proclaimed, “Whoever said money can’t buy happiness, isn’t spending it right.” This is an example of one of many tugs we receive daily – toward the values of our culture.

An author wrote, “We are wounded by wealth & victims of an ever-expanding consumerism.” Another wrote, “Covetousness is the hallmark of our society.”

And one author wrote, “Our culture is one of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, & conspicuous waste.” This conspicuousness has ecological concerns. In clearing out our house in the US, where we lived & all three of my children lived as adults, I still am depressed and amazed at how much we all took to the thrift store, recycled, & to the dump. And how much of that stuff we don’t miss! Collectively we could have saved a lot, as well as given away a lot of money, if we had not bought all that stuff, most of which we do not remember.

I’m sure you have heard the term, affluenza, defined as, the epidemic of shopping, stress, overwork, and debt infecting North Americans.

With these examples, you might think this is a sermon focused on economics, or even ecology. Well, it is – but only as it relates to our desire to gain security through wealth & stuff, instead of generosity. And as you think about these remarks – notice how they touch on things way beyond wealth. These statements assume that money talks, has power, and that persons with wealth have clout. But this too often provides security at other people’s expense. Like we all know we need to get the best lawyer we can afford when we get in legal trouble of any kind.

But money also talks in another sense. Money reveals the heart. Many persons have said, “Reveal your yearly spending and taxes, you will show what you really value.” We can say all the right things, but money reveals our attitudes, our priorities, true commitments, our real desires for security, and what we worship. Lent always begins with the story of Jesus’ temptations. The devil came to tempt Jesus in his hunger, his neediness. Jesus said his needs were met in the word of God; that was the source of his security. Once we release what we have, the things that make us feel secure and self-reliant, that’s when we receive God’s

security of being in Christ. That’s when we can become kind, bighearted, & love our neighbor.

The temptation event reminds us that we live in a world of competing stories. We must know and believe and act on the Christian story in order to resist the false stories that seek to take us captive. And one of those stories is the tension between our real fears of security & of generosity. Underlying the dialogue between the devil & Jesus are these two competing storylines. The devil offers a storyline of self-indulgence, make yourself bread from stones; self-aggrandizement, all the nations of the world will belong to you if you worship me; & self-serving religious identity, if you are the son of God cast yourself from the top of the temple.

But Jesus shows he knows God’s values. He responds with quotations drawn from the Old Testament that show awareness of the true source of life and identity - he knows that life is more than food; his reliance on God - the one worthy of true worship & service; & his understanding of God’s character of generosity & not one to be tested. Jesus’ responses are rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than stuff or self for life, glory, and identity. And all the gods that we often rely on.

The temptations the devil presents are aimed at the heart of Jesus’ identity – who he is, why he is on earth, and who he worships. Twice the devil begins his temptation, (vs. 3,9) by calling into question Jesus’ identity as the Son of God with the words “*if* you are the Son of God,” followed by a challenge to prove this identity with some miraculous display - stone into bread, & a dramatic angelic rescue from death.

This is the core Christian issue – who and what we depend on, trust and worship. And with an attitude that focuses on security – we find it hard to be as generous as our Creator is with us. That’s the story of the Bible – the Almighty in generosity keeps reaching out to humankind – despite our foul up and idols and other gods. We can not match Jesus’ generosity towards us.

And we need to consider a whole host of things such things as what size house we should have in order to be generous, instead of what we can afford, our comfort, out doing our neighbors & our inner need to be secure in our own place.

Now I don't have answers to how much is enough in our retirement accounts. Or how much is a proper profit. Or what is a godly size house. Or what is the maximum a person or a company should earn. Or what is a proper size vehicle or farm or barn. But I do know that when someone works all day and earns what someone else earns in a minute or an hour – something is wrong. I don't know what is the best measure on what a country should spend on defense. But I do know if its citizens are homeless, without health care and don't know where tomorrow's meals are coming from – something is wrong.

I find it very hard to say to people, just work a little harder and smarter – and you will get to a better secure place in life. Why? It's true in one sense, but knowing people who work 2 full time jobs and can't put food on the table, and knowing the favela people in our church in Brasil – despite all their hard work, they simply have no way to get ahead because the culture, business, economics, government & the system has a vested interest in keeping them as under-paid necessary workers. Their desires for more and to be secure simply makes sense. So, the health & wealth gospel makes sense. But it's a fine line of Christianity that gets in the way of putting God first in security, dependency, and trust. It's the same for us today.

I do know serving oneself, acquiring power and working toward fame, as Jesus was tempted – is not God's way. I do know not offering God our first fruits and more – is not God's way. Notice, Jesus' temptations are set in the wilderness. To me this is symbolic that temptations and lack of security are wilderness living. This is in contrast to generous living. I don't have easy answers except to share, God's ways are more life giving than Satan's. Satan causes us to fear and attempt to replace God. And fear for security is one of those replacements that

leads us into all kinds of sins – personal and communal and as nations. But choosing to be generous is a slap in Satan's face. It's an act of resistance to being on the wrong side of the faith line. Generosity is an action for and with our Creator. We need to be generous just as our God is generous with us.

But not just with our wealth. A generous spirit involves our attitudes and acceptance of people. It's toward that different person in our church & community. Generosity is giving the benefit of the doubt with people, instead of suspicion, making fun of them and categorizing them negatively. It's openness toward that person who does not hold our values.

It's encouraging our government to share its wealth – like with the matching grants for the Food Grains Bank & other international aid. And we can rejoice that we took in over 400,000 new immigrants last year in Canada. Plus, our defense expenditures are under 24 billion in 2021. Generosity like God's, resists compassion fatigue with all the bad news of natural disasters, wars, and so on. This is what we are called to as followers of Jesus. It's remembering God's goodness to us. We must resist the lures of Satan and our culture. It's joining with Jesus in building God's kingdom.

One other theme that ties in with generosity over security is, we can be generous with our time. The way we have sponsored and entered the lives of refugees is giving up our time so they can experience God's generosity. Being generous with our time so God's kingdom at North Star can flourish even more. Following Jesus' example in our lives is the best way to be secure – and to help others find security and find God's secure salvation.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.”