

EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

4) "The Heartfelt Choice"

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Imagine, for a moment, that you find yourself in the throng addressed by Moses in our passage from Deuteronomy this morning. Imagine that you are there, with your Israelite brothers and sisters, standing on the edge of the Promised Land, seeing and yet, not quite believing that after nearly forty years of wilderness journey, the long awaited destination was suddenly looming before you. Imagine the excitement and energy surging within you as you think about the possibilities of actually living a settled existence! Imagine, as well, the uncertainty and the fear that will not be denied in the face of the problems that will arise.

Moses, your long time leader and advocate with God, is certainly aware of these feelings as he addresses his people for the last time. In this epic farewell speech, the great leader sets before you and the others a fundamental choice—a choice between life and death, between prosperity and adversity. He then outlines the benefits and the consequences involved with these choices before arriving at his stirring conclusion in the 19th verse: **I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him...**

What a moment that must have been! A "crossroad moment" if there ever was one! And it is Moses who summons every ounce of his leadership skill to persuade his people to make the right choice, to take the right road—the road that honors the covenant with God and leads to life, hope and possibility.

The Bible, of course, is chocked full of what might be termed, "crossroad moments," moments in which people are invited to make a fundamental choice about how they will live and whom they will serve. In the Book of Joshua, the 24th chapter, this great successor to Moses, once again summons the people to gather and then challenges them with these words: **"Choose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."** Here is yet another "crossroad moment" in Israel's story of faith.

These moments, of course, are not limited to Israel's story, but continue on in the unfolding story of the Jesus movement and the Church that grew up around it. Time and again, Jesus invites his disciples to choose—between the broad way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads to life. So many of his parables and his teachings were offered in the hope of helping people choose the way that leads to life.

Suffice it to say that the journey of faith, whether ancient or contemporary, is a journey that invariably arrives at the crossroad moment in which we are asked to choose in clear and decisive ways just how we will live and what we will live for. **I am inclined to believe that this might well be one of those moments in the unfolding story of the life of our church.** It would not at all surprise me if ten or twenty years from now, the people of our congregation might refer back to this Sunday, November 13, 2011 as the moment in which our congregation made a fundamental choice that would leave an undeniable stamp upon our future.

Without wishing to be too dramatic, I believe that the choice that lies before us this morning is, fundamentally, a life or death choice—a choice that will either lead to energy, passion and possibility or to resignation, decay, and a creeping despair. You see, I don't think it is an exaggeration to suggest that the churches that are today closing their doors did not make this choice recently—within the last year or two. No, this was a choice that likely was made decades ago when they ceased to believe in and invest in their common vision for ministry and mission.

Peter Drucker, the brilliant business consultant and author, suggests that organizations actually begin to die in the moment they choose to exist not for others (customers, clients, those they are trying to reach), but for themselves. It may take years or even decades, but in that moment, they have taken the path that leads to their decline and demise. In other words, death.

It was the noted philosopher, Woody Allen, who addressed the graduating class at Harvard with this summary challenge: “As you men and women graduate, you find yourselves at a crossroad—the crossroad between despair and hopelessness. Choose your path wisely!”

That sounds like Woody, doesn't it? Actually, the choice before us is not between despair and hopelessness, but it is between hope and hopelessness, between resolve and resignation, between delight and despair.

Over the past three weeks, we have made the case for your investment in the life and ministry of this church. We have highlighted the programs and the people and the vision that make us uniquely who we are and have suggested that there is not a better investment that you could make than to generously—even extravagantly—support the San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church. For, not only does your investment provide you with the deep satisfaction of knowing that you are making a significant difference in the lives of others, but it also benefits the community of faith of which you are a part. In this sense then, we are twice blessed.

Having made the case for our investment, I want to be clear that there is, I believe, something of even greater importance at work here—something that has to do not so

much with our church and its need to receive our financial support, but, instead, something that has to do with you and me and our fundamental need to give of ourselves and resources for the work that God has set before us and the life that God has called us to live.

Robert Schnase, in his book, "The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations," offers this insight: ***"We give because we are made in the image of god, whose essential nature is giving. We are created with God's nature imprinted on our souls; we are hard wired to be social, compassionate, connected, loving and generous. God's extravagant generosity is part of our essential nature as well. But we are anxious and fearful, influenced by a culture that makes us believe we never have enough. And we are scarred by habits that draw us away from God and that turn us inward with a corrosive self-interest. God sent Jesus Christ to bring us back to ourselves, and back to God."***

Our Gospel lesson from John this morning tells us all that we ultimately need to know: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."** To love is to give—not grudgingly, but gratefully...not sparingly but extravagantly! We are hard wired to be caring, compassionate and giving people.

Albert Winesman has written provocative little book entitled, **"Growing An Engaged Church"** in which he chronicles what has become obvious to anyone who is paying attention—namely that in this age of great spiritual hunger, the Church as we have known it is in crisis. The signs of decline are too abundant to ignore any longer. It is, he suggests, time that we acknowledge and indeed, talk about this "elephant in the church," that is, the failure to grow faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Winesman is quite clear that if we are to create vital, healthy communities of faith, we must stop **"doing church,"** that is merely adding activities and going through more of the usual motions, and start **"being the Church,"** that is, building a congregation of dedicated and energized members who are growing spiritually and, at the same time, are reaching out in concern and service to the world.

This is, I believe, precisely what we are about. This is precisely the vision that is pulling is forward into our future—the vision of "being the Church," of being a community of faith that is growing spiritually and growing socially in our service to others—a community of changed lives committed to changing the life of our world.

This is who we are. This is what we are about. And by the grace of God at work through your extravagant generosity, we will allow this vision of transformed lives to open our minds, our hearts and yes, our wallets and pocket books. We will allow this vision of what we might accomplish together to be the inspiration that enables us to "be" the Church that God is calling us to be.

We are indeed, standing at a cross roads this morning and there can be little doubt that the choice we make in the gifts that we give, will go a long way toward shaping our future. I don't think that it is a stretch to suggest that, in some profound ways, this is a life or death, blessing or curse choice that we will make. So it is only fitting to conclude with the wise words of Moses : **Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying God and holding fast to God—for that means life to you and to me, and to this Church that we love. Amen.**