

“Growing in Generosity”
Psalm 92:12-15/John 15:1-11

“The righteous flourish like the palm tree...they flourish in the courts of our God.”

I suspect by now those Biblical words are familiar to most of you. They have served as the Scriptural basis for our Flourish initiative, that two-year effort to fully fund all of the ministries of DPC. In anticipation of this morning when we will dedicate to God our best estimate of giving for 2018 and 2019 we have focused in worship on the divine call to grow. Thus far, we have pondered our Maker’s intention that we grow in grace and knowledge. Last Sunday, we reflected on God’s desire that we grow in compassion using as our model two Biblical images that demonstrated such gifts received from our Creator and Jesus. Today, we conclude by appropriately looking at God’s call that each of us grow in generosity.

The two passages we read both have something to say to that conversation. Neither one of them explicitly uses the word “generosity” or directly speak of financial matters, but they each paint a picture of what such a life looks like, in both cases with images from nature.

“The righteous flourish like the palm tree,” the Psalmist declares “and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.” The image of a palm tree is a nice one for us to ponder on a weekend when we had our first freezing temperatures. That Biblical author actually goes on to place those two examples of flourishing indoors, too. “They are planted in the house of the LORD,” he adds, “they flourish in the courts of our God.” Both trees named in those verses bless humankind in specific ways. The palm tree bears coconuts and dates. Cedar wood is both strong and fragrant. According to the Psalmist, the gifts are intended to be lifelong, too. “In old age they still produce fruit,” he writes, “they are always green and full of sap.” In other words, they keep growing.

The words from Jesus share a different image from nature, offering one of his most beloved metaphors for the life of faith. “I am the vine, you are the branches,” he declares. “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” As is often the case in Jesus’ teaching so does this one provide an image that is both readily understood and rich in interpretative possibilities. Gail O’Day, Dean and New Testament professor at Wake Forest University’s School of Divinity expounds upon Jesus’ image of vines and branches by noting “There are no free-standing individuals in community but branches who encircle one another completely...The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine...the metaphor is stark in its anonymity...it is a decidedly corporate act...and undercuts any celebration of individual gifts.” (O’Day, Gail. “The Gospel of John” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 760-1). In other words, that metaphor can describe a growing generosity, too.

Now to be sure, we can be generous in non-financial ways. We can be generous with our time through watching a neighbor’s child or volunteering at church. We can be generous with our knowledge serving as a mentor to a colleague or coaching a youth team. We can be generous with grace and compassion, allowing them to shape our response in all settings. But today, prior to making our two-year financial commitment, our focus is on a growing generosity of treasures.

Both of our Biblical sources make clear who is honored in such acts. The Psalmist said that the righteous show “that the LORD is upright” while Jesus added that “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit.” In other words, our acts of financial generosity reflect the place and calling of God upon our life. They demonstrate a clear understanding that God is the source of every gift we have. And our acts of financial generosity bring honor to God.

Some of you will recognize the name of Thomas Cannon, a Virginia mail carrier who died in 2005. Upon his passing, Cannon was praised in newspapers as “the poor man’s philanthropist” and appropriately so as over thirty-three years he had given away more than \$150,000, most often in thousand-dollar checks. The usual recipients were people he had read about in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* who were experiencing hard times or who had been unusually kind or courageous toward others. The typical means of distribution was that Mr. Cannon would mail the check to the newspaper and ask a reporter to deliver it. Over the years, he gave \$1000 grants to a group of teenagers who rescued a drowning horse, a teacher from Kuwait who traveled the world in searching for the cure to a rare disease, a Colombian sailor stranded in Norfolk whose pregnant wife was about to be evicted from their home, and a teenager abandoned as an infant who years later was named Boys and Girls Clubs’ Youth of the Year for Virginia

Mr. Cannon was married and had two sons. His annual income never surpassed \$30,000 and yet he modeled incredible generosity. People would often ask “How can you afford it?” and he would say “How can people afford new cars and boats? Instead of those, we deliberately kept our standard of living below our means.” He practiced self-denial so that he could give.

He shared that the start to that generosity dated back to his time in the Navy. While at signal school, many of his shipmates were killed one day in an explosion at the Port of Chicago. He concluded that he had been spared to help others and be a role model, to help people see “the

oneness of it all.” Cannon went on to describe a box that held little scrolls, rolled-up pieces of paper with inspirational messages. When feeling low, he would go to the box and pick out one at random. When facing his greatest doubts, he would often be drawn to the words from the fifteenth chapter of John’s gospel where Jesus says “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go forth and bear fruit that will last.” (Holley, Joe “Thomas Cannon Dies; Postal Clerk Lived Liked a Pauper to Help Others,” www.washingtonpost.com, 7/3/05 and Sarahan, Mike “In Memory of Thomas Cannon,” www.richmond.com, 4/5/14)

Our reason for growing in generosity will not be the same yet by definition for there to be growth there must be a starting point for comparison. That, too, will not be identical for everyone as for some growing in generosity will mean that for the first time you make a financial pledge to the church. For others, growth will be demonstrated through deciding that even with all of the worthwhile causes you want to support, that DPC will be your priority. For others still, a decision for growth means that instead of looking at your giving over the past two years and turning in a Flourish commitment card that says “same as before” you intentionally look first to see if your circumstances have changed or if your level of giving in the past truly represents the depth of your gratitude to God. The genesis of your growth may be known only to God and you, yet the tangible results of such responses will be celebrated by your family of faith.

Many of you are aware that unless persons tell me what they give to the church I don’t know the amount. In fact, I only know of what one DPC member gives and I share my life with her and my finances and my devotion to the planet’s most perfect granddaughter! Except for Lori, I don’t know the specifics when it comes to giving by anyone else. Yet what I do know, is categories and want to share with you where our Flourish initiative stood at the start of this day.

Last Sunday, those who were present for worship heard an announcement about members who through our Advance Commitment Challenge had shared their financial plans prior to that morning. Through Friday of this week we have received commitments from 89 households. When you compare what each gave of those individuals gave to the operating budget during the past two years to what they are planning to give in 2018 and 2019, those estimates collectively represent an increase of 31%. Four of those commitments shared their intention to increase their giving by at least 400%. Not counting that group, fourteen other households plan to grow their giving by at least 100%--double--and excluding all of those individuals, twenty other households have shared their plans to increase their giving here by at least 50%. However you define it, such responses represent clear growth in generosity; a wonderful start that sets us well along the way toward our goal of \$4.2 million for the next two years. Now it’s our turn.

For you know what happens when we grow in grace, don’t you? What happens when we grow in knowledge and compassion and generosity? Quite simply, when we do those things, we begin to flourish as never before. Let’s take the first step toward that future right now.