

An Ecosystem of Generosity

September 21, 2025

One of the joys of having a five-year-old is that I get to revisit all of my dad's corny jokes from my own childhood. You know the kind—the ones that make you groan and laugh at the same time. Here's one my dad loved:

“Do you know why, when geese fly south in a V, one side of the V is always shorter than the other? Because there are fewer geese on that side!”

My dad thought that was hilarious. It warms my heart that my daughter, his namesake, loves these jokes, too.

I've reflected on this before in a sermon, but living here in Green Bay in the autumn, I find geese positively entrancing. Some fly from Canada to Mexico, sometimes over 2,500 miles. Now, it turns out geese really are remarkable teachers for us. Scientists who study migration have learned that when geese fly in a V, they can fly 70% farther than if they tried to fly alone. That's because the one in the lead creates a slipstream of air, making it easier for the others to glide. When that lead goose gets tired, it drops back into the formation and another goose takes the lead. And when a goose is injured and has to land, two other geese will land with it and stay until it's ready to fly again.

It's a picture of radical generosity—not flashy, not headline-making, but woven into the fabric of their community. They give of themselves for the sake of the flock.

Let's hold that image as we turn to scripture.

In Amos, the prophet is raging against people who exploit the poor, who treat the vulnerable as though they were disposable, who claim to worship God on one hand and manipulate the scales of the marketplace on the other. His words burn with God's anger: “Hear this, you who trample on the needy ...” God sees the injustice, the selfishness, the greed. And God's not having it.

Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, tells a story about a dishonest manager who cooks the books to make friends for himself. In verses 8 and 9, Jesus almost seems to wink at the cleverness of it. But then he drops the sarcasm and turns to the real point: *If you can't be trusted with a little, how can you be trusted with much?* You cannot serve God and wealth.

Both of these scriptures are so important for our time! We're living amidst a world in which so called “leaders” lift up trampling the needy and making dishonest wealth as a badge of honor.

The Biblical witness couldn't be a sharper critic. Amos shows us what happens when selfishness rules. Instead, Jesus draws us into a life where generosity and faithfulness rule.

And in between those voices we hear again the call of the geese: you can't do this alone. We're made for generosity, made to carry one another, made to live with open hands instead of clenched fists.

Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, pastor of Trinity UCC in Chicago, says generosity is the child of love and justice. It's what happens when love takes on flesh in the world. Generosity isn't just about money—it's about spirit, about vulnerability, about living in a way that says, "What I have, I'll share. What you need, I'll notice. What burdens you, I'll help carry."

And the great William Sloane Coffin helps us see how this lands in the church. He said the church isn't just an institution with a budget. The church is a moral community, a prophetic witness, a training ground for love and justice. To give to the church is not just to "pay the bills." It's to sustain worship that lifts weary hearts. It's to nurture children in the faith. It's to make possible prophetic witness in the public square. It's to take care of the vulnerable, to speak truth to power, to embody hope when the world most needs it. In the midst of NEW Pride being canceled this weekend out of fear of our current political climate, it's our community reaching out to LGBTQIA folks and saying, we've got your back. And then living that.

In other words: when you give to the church, you are choosing generosity that ripples outward into the wider world.

A lot of you have been asking me lately, "What can we do?" I don't have to name the subject you're asking about. Those are numerous, and they're daunting. My answer continues to be, "Practice living like Jesus." Deeply. Profoundly. Treat others like humans. Try to develop relationships with people you don't understand. Be about healing. Double down on love and not hate. Practice extravagant generosity. Doing these things at the personal level builds capacity and grass roots sustainable change, even as the macro level rages out of control. Actually living Gospel values not only gives you a clear conscience, it builds the infrastructure for a future of justice and hope.

That's why our generosity campaign theme this year rings so true: *Because of YOU, Union Church changes lives.*

Because of you, children hear the stories of God's love.

Because of you, our choir lifts voices in song that carry people through their week.

Because of you, hungry people in our community are fed.

Because of you, weary people hear words of hope.

Because of you, lonely people find a family.

Because of you, Union Church is able to keep speaking and acting for justice.

Because of you, lives are changed.

Friends, generosity is contagious. It opens us up. Rev. Moss says it requires vulnerability, not visibility—it's not about showing off, but about opening our hearts. And once you taste it, once you live it, you realize it is the very ecosystem God designed for us.

Just as clouds give rain, the earth gives crops, trees share nutrients through their roots, and geese give each other strength in flight, so we are called to live generously with one another.

But unlike geese, unlike trees, unlike clouds, we humans can choose. We can choose selfishness. We can choose scarcity. Or we can choose to live into God's abundance.

So here is the invitation as we begin our yearly generosity campaign. We ask you to prayerfully consider your pledge to the church. It's not merely an invitation to pay bills, although it is that. It's an invitation to be part of God's generous ecosystem:

- To fly like the geese in a V, carrying each other farther than we could go alone.
- To resist the greed Amos condemned, and to practice living the way Jesus modeled and proclaimed.
- To keep Union Church strong as a place where love and justice give birth to generosity, and generosity changes lives.

Because of you, Union Church changes lives. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13
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