

How Generosity Transforms

July 19, 2026

In my work with the Wisconsin Foundation United Church of Christ, I often work closely with congregations regarding questions about money. How do we raise money? How do we manage money? How do we spend money?

These questions matter. Spreadsheets and budgets, extra zeroes and percents can all help sustain the ministry of a local church. But as important as these questions can be, I find myself returning again and again to a deeper question: how might generosity change my life. It's a personal question, different from the ones people usually ask me to speak on. And while I can help your leaders think about how to raise money to support Union's mission, I'm much more engaged by the deeper one of how the practice of generosity matters.

Today, I want to think with you about the practice of generosity, and to do so using Paul's letter to the Romans to frame how generosity transforms us.

Congregations often reach out to me amid a financial challenge. Basically, I've never had a pastor call to say, "we have too much money – can you help us figure out how to possibly give it away?" Maybe someday I'll get that call. But more often, I hear from church leaders with the opposite problem – too big a deficit, too few donations, how can we get more money?

I find myself leaning on a lesson I learned from an old Lutheran pastor about fundraising. Rev. Larry Strange served churches over in Minnesota. And he taught me once that the secret to fundraising all comes down to our net worth. It's a simple secret. As easy to figure out as our net worth.

Larry told me to take out a piece of paper and then write down my net worth. When I paused, he assured me I wouldn't need to share it with him.

And then, just as I started to write out a number, Larry stopped me. "Were you thinking of a number?" he asked. "Our net worth comes from the image of God inside of us, from the divine who forms us, from the spirit who blesses us. Our net worth is that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

I realized in that moment all the ways our culture affected how I see myself. Our society teaches that net worth can be measured in things – what you own. It's a calculation of assets minus debts. But Larry pointed to how our faith understands net worth – not what we own, but a profound inheritance of every person, an essential dignity. Our capacity to be generous doesn't come from how much we own; rather it flows from how deeply we connect to God's love.

Paul's words in Romans root us in our true net worth. "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba!* Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness* with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

Paul speaks of us caught between two possibilities. Slaves of fear. Or Children of God, marked by faith, hope, and love.

We frequently reject religious dualism, the move to divide the world into us verses them, the saved vs. the rest, the saints vs. the sinners, the good vs. the bad, the blue vs. the red. Those kinds of religious dualisms divide a community: us vs. them. But Paul's dualism doesn't divide people from each other; rather, he saw us divided inside of ourselves, caught between fear and freedom.

I first discovered this verse of Paul's decades ago. Back then, I knew I was gay, but I struggled to share the news. I worried about what my fraternity brothers would say. I feared losing friends. I felt divided in myself, caught between the fears of my mind and the love of my heart. Paul's assurance that all are children of God gave me courage to face down my own fears.

The story of generosity starts with God's affirmation; the inheritance of love God shares with us. When we feel caught between fear and freedom, God's inheritance pulls us forward, because the Spirit of God witnesses with our spirit that we are God's beloved.

I know we don't have saints in our Christian tradition. But I grew up Catholic, and I find myself thinking of some people as saints whose stories help me imagine how to faithfully live. Perhaps the saint I hold most dear is Elizabeth Freeman, an African woman who lived during the colonial and early American period.

Two hundred fifty years ago, at the outset of the American Revolution, Elizabeth lived enslaved in western Massachusetts. She suffered all the indignities of enslavement – physical abuse, family separation, the theft of her labor.

One day, her enslaver hosted a gathering of men to discuss the draft constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The Massachusetts constitution relied on the opening words of the Declaration of Independence. It began, like the Declaration, "all men are created equal."

Elizabeth took those words to heart. Along with a few others from the household, Elizabeth escaped and took shelter with a lawyer. She explained, "all men are created equal – that includes me." Working with the lawyer, Elizabeth sued for her freedom. The newly formed court in Massachusetts heard her appeal, and, recognizing that all people were created equal, ruled that slavery was unconstitutional in Massachusetts. Elizabeth got her freedom, made Massachusetts the first state to outlaw enslavement, and won back-wages from her enslavers.

Elizabeth held on to the truth of God, to the spirit bearing witness with her own spirit. Setting aside fear, she claimed her identity as God's beloved child. And, in celebration of her new legal status, she called herself "Freeman."

I've kept returning to Paul's words, and over time, different parts of this chapter have come into focus. Recently I found myself returning to his comment, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." First the heat, then the smoke, is this the groaning of creation?

The blanket of smoke that covered our communities caused numerous health alerts. Dangerous air, the government warned. Unhealthy, certainly. But I was struck by the heaviness of it all. It felt overwhelmingly sad – so much of creation burning up.

The problem seems so large that I can scarcely begin to imagine solutions. But I come back to Paul, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

Just as the smokiness caught in my throat, something catches in my heart; how do I pray in this moment? I don’t have answers for this moment. But Paul tells me that the spirit is praying inside of us with sighs too deep for words. I don’t have to have the answers, I can listen. I can open my ears to the sighing of the spirit.

Sometimes, in moments like this, I go to see the buffalo on the Menominee Reservation, just a few miles from my house. Buffalo once roamed as far east as the Menominee lands; but they were hunted out of existence over 200 years ago. But, over the last few years, a group of Menominee worked to restore buffalo to the area.

The group is called Medicine Fish. They focus on two issues – positive youth development and ecological restoration. Basically, they engage Menominee youth in traditional lifeways – hunting, fishing – and care for the environment. I once talked with Donovan, the founder, about his vision. He saw restoring the land as the way to help youth avoid drugs and despair. We were looking out at an enclosed pen of buffalo. The youth helped build fences, care for the animals, and eventually help butcher them to provide buffalo meat to the Menomonie school district.

When I go out to see the buffalo, my heart quickens with hope. Something once lost, restored. Not just the buffalo, but seeing Menominee people reclaim indigenous lifeways. Beautiful.

I said earlier that generosity begins with God’s gift to us, the inheritance all people share as God’s beloved. Generosity continues with the gifts we receive from each other. I can’t hear all of God’s spirit praying inside of me. I need to listen to other people. To hear a vision from Donovan. To talk with youth caring for the buffalo. To hear what God’s spirit says in their hearts.

I realize that people often start stories of generosity with what they have and what they give. But I find that my understanding of generosity begins with what I’ve received, from God and from others.

Perhaps my favorite verses in the New Testament come from our final part of the reading. Paul wrote, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I may wonder about the miracle stories of the Bible, and there are plenty of Paul’s teachings I disagree with, but these verses I never doubt. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Paul wrote of all that might separate us from God. But I also hear it as about all the things that can separate us from each other. Certainly elsewhere, Paul took a similarly inclusive view of

human community – no more Jew nor Greek, no more male nor female, no more slave nor free, but all united in Christ. I feel like this vision of unity, of nothing separating us, is the fulfillment of what Paul first described: we have not received a spirit of slavery, to fall back into fear, but have received a spirit of adoption, that declares us to be siblings, each to the other.

Pastor Anita Phillips, a member of the Cherokee Nation, once wrote of the Native concept of “all my relations.” She said, “To be related to someone, you claim them as your kin. They are part of your family.”

For me the journey of faith means learning the deep truth that nothing can separate us from God’s love and that God’s love brings us all into one family.

When it comes to my generosity, I want my financial giving and my volunteering to be about taking down divisions and building up community. That work is one of the reasons I give to my local congregation – it’s the place where we proclaim and live into the reality that nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Years ago, at the church Bridget and I once served together, the church hosted a funeral for a non-member. We hosted it because the man’s evangelical church wouldn’t celebrate his life. The man had committed suicide. And because of it, his evangelic church would not bury him. His wife and children came to our church because one of their friends said, “we’ll care for you.” We opened the church. We did the churchy thing, putting on a reception meal in the basement, a funeral repast, showing up for a family in their grief with casseroles and desserts and bars.

I think back to that moment, because it reminds me what I hope all my generosity helps to create: community that welcomes in, a place where we say ‘no matter what, you are welcome here,’ a people committed to claim each other as kin.

Generosity begins for me in the realization of God’s love – that we are all children of God. And it continues as I hear the spirit of God in the voice of other people. Generosity begins with gratitude. And then I work with all I have to respond, giving back to build up a community of love, God and people as kin together, where we can know nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Alleluia and Amen.

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