

3. Living Generously

Today, two stories. Two stories of people from different continents, in different centuries, in very different circumstances. Two stories of people who lived very generously, who exemplify everything Jesus taught about giving.

The first is from a man headed for Chicago on an airplane in 2012. This is his story in his own words:

“I put my hand luggage in the luggage compartment and sat down in my assigned seat. It was going to be a long flight. I was glad to have a good book to read. Perhaps I will get a short nap, I thought.

Just before take-off, a line of soldiers came down the aisle and filled all the vacant seats, totally surrounding me. I decided to start a conversation. *‘Where are you headed?’* I asked the soldier seated nearest to me. *‘Great Lakes Naval Base. We’ll be there for two weeks for special training, and then we’re being deployed to Iraq,’* he replied.

After flying for about an hour, an announcement was made that pack lunches (called sack lunches in the US) were available for five dollars. It would be several hours before we reached Chicago, and I quickly decided a lunch would help pass the time.

As I reached for my wallet, I overheard a soldier ask his buddy if he planned to buy lunch. *‘No, that seems like a lot of money for just a sack lunch. Probably wouldn’t be worth five dollars. I’ll wait till we get to Chicago.’*

His friend agreed.

I looked around at the other soldiers. None were buying. I walked to the back of the plane and handed the flight attendant a fifty dollar bill. *‘Take a lunch to all those soldiers,’* I told her. She grabbed my arms and squeezed tightly. Her eyes wet with tears, she thanked me. *‘My son was a soldier in Iraq; it’s almost like you are doing it for him.’*

Picking up ten sack lunches, she headed up the aisle to where the soldiers were seated. She stopped at my seat and asked, *‘Which do you like best – beef or chicken?’*

‘Chicken,’ I replied, wondering why she asked.

She turned and went to the front of the plane, returning a minute later with a dinner plate from first class. *‘This is your thanks,’* she said, passing me a wonderful

plate of food. After we finished eating, I went again to the back of the plane, heading for the bathroom. A man stopped me.

'I saw what you did. I want to be part of it. Here, take this.' He handed me twenty-five dollars.

Soon after I returned to my seat, I saw the Flight Captain coming down the aisle, looking at the aisle numbers as he walked, I hoped he was not looking for me. When he got to my row he stopped, smiled, held out his hand, and said, *'I want to shake your hand.'*

Quickly unfastening my seat belt I stood and took the Captain's hand. With a booming voice he said, *'I was a soldier and I was a military pilot. Once, someone bought me a lunch. It was an act of kindness I never forgot.'*

Later I walked to the front of the plane so I could stretch my legs. A man who was seated about six rows in front of me reached out his hand, wanting to shake mine. He left another twenty-five dollars in my palm.

When we landed in Chicago I gathered my belongings and started to disembark. Waiting just inside the airplane door was a man who stopped me, put something in my shirt pocket, turned, and walked away without saying a word. Another twenty-five dollars! Upon entering the terminal, I saw the soldiers gathering for their trip to the base. I walked over to them and handed them seventy-five dollars. *'It will take you some time to reach the base. It will be about time for another sandwich. God bless you.'*

Jesus said, *'Give to others, and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands – all that you can hold. The measure you use for others is the one that God will use for you.'*

Our second story comes from London at the turn of the nineteenth century. A wealthy, English father took his timid 15-yr old daughter Elizabeth past a notorious women's prison, a hell-hole where prisoners desperately reached through the bars and begged for help. This little girl was so shaken by the horrendous sight that she wrote in her diary, *'If this is the world, where is God?'* Two years later, a visiting parson convinced her that God is real. Elizabeth was inspired by Jesus and his love for the marginalised of his day – the prostitutes, the lepers, the social outcasts, the poor. Her heart was touched by Jesus' teaching in Matt 25 that *'whatever we do for the least among us, we do for him.'*

So, at the age of 17, she ventured from her comfortable home and walked among the poor in the surrounding village. Her heart went out to them. She concluded that

if Christ was really alive in her life, then *she* was his hands and feet in the everyday trenches of her world.

In 1813, Elizabeth's life took a dramatic turn. It began when she heard about Newgate Prison for Women, close to the Old Bailey in London, which was even worse than the prison she had seen as a teenager. It was a hellish place. Hundreds of women and their children were crowded into a stark facility that had been built to house far fewer.

The place was filthy and foul-smelling. Disease was rampant and an average of five women died each month. There was no clothing except for the rags on their backs. No beds, only the floor. No heat. No baths.

When Elizabeth Fry asked to see the prison for herself, the authorities were aghast and tried to talk her out of it. But she persisted. As the iron door slammed behind her on the day of her first visit, the horrifying sight of the prisoners broke Elizabeth's heart. She began speaking to them about the deplorable conditions. And then she asked, *'Would you be pleased if someone were to come to serve you?'*

The prisoners looked at each other in cynical disbelief.

'And just where would we find such a friend?'

'I am your friend,' she replied.

She began talking about God and how he wanted to be their friend as well. She told them they could rise above their despair. They hung onto every word. When finally she was about to leave, one woman cried out, *'Oh, you'll never come again.'*

'I will come again,' Elizabeth replied.

And she did, time after time. Because that first visit had done two things inside of her. First, it overwhelmed her with a huge amount of work that needed to be done. But, second, it inspired her. Because, even in those brief moments, she could already see how the most hardened prisoner was open to the love of Jesus.

Elizabeth organised other Christians to come and help nearly around the clock. They provided practical assistance and supplies, taught the Bible, trained the women, built friendships. Most of all, they treated them as people who matter to God. Prisoner after prisoner – seeing Jesus Christ serve then in flesh and blood – committed their lives to him.

Over time, the impossible happened. Newgate was transformed. Prisoners went from spitting foul words to singing hymns. They went from violence to turning the other cheek. They went from an 'every person for themselves' attitude to becoming a community. So incredible was the transformation that one prisoner later wrote, '...

'I bless the day that brought me inside Newgate's walls; for it was there that the rays of Divine Truth shone into my dark heart.'

Ultimately, Elizabeth founded the Protestant Sisters of Charity to help spread hope to the outcasts of society. All of Britain, and soon much of Europe, took notice. For the first time, governments began passing laws to treat prisoners humanely.

Two people, two hundred years apart, who decided to live generously. One gave money; the other gave her time, indeed her life, to transform the lives of those many choose to forget. Both gave in response, in thanksgiving, to the sacrifice of another. The chap on the plane in thankful response to soldiers giving their all for their country, including potentially their lives. Elizabeth, in response to Jesus. The life he lived whilst on earth – those words from our first reading, *'that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich'* - and also his sacrifice on the cross. And giving her life to Jesus in that way transformed her life too. Her sister wrote, *'There was a marked change in her. The Bible became her study, visiting the poor, her great object. To us, she was now always amiable and patient, forbearing and humble.'*

The Bible says that a person cannot be the same when they decide to follow Jesus. Galatians 5:22 says that God's Holy Spirit, over time, transforms us to be more loving, show more kindness, demonstrate goodness and generosity. His concerns become our concerns.

So, a question. If you are a follower of Jesus, would your brother or sister say they've noticed a change in you? Is God transforming you so that, more and more, your heart is *his* heart? On this Stewardship Sunday, is the stewardship of *your* life in line with his priorities? Do you sense God rousing you? Is he awakening something in *your* heart? It may not involve anything as elaborate as the work of Elizabeth Fry. It may start with a cup of cold water given in his name – a small act of kindness done with great love.

But here's the ironic thing. When Elizabeth Fry died in 1845, she had a heart that was full to the brim. The more she brought Jesus to others, the closer she got to Jesus herself. The more she poured her soul out, the more God refilled it to overflowing. And that's what St Paul encouraged the church to do in Corinth: *'Finish the work, so that your eagerness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.'*

We have much to be thankful for at All Saints', Cottenham with Rampton. And we have much to do in reaching others with the good news of Jesus Christ.

And we live a great upside-down truth. Jesus came not to be served but to serve.
And when we follow him, we find that unique fulfillment that only he can provide.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father,

in thankfulness, Mary sang a song of joy:

'My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the mighty one has done great things for me.'

Father, we thank you for all you have done for us,

and pray that you would create thankful and generous hearts within us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.