

May 19, 2024

Thriv'era | We Are...Generous

Days of Generous Thriving

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Parker Palmer is an American author, educator, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change. He tells one of the most compelling stories of how generosity creates profound moments of trust and respect, which creates community.

A number of years ago, Parker was a passenger on a plane that backed away from the gate, taxied to a far corner of the airfield, and then stopped. If you've ever been on a flight that taxied and then stopped—for a long time, then you know well the feeling you feel when the plane stops, and you look out the window and see that you're not on the runway and the engines wind down. It's a moment of deep disappointment. The pilot then made the announcement and said, "Well folks, I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is there's a storm front in the west; Denver is socked in and shut down. We've looked for all kinds of alternatives and there are none. So we'll be staying right where we are until things open up. And I don't know how long that will be. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we can't return to the gate, and we have no food, and it's lunchtime." Everyone groaned. Some passengers started to complain, some became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants did something amazing. She stood up, took the intercom, and said, "Hey everyone... we're really sorry about this. We didn't plan it this way, and we really can't do much about it. And I know for some of you, this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to some lunch. Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So, I'll tell you what we're going to do. I have a couple of breadbaskets up here, and we're going to pass them around. I'm asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along with you—something to tide you over—just in case something like this happened,

some peanut butter crackers, candy bars. And some of you have a few Life Savers or a pack of chewing gum or Roloids. And if you don't have anything edible, you may have a picture of your grandkids or spouse or a girlfriend or boyfriend or a bookmark or a business card. You may have a small toy or a collection of paper clips—something that you wouldn't mind parting with—at least for a while. Everyone just put something into the basket. And then we'll reverse the process. We'll pass the baskets around again, and everybody can take out what they need.

What happened next was amazing. The griping stopped. People started to dig around in pockets and purses. Some got up and retrieved their carry-on luggage from the overhead compartments, producing boxes of candy, bags of popcorn, salami, and a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. The flight attendant had transformed a group of people who were focused on need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration." Everything changed when people began to consider the health and well-being of the community. When they practiced generosity, things began to turn around.

We're in the seventh week of our Thriv'era series. We've been exploring what it means to thrive as people of God in this and every time and era of life. We've been reminded that we are spirited, creative, and connected people, called to be present, grateful, generous, and missional with our lives. We're focusing on this particular series of life rhythms, which help us bring some good to each moment, something better to each day, and our best to each other as we encounter the world around us. This week, we're considering the thriving rhythm of generosity. By now, you know that each of the seven thriving rhythms has a guiding narrative. Today, we're centering on the reality that as image bearers of the Divine, we are called to be extravagantly generous human beings. We thrive and create a sense of thriving for others as generous people by living open-handedly and open-heartedly, seeking lavish interactions with the world so that the abundance of the few can transform the scarcity of the many into a feast of blessings where all have enough.

Of all the stories in the Gospels that illustrate the power of generosity, there is none more revealing than the story of the feeding of the 5000 in Matthew 14:13-21. I want to read this passage for us and then peel back some of the important layers. [Matthew 14:13-21]

Jesus went away in a boat to a quiet place by himself. But when the crowds heard about it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed, he saw a large crowd and felt compassion for them, so he healed their sick.

As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Jesus replied, "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"But we only have five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," Jesus said.

He told the crowd to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, gave thanks, and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

Everyone ate and was satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftover pieces. About five thousand men ate that day, not including women and children.

All of Jesus' miracles are included in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, only two of the miracle stories are shared across all four Gospels: the resurrection of Jesus and the story we're exploring today. The Feeding of the 5000—though likely double that figure when accounting for whole families—is a story of fabulous generosity. But whether five thousand or ten thousand people were fed with legendary leftovers

really doesn't matter because here's the deal: ultimately, this story isn't about numbers. This is a story about the heart. This isn't really about one man, Jesus, multiplying fishes and loaves while everyone sits there and takes it all in; it's a story about the multiplication of a sacred impulse within the hearts of people to care for and be generous with others.

If we were to read this story, close the book, look at each other, and say, "Well, isn't it just amazing that Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish and fed five thousand people? Gosh, that's amazing! What a guy, want a talented rabbi, What a display of cosmic generosity on the part of Jesus, the Savior of the world..." and then go on our merry way into the rest of today as if nothing had been challenged or changed within us, we'd be missing the point. We'd be missing the transformation. It would be a failure to thrive. So, how does practicing the thriving rhythm of generosity bring some good to each moment, something better to each day, and our best to each other as we encounter the world around us? Let me unpack this a bit.

First, the last thing we want to do is forget that God's math is the New Math. Jesus wanted people to thrive in life, and the way to thrive is to be generous. It's all about addition. The disciples didn't quite get that. They were busy assessing the situation. A big crowd was growing bigger, Jesus was still teaching, and the people were tired and hungry. And the disciples are thinking: Subtraction. Let's subtract the people from this place so they can go home. Let's subtract ourselves from the equation because we don't want to be responsible for figuring out how to feed so many people! The disciple's thoughts turn from *what was happening* to *what they wanted to see happen*, skipping right over *what could happen* in Jesus's name.

The disciples said to Jesus, "*Send the people away... so they can buy themselves something to eat.*" That's it. That's their plan. "*We're too far away; it's too late in the day. Send the people away and let them figure it out.*" Subtraction. Was there no room in their hearts for a miracle? Was there no space for them to consider what they could do in Jesus' name in this remote area? Was there no

compassion left for these people? Sure, Jesus knew they were out in the boonies with daylight dwindling. But what we see as a problem, Jesus sees as an opportunity. God does not want to send anyone away or subtract anyone from a deeper sense of thriving. Jesus' resurrection is the sign that God meets people in their weariness and hunger. It offers a way of thriving in partnership with God. And that's where we come in.

Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." We're not just along for the ride. We're called into partnership, into relationship, called to be invested in God's work in the world for the sake of the kingdom of God. Do you ever get the idea that God just loves a challenge, that Jesus just loves a challenge? Jesus turns this situation around and puts it right back on the disciples.

Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." The disciples were incredulous. He didn't really expect them to pay to feed such a massive number of people! That was impossible. But that was the point—Jesus wanted them to do the seemingly impossible, the kind of miracle that is only possible by the power of God.

Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." But the disciples were thinking too small. They were thinking in human terms, keenly aware of their limitations. As they calculated the cost of such a feast, they neglected to factor in one critical figure: Jesus. Didn't the presence of the Son of God open up all kinds of new possibilities? Wasn't it possible that being in partnership with Jesus meant that truly amazing things would happen?

Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." This is a call to the people of God to get in the game. We're not called to sit on the sidelines and watch; we're called to get in the game and see how God wants to use us! This story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is an invitation to surrender what we have – our five loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and to see how God can transform all of that into a way of thriving that impacts the whole creation!

Perhaps the most remarkable yet overlooked part of this story is that someone, in the face of such

enormous need and hunger, surrendered their few gifts to Jesus: five loaves of bread and two fish from the heart of whom Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us was a little boy. A little boy with a backpack full of snacks—a juice box, an apple sauce pouch, a ziplock of goldfish crackers, five small loaves of bread, and some dried fish—is at the heart of this extravagantly generous story. The implied invitation for us is to thrive as generous people by living open-handedly and open-heartedly, seeking lavish interactions with the world so that the abundance of the few can transform the scarcity of the many into a feast of fullness where everyone has enough.

Like that little boy, we get to share what we have—however much or little—knowing that God will multiply our generosity to bless the world. God's math: Five loaves of bread plus two fish, divided by five thousand people, not counting women and children, equals thriving generosity. That is God's generous math. That creates a sense of thriving in the world. The real miracle that took place that day was the transformation of the hearts of five to ten thousand when they saw the example of someone giving Jesus five loaves of bread and two fish.

Making this "sticky..." Two Practices:

A Generous Prayer

Gracious God, we are grateful that you continue to create and recreate us in your image; we acknowledge that you are the One breathing the fresh breeze of your Spirit into each one of us, that you call us into deeper connections with others, and that you fill every present moment of our lives with life and more life. Equip us to respond with grateful lives as we thank you for your generous and extravagant love that sets us free to be your missional people in this world.

A Generous Manifesto

We believe in the power of generosity. We believe that by living generously, we encourage an open-hearted Spirit in the world. We believe that living with open hearts leads to living with open hands. We believe that we thrive as generous people of God when we seek lavish interactions with the world around us so that the abundance of the few can transform the scarcity of the many into a feast where all have enough.