

Collins Street Baptist Church
Sunday May 29, 2011
Harvest Festival
10.30am & 5.00pm

Living Generously: The Practice of Giving

I have to confess, I'm a sucker for Harvest Sunday. I know it's old fashioned and there are not many churches left that celebrate it. Of course, that's not surprising. It's a festival that harks back to a different age, an age of agrarian villages when communities brought produce from their very own fields and gave thanks to God. Here we are in the middle of the city in 2011 where food production is so industrialized and the very idea of planting tomatoes, let alone harvesting them, is about as alien to our urban lives as swimming is to cats. But what is laid out in front of us today, while it may not be the harvest of our own backyards, is still a tangible reminder that life is a gift.

What's here is such ordinary stuff. I suppose if we wanted to, we could have wheeled in a black BMW convertible and surrounded it with a very fine looking display of fashion from Hugo Boss and Country Road. We could have placed on the communion table some beautifully plated meals from Press Club and the Grand Hyatt along with bottles of wine and candelabra. And then, just to finish it all off, we could toss around some throw cushions from Laura Ashley. Instead, we have loaves of bread, bags of potatoes, cans of baked beans, and home-brand packets of pasta. No matter how basic and unremarkable this stuff might be, Harvest Sunday reminds us that we have in life is good. Life is gift. A cup of tea and an Arnotts biscuit is grace.

Today, as part of our series on Christian practices, we are exploring the spiritual practice of giving. To give is to live generously. To give is to live out of a strong sense of grace. To live generously is to live with our arms open because we have been received into the open arms of God. It's altogether different from living with the more natural posture of closed arms, protection and self-preservation; the posture of hoarding and hiding what is our own. The fact is, living with our

arms open is counter intuitive. It's a posture of vulnerability and is anything but instinctual. To do so takes practice; it takes discipline; it's a choice we have to make each and every day. The practice of living generously flows from two choices in particular. The first is a choice for community and the second a choice for contentment.

The choice for community

In reality, as ordinary as all this stuff is laid out before us, the very fact that it's laid out in such volume is a measure of affluence. There are people in other parts of our world who simply could not imagine this sort of abundance. But we will never see those people unless we chose to. The uncomfortable truth is, affluence is isolating. The more middle class we are the more isolated we can be from anything other than middle class. We can live in our own 'gated communities' of middling affluence. According to theologian David McCarthy, "*... the offence of the rich is not their desire to possess the earth, but their desire to separate themselves from the human race through their possession of the earth.*"

When I was a boy, there was a man who would occasionally come to our church's evening service and sit in the back corner. He was homeless and always carried a stack of old newspapers under his arm. His clothes were dirty and dishevelled, his hair matted. Above all, he stunk. The odour was so strong it wafted through the church. The pews around him would gradually empty as people were overcome by the smell. I remember clearly, though, that every time he came my own father would get up from where he was sitting and plant himself right beside this man for the duration of the service. On the way home in the car it was dad who stunk. We would wind down our windows to get relief. But dad would always say, matter-of-factly, "That's just how I would smell all the time if I couldn't have a shower." Where we are sitting in relation to others makes all the difference in the world.

To live with our arms open is to live aware of our connection to each other, our mutual dependence as human beings, our dependence upon God and each other.

We are not isolated, self-sufficient beings, no matter how well-resourced. We are connected at the most fundamental level no matter who we are, how much we have or don't have, for we are all made in the image of God.

The choice for contentment

A market economy like ours flourishes best in an environment where *wanting* is a more powerful force than *having*. It is in the *wanting* that we you have it you want something more. Contentment is the enemy of the market. The spiritual discipline of *contentment* is practicing gratitude for what we have. But contentment takes practice. It's as though we are naturally programmed to want more and better than we already have. Kate Perkins, product manager for Freedom Furniture recently said, "*Young shoppers aren't buying for life any more. Fifteen years ago, people were likely to change their curtains every ten to twelve years, but now it's every six years. It's the same with furniture—they can afford to do it and, more importantly, what looked good six years ago now is just so ... six years ago. That's why we're here!*"

I have a daughter who is now sixteen years old. She is a wonderful person and has always been acutely aware of those around her, both of their needs and their status. This sensitivity is both her strength and weakness. For a while she was constantly comparing what she had and what others had: they go to Fiji for their holidays; their television is bigger, they have more clothes than I do; they get more allowance than me. Of course, my fatherly wisdom has always been extraordinary! I have often used that clever little image of one person who sees a glass half full and the other who sees it half empty. 'Yeah, whatever Dad,' she would say as she rolled her eyes. And yet the truth is, as I wander through Freedom Furniture, my glass always feels so empty.

In an environment like ours, there is perhaps nothing more counter-cultural than the defiant expression of contentment: *I have enough*. To live with our arms open is to live counter-culturally, to live the choices of community and contentment over those of self-sufficiency and the constant drive for more.