



A Theology and Practice of Abundance

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” John 10:10

To get started, what I want you to do is to turn to the person next to you and to share a story about the last time someone asked you for money. Where did it happen? What did you do? How did you feel? (5 minutes)

Well, the same thing happened to a man named Sasha Dichter one day as he took the train home from his office in New York City. There was a man who was asking for money on that train and, as was his custom, Dichter said “no” to him. And as Dichter tells the story, the minute he said it and walked on by he knew that he had made a mistake. It was a mistake for him because Dichter had said “no” so many times in situations like that that he had begun to feel as if he were turning into the “no” he so often was saying. This was disturbing to Dichter because he was the Development Leader for a non-profit Venture Capital Group called the Acumen Fund. The Acumen Fund raises and invests money in emerging and, therefore, risky technologies that improve the lives of the poorest of the poor, with a special emphasis on water, energy and technology. What this meant is that Dichter’s job is getting other people to take a risk and to say “yes” to something meant to improve the lives of the poor that they cannot not entirely be sure will pan out.

And so Dichter decided to make a change. He undertook something he called “The Generosity Experiment” a 30-day period in which he would say “yes,” in which he would give something to any person asking on the street, to any non-profit or individual, to any musician in the subway asking him for money. He announced this on his widely-read blog. As he recounts, he did this to practice saying “yes” in the same way that he asked his own two children, Jonah and Zoe, to practice their please’s and thank-you’s at home. He did this to get into a new habit and to cultivate a new reflex, believing that “If I want the world to be more generous and action-oriented, I need to become more generous and more action-oriented.”

The way I heard about Dichter and the Generosity Experiment was through being asked to give a talk to the Center for Sustainable Leadership in Seattle some years ago and in that talk to focus on generosity as a way of living in the world. And so I decided to research generosity and especially to find out what people who were not necessarily religious people were doing and learning in the realm of generosity. Right away I hit on Dichter's TED talk about the Acumen Fund and his own Generosity Experiment, and before I knew it, I myself, had decided to undertake my very own Generosity Experiment.

I began my Generosity Experiment on Sunday November 11, 2012 the very Sunday my former parish had asked people to turn in those little cards we had mailed them so that they could make a financial pledge to the parish for the following year, that is, for 2013. And this is exactly what I said in the sermons preached in the four liturgies that day:

"...while I don't have a blog to announce it, I myself, am embarking on my own "Generosity Experiment" beginning today. As I turn in my pledge card today, I also pledge that for the next 30 days I will say "yes" to everyone who asks me for (money). At the end of the 30 days I'll then tell all of you what I learned. And, of course, if any of you want to join with me in this, you're welcome to do so as long as you start today, making your first "yes" turning in a completed pledge card to this parish!"

I went on to say; "What I'm hoping to learn about and to get in my reflexes is a kind of openness to...who is right in front of me (and) a letting go of all the reasons I have figured out to say "no" to people...What I'm hoping to do is to live a little more deeply into the generosity that I believe (is) God...I want to learn...to live there...help(ing) to release more of God's generosity into the world and into my own heart."

And so I undertook my Generosity experiment and I did learn some things, some surprising things. I learned that saying yes, that deciding to be generous, swept me and others up into an abundant, free and interconnected life that I could never have imagined.

These were some of the more specific things that happened:

After the sermon on the day that I announced my Generosity Experiment and invited others to join in as they wished, a handful of people—an affluent retired white male PhD in business, a young woman just beginning her first job out of undergrad, a shy musician who had never spoken to me, a retired nurse, and a person who lived quite close to the street—none of whom I would have ever guessed would have done so, come up to me and say "We want to join with you in this!"

And so, the decision to be financially generous, it would seem, can be infectious among those you would never expect.

A week into my experiment, I witness a minor car accident, and instead of wondering about whether I should pull over and check on the older man who caused the accident that I see pulled over by the side of the road, I do it immediately because, well, it just seems that I should. It just seems that even when someone neither asks for money or for help, that I should give.

And so the decision to be financially generous, it would seem, does not stay put in ourselves but starts leaking out into other areas within us.

Two weeks into my experiment, I not only give money for lunch to Jeffrey, one of the people who lives sometimes on the street near our church, but I end up eating lunch with him. I hear about his life, his girlfriend, the shelter that he stays in occasionally, his medical challenges. Within a week he begins coming to our 5 PM Jazz Sunday Service. A few days later as I drive up to the Church I see Jeffrey with two of his homeless friends with gardeners' gloves on picking up leaves on our property.

And so the decision to be financially generous, it would seem, starts knitting people together and taking them into places (to include parish churches!) they had never imagined.

Towards the end of my 30 day experiment, I am in a leadership meeting in my congregation. We are discussing the budget and discovering that we will indeed end the year in the black. We had planned to have an auction at the end of year to raise money for the operating fund. Now we discover we don't need to do this. We're talking about this when one person says "Let's do the auction anyway but let's call it a "Yes" fund and connect it to The Generosity Experiment. Let's create a "yes" fund that allows us to expand what we do in our neighborhood around our homeless population. The lay leadership group discusses this and decides right there on the spot to do it.

And so the decision to be financially generous, it would seem, inspires people to be more generous, leading to a kind of multiplying effect, rippling generosity out into the world.

When Jesus says to his disciples in John's Gospel "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," he, I believe, is not talking about (as some people interpret his words) a kind of prosperity and health that will come to those who believe in him. Rather, he is referring to much of the experience that I have just described. When we say "yes" to others, when we enter into and participate in the generosity of our God who gave it all to us, who said and says "yes" to us, we experience the abundance of life that comes with opening our own capacity for generosity, that comes with being open to others, that comes with being in relationship to others and that comes with being swept up into God's infectious movement towards ever-widening circles of self-giving generosity.

And so, today, I announce once again that I am undertaking a 30-day Generosity Experiment here in Canada: 30 days in which I will say "yes" to anyone asking for money from me or from my office, all as a way to learn what it means to do this here with all of you. And, of course, I invite any here today who want to join with me in this to do so. We do this to exercise and practice our own reflex to generosity and to see what God might do with our experiment.

I want to close by going back to Sasha Dichter and what happened to him after he finished his "Generosity Experiment." I want to go back to this because it brings us back to the practical aspects of what it means to cultivate a new practice, a new reflex, and some of the benefits of doing this on the other side of the experiment.

One evening Dichter was again riding on the train home from New York City. This is what he says about that train ride. "There I was. It was... a few months after the Generosity Experiment and, lo and behold, there's another guy on the train. He didn't seem well. I'd never seen him before. He clearly had diabetes. He said he'd just gotten out of the hospital and he had prescriptions to fill, and

he needed money. I stood up, and I gave that guy \$20. Now \$20 isn't much money really but I promise you in that exact situation it certainly feels like a lot.

And I'm positive if it hadn't been for this Generosity Experiment I never would have done that. I never would have done it if I hadn't decided in advance how I was going to behave in that situation, and letting that decision in advance inform my actions.

I'm never going to know if the money I gave to that guy made a difference.....There is a risk involved in taking that leap. I think that what we forget too often...is that philanthropy is about risk taking.”

The story of our generous God, the story of our own abundant life is a story of risk-taking. God risks everything in becoming flesh and dwelling within the beauty and terror, the foibles, folly and glory of human life. And we risk as we offer our money, our time and our energy to others, neither knowing nor controlling what will be the outcome or what will come our way.

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” Jesus says to us all. It is his life of generosity that we are to share in. It is his life and what it has created that shows us what abundant life is all about.