

OCTOBER 14

Celebrate Generosity (part 3)

Are You and Apron or a Bib Person?

Luke 6:17-26

(Luke 6:17-26 NRSV) He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. {18} They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. {19} And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. {20} Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. {21} "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. {22} "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. {23} Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. {24} "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. {25} "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. {26} "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Last month, Bishop Mike attended the consecration of the new facilities of St Andrew United Methodist Church in West Lafayette. St Andrew is pastored by one of my dear friends, and fellow Duke graduates Tim Burchill.

St Andrew has been a church nestled on a tiny piece of land in the midst of a neighborhood a couple of blocks from the Purdue University campus.

A number of years ago, through much soul searching and hard work, the congregation of St Andrew, decided to leave their comfortable setting and move out into the area that was booming in West Lafayette. If you are familiar with the area, they moved close to the West Lafayette Jefferson High School. It was a bold move — as any major change in the church is — and one that was not taken lightly, nor without much pain and anguish.

The completed their new facility earlier this summer, but scheduled their grand opening and consecration for September 16<sup>th</sup>. Thus they had time to work out some of the kinks, and to open to the community and wonderful new church that is striving to make a difference in the community.

Now, why am I telling you all of this? Because of what happened that consecration Sunday.

As people came to church that morning they were all given a gift.

Not a pen, or a key chain, not even a coffee cup — when people came that morning they were given an apron.

That's right — an apron.

But it wasn't just any old apron — this was a beautiful apron that had the church logo and motto embroidered on it.

What an interesting gift.

This was not something that was handed out haphazardly — but rather was given out with great forethought and insight.

Why?

What does an apron represent?

When I think of an apron, I instantly think of somebody serving somebody else. Whether it is a waitress or a cook, or even the bus boy or girl. An apron to me is the symbol of service.

Think of the apron wearers here at Ridge church

We can start with the most obvious:

- those that cooked, cleaned, served, prepared our pork chop dinner

but then there is also

- Sunday school, Bible Study and Wednesday night teachers/leaders
- worship leaders — choir/band members
- office volunteers
- those who feed the hungry at the state street center or at the warming shelter
- those who have gone to Slidell or Haiti
- Open Gym volunteers
- Winning at Life
- Vacation Bible School
- Adult youth leaders

I know I am forgetting many, many others.

Unfortunately, an apron is not the typical symbol of the church. Most people today, do not seem to be coming to church to put on an apron.

If I had to share with you what I think the typical symbol of the church is, I would suggest a BIB.

That's right, a bib.

Because too often, we come to church wanting to be fed — wanting to be taken care of. We come to church asking the question — “what's in it for me?”

And there is no doubt, but that there are times that we all need to be “fed.” That we all need to be taken care of. Especially when our life is in a crisis — whether that crisis is physical, emotional, financial or spiritual. The church not only needs to be there then, but it must be there then. If it is not — the church has failed in one of its major responsibilities — which is to be a MASH unit, a light house, a safe haven in the times of crises.

BUT, we must not stop there. If the church is only about taking care of me, we become weak, dependent, and unable to grow spiritually mature, or become fully actualized human beings.

No, while the church must be a place where people who are hungry must be fed, the church must also become a place, where once we are healthy, once we are ready to grow, we take up our apron and begin to serve others, so that they too can be on the cycle which leads to life.

I think one of the most important lessons that Jesus teaches us is found in John's gospel. In the tenth chapter Jesus tells us: (John 10:10)

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (NRSV)

or

My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. (NLB)

This theme is not new to the New Testament. We find it in numerous places in the Hebrew Bible, but maybe nowhere quite as explicit as in Deuteronomy.

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20 NRSV) I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, {20} loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the

land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Or as Petterson offers in *The Message*:

I call Heaven and Earth to witness against you today: I place before you Life and Death, Blessing and Curse. Choose life so that you and your children will live. And love God, your God, listening obediently to him, firmly embracing him. Oh yes, he is life itself, a long life settled on the soil that God, your God, promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The purpose of the church is to help us to learn how to live abundantly, and the way that we choose life is by helping and loving each other.

And how do we do that?

Author and lecturer Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child.

The winner was a 4-year-old child whose next-door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there.

When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."

We live abundantly when we realize that life isn't all about us, it is about caring and loving each other.

A great story is told of a seminary professor of another generation who retired early because of his health and died at the age of 58. The last 10 years of his life were spent in and out of hospitals.

After his death, his wife gathered together several of his articles to be published. In one chapter, this teacher traced the steps and stages of his ministry.

He said: "When I began, I thought of myself as standing upon the bank of the stream of life, shouting instructions to the swimmers who were down below. I was the expert.

The second stage of my ministry, I thought of myself as the rescuer. If I

saw someone going down for the third time, I would plunge into the water, rescue him, get him started in the right direction again, and then I would return to the bank.

But the last 10 years of my life, I was in the water, and we were fellow strugglers with arms around each other, trying to help one another make it to the shore.”

Stephanie L. Brown, a researcher at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, reports that among a group of 423 elderly couples followed for five years, the people who reported helping others — even if it was just giving emotional support to a spouse — were only about half as likely to die as those who did not.

And in a study of more than 2,000 Presbyterians, published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, behavioral scientist Carolyn E. Schwartz and colleagues report that improved mental health seemed to be more closely linked to giving help than to receiving it. Schwartz said to *The Boston Globe* (November 28, 2003):

“The sample was not a small sample — this was a robust finding, . . . The statistician and I were very careful to check all the alternative hypotheses, and it really did look like the benefits of giving to other people had a really substantial mental health benefit over and above the benefit of receiving.”

If you want to experience life, and experience it abundantly, you have to take off your bib, and put on an apron.

Bishop Mike in his weekly column wrote this about his experience at St. Andrew UMC.

I like my new apron, and I especially like the reminder that we don't go to church just to be fed (that would mean we all wear bibs to church), but we go to church to learn how to feed and serve others (hence the apron). Certainly all of us have times when need to be fed, nourished, supported by prayer, and cared for. Church must be a place where all of us receive God's grace when we need it. But if we stop there - only asking, "What's in it for me?" - then we buy into the consumer mentality of our culture, and we make church into just another place where we shop for our favorite treatment and service. All of us know persons who seem to "church shop" and jump from church to church, often making the same complaint, "I wasn't fed there." Perhaps such persons need to learn to lengthen their bibs into aprons, and to learn how to live the life of service and discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

The food for thought that I begin with this morning is telling. I think that Joan Chittister is right. She writes:

There is the story of a man who came to a holy person seeking healing. The holy person listened patiently as the man listed his complaints and then asked, "Do you really want to be cured?" The man was shocked by the question and said, "Of course I want to be cured. Why else would I have come?" To which the holy person replied, "Most come, not to be cured, that is too painful. They come for relief."

We have got to learn to move beyond getting relief — sure, we definitely need relief — but we cannot stop there, when we are cured, we need to put on our aprons and serve Jesus.