

ALL FOR ONE & ONE FOR ALL

Generosity Leads to Flourishing

Text: Acts 4:32-37

Me-For-Me

In his best-selling trilogy on the life of Cicero,¹ British author, Robert Harris, provides a window not only into the life of the brilliant statesman but also into the Roman Empire, just prior to the arrival of Jesus. What struck me as I read these books is what a dog-eat-dog environment the Roman world was. As Frank Bruni writes in his *New York Times* book review: "[An American president's] worst day is a sugary cakewalk compared with" the "treasonous blood sport" of politics in those ancient times.² The gladiator fights that filled stadiums all across the empire were a metaphor for the "every-person-for-themselves" ethos that characterized the Roman world.

It's a culture of endless positioning, back-stabbing, and betrayal. Society is divided into strict strata and segments, and each group is suspicious, contemptuous, or hostile toward many others. Men, women, and children live separate lives in many ways, each scrapping to take care of themselves. Where connections form, they are often brief, brutal, or shallow. As one slave girl observes before climbing into bed with a stranger: "[Let us] enjoy such brief ecstasy as the gods permit us, for it is only in these moments that men and women are truly not alone."

Harris' books are an eerie picture of the world toward which it sometimes feels as if we are marching today – a culture where excessive individualism has taken over every sector of society and life has become a non-stop fight for power, position, fame or pleasure. At one point in Harris' book, Cicero himself voices his distress and exhaustion over what has become of the once glorious Roman Republic: "*We have so much — our arts and learning, laws, treasure, slaves, the beauty of [our land], dominion over the entire earth — and yet why is it that some ineradicable impulse of the human mind always impels us to foul our own nest?*"

It Was for the Joy

Had Cicero lived a bit longer, Jesus, could have answered that question for him. Jesus had a word for that "ineradicable impulse" responsible for so much fouling and folly to our day still. The word is SIN. It literally means "*curving downward and inward upon self.*" And what Christ came to do in his teaching and modeling and self-sacrificing upon a cross, was to reverse this curve. The Jesus Effect, as we began to explore last week in our first study of the Book of Acts was to curve people out. The more the first followers of Jesus rooted their lives in Christ, the more they became like him. They grew UP, flourishing with the fruit of his Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). And they grew OUT, with a passion to extend the Gospel and the Kingdom of God's flourishing to other people.

When we meet the early church in Acts 4:32, they are living a life together that is about as far from dog-eat-dog individualism as any community could possibly be: **"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-35)**

In my role as moderator of the Executives Breakfast Club of Oak Brook, I've heard stories a bit like this. Over the years, I've talked with the founders of companies like GrubHub, Protein Bar, and Kickstarter or people who were among the first stakeholders at the start of Apple or Priceline.com. They'll talk in corporate-speak about their company's vision and values and how they try to develop their employees. And eventually I'll get around to asking: "Tell me about the early days." Without exception, the person I'm talking with will sit up and forward in their seat. I'll see a light of something different suddenly filling their eyes. "Oh, it was amazing," they'll say.

They'll go on to describe how tough the original working conditions were in somebody's garage or basement or back room. They'll talk about how they and the others pitched themselves all in at an almost crazy level of sacrifice in pursuit of something "insanely great."³ They'll explain how the whole thing would have folded if somebody's friend hadn't made a big contribution at a critical time or someone's uncle hadn't volunteered to do the website at a cut-rate, or if Susie hadn't opened the door to this connection, or if Sam hadn't kicked in his gifts here. I realized they were describing a movement of communal generosity – of diverse people sacrificing and staking something of themselves in service of something that is not themselves – all for one and one for all.

And I wondered: Is the joy I see in these people because their company was successful in meeting some need or because there is something deeply satisfying about knowing you've personally bled or brought something without which it wouldn't have happened? Now, after listening to enough stories, I know what the light in those people's eyes was. It's called FLOURISHING! We are made for this. We are made in such a way that we are at our best at the precise moment when we are helping others rise to their best. I understand what the writer of Hebrews meant when he said that: **"It was for the joy set before him that Jesus endured the cross."** Jesus was never so alive as at the moment when he laid himself down and died so that others might live.

The Early Church never forgot that -- the generosity of Jesus' life and the joy he took in healing and helping, forgiving and lifting up others at their point of need. The Apostle John wrote: **"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but**

has no pity, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18)

The first Christ followers wanted to experience that kind of flourishing and to help others flourish. Which, I think, is why **Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-37)**. The Bible doesn't tell us the specific need that Joseph's sacrifice made it possible for the church to meet. But what we do know from Scripture is that something happened in Joseph that day that transformed him into Barnabas, one of the most famous and fruitful followers of Jesus the New Testament records.

Stories of Encouraging Grace

That's still happening, you know. I hear so many stories of God's grace powerfully at work in and through the people of this congregation. It was about ten o'clock on a winter night when my colleague Randi got back to our church parking lot after a day spent in Chicago volunteering with one of our mission partners. At the start of that day, Randi had prayed: *"Give me your eyes to see what you want me to see."* But now she was tired and just wanted to close her eyes and go to sleep. There was a woman in the parking lot, however, inquiring about getting some help. Someone tells her about going tomorrow to the Christ Church Food Pantry. Yet as Randi prepares to leave, she sees the woman turn off her car and realizes that she's going to wait out the night in our parking lot. A Voice rings in Randi's head: *"Are you just going to leave her?"*

Randi walks over to car and sees three little girls in the back seat. And before she can stop herself, the words blurt out of her mouth: *"Why don't you come home with us?"* A short while later, the rag-tag family piles into Mark and Randi's house. At first, the three girls are rattled. An hour later everyone is eating popcorn and talking. The next day, the Lundgren's take them to the Food Pantry and then back to a disheveled apartment that cries of NEED. Randi and Mark talk with the landlord and get the lights turned back on. Then they send out a note to our church community. In come a flood of gas cards, bags of clothing, money for groceries and, eventually, a car to replace the barely functioning one the mother had been driving.

In time, the children's father returned, started attending church with the family, and became a follower of Christ. He went back to school to become an electrician. They moved into an apartment and people of our congregation furnished it. Today they own their own house. On that original morning when Randi had prayed to see what God sees, that young mother had prayed: *"Please send me an angel."* Ever-generous, God sent a whole host of them – a church community that enfleshed Jesus for them and changed their lives.

I want to tell you about the community of people who recently rallied around a beloved child named Brett and helped his family buy the motorized wheelchair for him that the

insurance company denied and the family couldn't afford and how a young girl named Mimi committed herself to being Brett's companion here at church each weekend. I want you to know about Cathy, a young woman in our congregation whose husband tragically died and whose house burned in a fire the day after Christmas, and how a collection of servants came with bags of clothes and washed all the children's Legos, and became surrogate fathers till those children grew up. I wish you could see the recently flooded basement at Pete and Brittany's house, *before* the members of their neighborhood small group showed up to mop it up and replace the floor. I wish you could see all of the places where God's resurrecting grace is so powerfully at work resurrecting hope and life and helping people flourish.

One and All

But here's a larger vision. I wonder what it would be like if that generous grace truly took root in the life of every Christian and church in America, such that the needs of even ONE person became the concern of ALL? Suppose that when an individual's need became known, people in the neighborhood or community asked: "What have I been given that might help there?" Suppose all moved toward the need of that one with money, tools, insights, networks, comfort, or skills. How long would it take for loneliness to disappear, for hunger to be eliminated, for that widow's front steps to be fixed or that unemployed person to have a job? What if we were all for one?

And what if it worked the other way too? What if the needs of ALL shaped the actions of each ONE? Just suppose that as people pulled out their wallets or opened their mouths to speak or used the other powers they have, they asked not: "Will this be good for ME?" but "Will this be good for WE?" How long would it take for crime to disappear, for gossip to be eliminated, for sniping criticism to cease, for charities to be flooded with resources? What if we were, each one, for all?

This is what TAKE ROOT is ultimately about. We're trying to foster and further a movement, a grace-based start-up, fueled by the same Spirit of communal generosity that rose up in the early church and made them a force for flourishing that changed history for good. We want it said of Christ Church and every church that **"God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them" (Acts 4:33-34).**

You see, we believe that the "ineradicable impulse" of selfish sin that Cicero saw destroying his republic CAN be opposed and overcome by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the life of his Kingdom. We believe that just as the early church turned the tide of culture in their time, we can turn it in ours – from the grass ROOTS up. This is why we are reaching out every week to thousands of children, youth, and adults through ministries of worship, growth, and care. This is why we are growing the capacity of this campus and our Esplanade campus -- so that we can meet the needs of more people like I described in the stories I told. It's why we're helping schools and

families in the Roosevelt Corridor and in Kenya flourish more than they will ever do if we were not sacrificing and building resourceful relationships with them.

And when YOU tell others one day that you got to be part of this “insanely great” venture... when you describe what you and others sacrificed to make this life-changing impact possible, people are going to notice a light in your eyes. It will be the light of Jesus-like joy that fills the eyes of those who have exercised a generosity that helps others FLOURISH. Even if you haven’t yet come forward like Barnabas to be a significant part of what God is doing in this amazing community and season, it’s not too late. We’re going to give you an opportunity to formally join us in this in a few weeks’ time. Let’s just close out our time today, by seeing how that light is growing in one couple in our church. I hope the story of what God is doing in them will inspire us.

¹ Robert Harris, *Imperium, Conspirata, and Dictator* (New York: Simon & Shuster).

² Frank Bruni, “Annus Periculosos,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2010

³ Steve Jobs’ favorite expression for the products that he and Apple sought to make