

Giving is a Piece of Cake

It was an early winter morning, and an enthusiastic energy filled the air as sixteen Ambassadors of Generosity gathered at the office of the National Christian Foundation, Wisconsin. These individuals were chosen to serve on this committee because of their passion for generosity and their desire to share it with others. This day, they were to report back on an assignment they had received in the mail a couple of weeks earlier.

Each ambassador was sent a small sum of money, between \$5 and \$20. The task was to give this money away to someone in need before the meeting and come back ready to talk about the experience. They took turns going around the room, sharing not only how much they had received and their initial reaction to the assignment, but also their internal decision making process, as well as their contemplations since giving the money away.

It was slightly reminiscent of the reality TV show, The Apprentice, where the contestants are each given a task and are supposed to prove themselves through their responsibility, creativity and productivity, in order to win a chance to work for Donald Trump. Sitting around this board room table, one could hardly wait to hear how each person had carried out the task they had been given. The stories were as varied and unique as each person in the room. While there was no position with Donald Trump waiting in the wing, there was a sense of eager anticipation as each new story came forth.

When Lori had opened her mail a couple of weeks earlier, she smiled as she came across the \$5 and instructions for this assignment. It did not take her long to give it away. In fact, she decided to double it and give \$10 to the woman who cleans her office. She explained to her that it was a gift, not a payment. But that was only the start.

The next day Lori was leaving for a trip and had a layover in Atlanta. While at the airport, she stopped at a bakery stand called "Piece of Cake." That is when her eyes landed on a phenomenal piece of strawberry cake with strawberry frosting, packaged in a little bag. With satisfaction, she purchased it and headed to the bookstore across the way. The clerk at the bookstore engaged her in a conversation about the piece of cake and how she had wanted to try that specific kind. Lori suggested she get a piece for herself.

The woman proceeded to explain that she was trying to be very careful with her money as she had two kids at home and was saving for Christmas. Touched off by the generosity assignment the day before, Lori was moved and gave this stranger her piece of cake.

She promptly headed back to the cake stand to purchase another piece. After all, she really wanted that strawberry cake! The clerk joked how quickly Lori had returned. Lori explained that she had given hers to the clerk at the bookstore. Moved by Lori's generosity, the clerk said, "Here, take this one. One good turn deserves another."

This experience was a poignant reminder that giving is contagious and creates a ripple effect!

Upon hearing this story, another woman at the meeting quipped that this cake trick should be tried with a sweater at Nordstrom's... "Hey, I gave this sweater away...can I get another?" Laughter erupted throughout the room.

As the conversation continued, a few people around the table mentioned the concern and shame they had over their isolation, not really knowing anyone in need to whom they could give this money. One ambassador, Sandy, described her internal processing upon receipt of this assignment, as she assessed where all her time is spent – at work, which happens to be a Christian organization and at home and at church. Where would she possibly find an opportunity to give to someone in need? It did not take long.

Four times a year, her church hosts a night out for parents of children with disabilities. For a few hours, parents can drop off their special needs children and their siblings for free, to enjoy a much needed break. This particular evening, Sandy was at the door, greeting the families as they came in. At once, it occurred to her that she was seeing all these people with financial need due to their children's medical bills, many of whom have experienced marital stress because of all they have had to endure. One of the moms who came through the door that night stood out as the one to whom she was to give the \$20 she had received.

Sandy pulled this woman off to the side as she was on her way out the door for a few hours of freedom. She asked her for her name. “Michelle,” she said. Her need seemed all too clear as she wore a tattered fall coat in the cold winter weather. Sandy explained that she wanted to give her this \$20. Michelle stared at her for a moment, blinked and teared up, “Thanks, this will help a lot.” Who knows if this was spent on gas, a Christmas present or a little dinner, but there was no doubt it had touched this woman’s place of need.

It was interesting to hear how some of the ambassadors spent a lot of time analyzing to whom they would give this money. These individuals wanted to be sure they were being good stewards of that which they had been entrusted. Others felt compelled to give it away as quickly as possible, as if it were a hot potato in their hands.

Donna described that this exercise helped her to realize how much her focus tends to be upon the amount which she gives rather than person to whom it is given. When she opened her envelope with \$5, she was quick to find out how she would be measured. She read that she would be asked how long it took to give the money away. So, she wanted to get on it! She gave it away quickly to a family standing next to a Salvation Army kettle, as this was the first opportunity that crossed her path.

When she got home that night, her husband asked her what their year-end looked like in terms of giving. He mentioned that in the past she had not really been involved in the decision with regard to whom they gave, only with regard to the amount. She became indignant, “That is not true!” Then she paused to think about the assignment she had been given. It became clear to Donna that the Lord was nudging her to become more involved, not just in the letting go, but in truly giving attention to the receiver.

The concept of the receiver was an important consideration in this exercise. Anne suggested to the group that the definition of someone in “need” should be re-evaluated. She described a client of the financial firm for whom she works. On the outside, he is wildly successful. He is handsome, wealthy and lives on a lake. From his outward appearance, he has it all together. She noted that his success, as with many wealthy people, can cloud his need. Aside from this particular assignment, as a part of one of her firm’s initiatives, Anne brought him a gift. She had perceived that he had a deeper need. He became very emotional. It was a reminder to her that

human needs are varied and many. And that it is not about amount, but impact.

Giving is contagious, but sometimes it requires an invitation to join in the effort. And invitations come best on the coattails of a relationship. Upon receipt of this assignment, Roger made the decision to multiply his \$5. Rather than giving it to one person in need, he saw a ripe opportunity to teach his thirteen grandchildren the importance of generosity. He gave \$5 to each of them to replicate the mission he had been given. He stressed to the group of ambassadors the impact a grandparent can have in leaving a legacy of generosity. Thoughts were darting across the room as to how this exercise could be utilized in other venues as well.

There are more noteworthy stories than space in which to share them, but it was clear that the point had been made. Generosity is not about the amount, but about the heart of the giver and the impact on the receiver.

Generosity might be compared to exercise. When one embarks on a new exercise regimen, it is hard. It takes work and does not feel natural. Over time, however, it becomes easier and one starts to see the great benefits exercise provides. The same can be said of generous giving. It might feel unnatural or even uncomfortable, at first. As one puts it into regular practice, it becomes more and more enjoyable and the effects ripple outward.

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Proverbs 19:17 states that, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD and he will repay him for his deed.” When our motivation lacks, we must remember that it is the Lord’s generosity in our lives that inspires our own. And when we give to those in need, whether poor in wealth or poor in spirit, we give to the LORD himself!

As you continue to exercise generosity, you may unwittingly end up with a few hundred extra “calories” to burn should you find yourself with a free piece of strawberry cake...

