



Sunday, October 13, 2024

***Do Unto Others* Kindness Campaign: GENEROSITY**
“Finding Purpose” | 1 Timothy 6:17-19 | Charlie Berthoud

Today is as good a day as any for us to think about our purpose in life.

Stephen Covey famously wrote about beginning with an end in mind. This is good for an organization and a long-term plan, and it's good for an individual to ponder, to consider goals for a lifetime or even for a month or a day.

Where am I going? What am I doing? What is my purpose?

It's pretty easy for any of us to slip into autopilot and just coast through our days, going through the motions.

But without a clear sense of purpose, we could get pulled in a lot of directions and easily end up somewhere that we don't want to be.

The Christian faith gives us a sense of purpose, stated in various ways.

- Jesus summarized the law and the prophets, saying the greatest commandment is to love God and to love neighbor.
- Jesus also said to seek first the kingdom of God.
- And when he called the first disciples, he encouraged them to fish for people, which I don't think has anything to do with nets or hooks and instead has to do with focusing on people, listening to people, caring for people, serving people.

Our “Do Unto Others” Kindness Campaign is focused on helping us find purpose in the midst of this tense and contentious election season.



We are in week five of our seven week KINDNESS campaign, in which we are not endorsing any candidates or political parties, but instead we're endorsing healthy ways of living our lives and engaging in politics, which we need to do, if we're serious about our calling to love our neighbors and work for God's kingdom.

The theme verse for the series comes from Matthew 7:12, known as the golden rule, when Jesus urges his followers to treat other people decently. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Each week we're focusing on a different word, a different theme, each of which gives us opportunities to think about purpose. Over the first four weeks we reflected on:

KINDNESS, COMPASSION, JUSTICE, SHARING



Any of these could be our purpose statement during this election season. "I am going to be KIND." "I am going to be COMPASSIONATE."

And we have yard signs in front of the church, to let our neighbors know about our campaign.

Today's theme is GENEROSITY, which could also be part of our purpose in this election season, in that we can be generous with those who have different opinions. It's tempting to see an extreme position and then think "all of those people" think that way. The reality is that most of us gravitate toward the center, toward some core values. So, it is helpful when we can be generous in our thinking about each other, when we do the hard work of seeking compromise and the common good. It's good when we can be generous in listening to each other and in trying to bring out the best in each other.

Our reading for today is from the short and little-known book of First Timothy. First Timothy was written by Paul (or a follower of Paul) to encourage Timothy, a young leader in the church, who had helped Paul with the church in Ephesus. The main concern of this short letter is **false teachings**.

The little letter begins and ends with strong words about false teachings. We don't know specifically what those false teachings were, but apparently, they were a big concern. Right after a typical brief greeting, Paul urges Timothy to make sure false teachings are not spread:

I urge you ...to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach different teachings and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love...

And the book concludes with Paul warning Timothy to stay away from the false teachings.

Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. Grace be with you.

Paul doesn't want Timothy or the church in Ephesus to be distracted by false teaching and lose track of their purpose.

Two thousand years later we have plenty of false teaching, distortion, and outright lying in our world today.

As we know, every election season has “exaggerations” by politicians, but over the past few years, persistent lies about the 2020 election continue to the point of dangerously undermining our democracy.

We need to work hard to avoid these false teachings and instead stay focused on our purpose as a nation, to have a healthy democracy, “with liberty and justice for all.” This is a big reason why we are doing this series, to encourage each other, in this challenging context, to be courageous and engaged in politics, or at least aware of what is going on, and working to make this world a better place. Remember, we pray for a better world every week, saying “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The work is hard and sometimes messy and so we need to do this work with KINDNESS and COMPASSION, actively seeking JUSTICE and finding ways to SHARE, while being GENEROUS in our thinking about people with different opinions.

And it’s important to be GENEROUS in other ways.

Generosity, money, and contentment are important themes in Timothy, just as they are central themes in the life and teaching of Jesus.

In the final chapter, Timothy offers teaching on contentment and riches, echoing the teachings of Jesus, calling people to simplicity and warning them about the dangers of getting obsessed with money and wealth.

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it, ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

And then, a few verses later in 1 Timothy six, right before the closing warning about false teachings, there is a three-verse call for generosity, which is our reading for today.

It seems significant that this teaching on generosity is at the conclusion of the letter, right before the final words about false teaching. It suggests that there were false teachings about money and riches and generosity—and those false teachings are still with us today, suggesting that having lots of money will take away all our problems and make us forever happy.

The final line of the reading makes a strong case for generosity as an appropriate purpose for a good life.

Listen for God's word.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

Paul is urging Timothy and other followers to avoid greed and be generous, which will allow them to take hold of the life that really is life.

He's suggesting that GENEROSITY could be one of our purposes in life. We encourage generosity in a variety of ways here at Covenant, and I want to focus on one in the rest of this message.

As we shared in the announcements at the beginning of the service, this month is our stewardship campaign, our generosity campaign—when we ask people to make a financial pledge for next year, so strengthen our common ministry.

Today is the one and only sermon of the year when we make an explicit request for you to make a pledge—a financial intention for the following year.

So, I need to ask a favor of those of you who are first time visitors or relatively new visitors or if you're watching for the first time. Please ignore me for a minute, because this next part isn't for you.

Our church is healthy and strong. One important way to help keep us healthy and strong is with generous pledges for the next year.

Pledging is an intention of your financial giving, and pledges are vital for the Session—the elected leaders of the congregation—to make plans for the future.

There are packets available in the narthex, and if there isn't one with your name on it, we have extras. You can fill out a card and drop it in the lectern, or you can fill out your forms online. You can make payments in that lectern or online.

Those that are not picked up will go in the mail this week.

Our budget is over one million dollars, and the vast majority of that comes from individual gifts. Some people pledge a couple dollars a week, and some people pledge a hundred or more dollars each week.

My wife and I make a pledge to this church, and we're raising it for 2025, because we believe in the good things happening here.

We hope to get as many pledges as possible by October 27, two weeks from today. Traditionally this season is called stewardship season—taking care of what has been entrusted to our care.

More recently we've called it our generosity campaign, recognizing that God has been generous with us, loving us and giving us life.

Hesed is that wonderful Hebrew word describing God's primary attribute. It's often translated as "steadfast love" and it could be translated as "generous love."

God has been generous with us, giving us life and much more. Our calling is to be generous with our time, our talent, our treasure, our lives.

After 11.5 years here at Covenant, I know we are a generous congregation. I see it all the time. And I see it happening this very month, as we are doing something that most

congregations would think is absolutely nuts.

Right now we have five “asks” out to the congregation.

- Peace and Global Witness Offering
- Hurricane Relief through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance
- Diaper and Detergent Drive
- Youth fundraiser meal and Packers game next Sunday
- Generosity campaign for 2025

There was actually some concern that this was too much, and we considered canceling or postponing one or two of these, but we didn't. We kept all five asks going, knowing that they are all important and that people of Covenant will do what they can to help. And we're trusting that the good people of Covenant know how important generosity campaign for the annual budget is, because that undergirds all of our ministry.

Another way I see generosity at Covenant is in how we use our building. When we made a renewed commitment to our building a few years ago in the form of a very expensive HVAC system, the Session agreed that we need to make sure the building is well-used for church activities as well as for the community.

So, the building is being used a lot—which seems appropriate since we are in the “love your neighbor” business. This building can be and is a place where people come together for all sorts of good reasons.

Over the summer our Church Administrator Bailey made a list of building users, which I want to share with you.

We have many users on a weekly basis: a refugee group stores supplies here. Several scout troops meet here. Two AA and one Al-Anon groups meet here. And we have a Spanish language Bible study. We also have a ton of music groups, including five different organists practicing on this wonderful instrument.

Plus, we have exercise groups, a huge Russian culture and language school on Saturdays, a Scrabble group, and the Kiwanis group every Friday at lunch. And we have many groups here on a monthly basis and occasional basis.

Generosity with our building— **Girls Rock Camp**



kindness
Campaign

generosity



covenantmadison

And we have ongoing special events and gatherings. One of the best ways the building has been used in a long time was this summer when we had three weeks of Girls Rock camp.

And we have church folks using the building too—for meetings, study, fellowship, worship, and more.

Our custodian Rodrigo says he doesn't find many cobwebs around the building, since it is so well used, and he's actually grateful to see that the church gets dirty because it's well-used.

Yes, we get some income from some of these groups, but part of the money you pledge helps make this space available for people to come together and get clarity on their purpose in life.

It feels good to be part of a church that prioritizes being a good neighbor. Thanks be to God that we can be generous with our building for the sake of our community.

Thanks be to God that we can all find clearer sense of purpose in our lives, being generous with our words, with our time, with our money, and with our lives.

Let us pray.