

## **Core Practices of Healthy Churches**

### **Part 1, Hospitality**

*Luke 14:16-23*

Many years ago, when Fred Craddock was a young preacher out of seminary, he pastored a small church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. It was a beautiful little white church up on a hill. At that time, Oak Ridge was rapidly expanding. Lots of people were moving to town to help in the construction work. Many of the newcomers lived in a mobile home park located near the church. The trailer park was packed with newcomers, including a large number of children. Fred saw all those new people and thought: our church ought to reach out to them. So, at the next Board meeting, Fred recommended a plan to reach out to the newcomers. “Oh, I don’t know,” said the chairman of the board. “They might not fit in here very well.” Fred countered, “But they live right next to our church. I think we should invite them to worship with us.” But Fred got resistance to the idea. The Board finally decided to table the discussion and deal with it at their next business meeting. At that meeting, a leader of the congregation said, “I move, that in order to be a member of this church, you have to own property in the county.” “I’ll second that motion,” said another man. Fred was mortified and spoke against it. But in the end, the motion passed. As a result, no effort was ever made to reach out to the newcomers.

Soon thereafter Fred left that church. Twenty years later, Fred and his wife were driving past Oak Ridge on a trip through Tennessee. Since he was single when he served that church, his wife had never seen it. So Fred decided to show it to her. As they drove to the church, Fred told his wife that painful story of how the church refused to reach out to newcomers in the community. It took a while to find the church. Lots of new roads and homes had been built in the area, but they finally found the spot. The beautiful white frame church was sitting there as always, but something was different. There was a big parking lot out front, full of cars, trucks, motor homes, and even motorcycles. As they pulled into the lot, they saw a big sign in front of the church. It said, “BBQ: All You Can Eat.” It was a restaurant! Fred and his wife went inside and the place was packed with all kinds of people—white and black and Hispanic. Rich and poor. Southerners and northerners. Fred said to his wife, “It’s a good thing this isn’t a church anymore. If it were, these people would not be allowed in.”

Well, that's a sad story, but it happens a lot. There are many churches that do not practice hospitality. They don't invite new people to their church, and when guests do come, they don't welcome them very warmly, especially if their guests appear "different." The end result is stagnation, decline, and eventually, death. But the Bible is clear. God expects the church of Jesus Christ to invite and welcome all people. We see that in today's parable in Luke 14 where the Master says, "Go out in the streets and invite all to come, even the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame ... so that My house will be full." The mandate from Jesus in this passage and throughout the NT is clear. Every church is called by God to invite and then welcome newcomers from all walks of life. In short, every church is called by God to practice radical hospitality.

Why is this so important to God? It's important to God because even in our sophisticated 21st century world, and even in our well-educated and affluent community, people still need Jesus. And people also need a community of faith. It's a tough world out there, and people need comrades for the journey.

Although I've only been here a few short weeks, I can already tell that we do a good job in this area. (I recounted numerous examples of my congregation practicing hospitality and affirmed those efforts). So in many ways, we already practice radical hospitality here. My hope and prayer is that in the months and years to come radical hospitality will become an even stronger part of our core culture. Why? Because reaching new people for Christ and church is God's mandate, hope, and dream for every church, including ours.

Please take out the insert in your bulletin today. Instead of just talking about hospitality in theory today, we want to give you some concrete opportunities to actually practice hospitality. So let me tell you some ways you can be a minister of hospitality in this church. *(I walked through the hospitality card and asked them to place it in the offering plate later. It could also be taken up at the end of the service if you take up the offering before the sermon. The card asked people to commit to several hospitality practices, including inviting at least one person to worship over the next month, parking in our satellite parking lot, sitting on the front pews of the sanctuary so our guests could sit closer to the back where they would feel more comfortable as newcomers. We also asked them to check if they wanted information about how to become a greeter, usher, or an Andrew Minister (they staff our Guest Services ministry and serve as hospitality ministers—such as taking guests to SS classes, showing young*

*parents where the nursery is, giving tours of the church, etc.) We followed up with these folks the next week and many of them went to training sessions for these jobs. Overall, we received incredible response to these hospitality commitment cards).*

I once heard a story about a young college student named Bill. Bill had wild hair, spiked with vivid colors, and he wore a nose ring. Bill always wore a T-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans, and no shoes. Bill, a brilliant young man, became a Christian while attending college. He attended a Christian organization on campus, but he also wanted to find a church. Across the street from Ken's college was a well-dressed, very traditional church.

One Sunday Bill decided to visit that church. He walked into the sanctuary with his nose ring, no shoes, jeans and a T-shirt, and wild hair. The service had already started, so Bill walked down the aisle looking for a seat. But the church was packed, and he could not find a seat anywhere. By now, people were uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill got closer to the front of the church. When he realized there were no seats left, he squatted down and sat in the aisle. Although this was perfectly acceptable behavior at his college fellowship group—trust me—this had never happened before in this church!

The tension in the congregation was palpable. The preacher didn't know what to do so he stood there in silence. About that time, an elderly man, one of the old patriarchs of that church, slowly made his way down the aisle toward Bill. The man was in his eighties, had silver-gray hair, and always wore a three-piece suit. He was a godly man, very elegant, dignified, traditional, and conservative. As he started walking toward this boy, everyone was saying to themselves—you can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid with a nose ring, wild hair, T-shirt and jeans and no shoes, sitting on the church floor? They knew he was about to banish this kid from the church. The old man walked with a cane, so it took a long time for him to reach the boy.

The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of the old man's cane. All eyes were focused on him. Finally, the old man reached the boy. He paused a moment, then dropped his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, the old man lowered himself and sat down next to the boy. He shook the boy's hand, welcomed him to the church, and sat with him for the rest of the service. That, my friends, is radical hospitality!

If time permitted, I could talk for hours about inviting and welcoming people into the life of our church. But in the end, there is only one ultimate reason for practicing radical hospitality. It's because, even after all these years, people still need Jesus.

***Solo: People Need the Lord.***

**###**

## Core Practices of Healthy Churches Part 2, Worship

*Isaiah 6:1-8*

***[As I prepared for this sermon, I realized it would be difficult if not impossible to share what I wanted in a traditional sermon format. So I decided to attempt a Q and A sermon. I recruited a TV reporter from our congregation to help. This experiment proved to be an effective way to communicate this material on worship. Although you would have to make adaptations, you might want to consider doing something similar at your church. The Q and A interview sermon follows.]***

**MARTIN:** Many years ago, after a morning worship service, my son Jonathan, who was just 4 years old at the time said, “Papa, are you tired? You look tired.” I said, “Yes, Jonathan, I get tired when I preach.” He said, “Yes, I get tired when I listen.” We are in a five-week series called “The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.” Today’s topic is passionate worship. In order not to tire you too much, I’m experimenting today with a different style of preaching: a Q and A approach, which is something I’ve never done before. I’ve asked one of our longtime church members to assist me in today’s sermon.

As most of you know, Meryll is the host of NewsChannel 5’s midday show “*Talk of the Town.*” So Meryll, please come and join me at this time.

**MERYLL:** Martin, this is an experiment for you... and it’s an experiment for me too, because I usually have lots of backup when I do an interview... the studio crew, the teleprompter, a smart producer in my earpiece to help me out... so we’re both a little bit out of our comfort zone today! But we’ll give it our best shot! And you can thank your lucky stars that investigative reporter Phil Williams attends another church, or this experiment could have had a very different outcome!

Okay, let’s get started... I always do some research before an interview... and in looking at your bio, it seems you’re kind of a worship expert. I’m going to make you brag on yourself a little bit... tell us about the ways that you’ve been involved in teaching worship.

**MARTIN:** Worship has been a life-long passion of mine. I have a good bit of advanced education in worship. And I've done a lot of writing on the subject. I've written four books on worship and preaching and over a hundred articles. And, I write two national columns for clergy called "*Getting Ready for Sunday*." I also have a *Getting Ready for Sunday* website for clergy. I served my old denomination as a worship and preaching consultant, editor, and workshop leader. And, I used to teach worship at a seminary. In fact, one of my old students once called me a "worship junkie." Although I don't like that term, it's probably true—I am a worship junkie.

**MERYLL:** I don't think that's a bad thing! So obviously you know a lot about worship. But why are you so passionate about it?

**MARTIN:** There are several answers to that question. I'll begin on a personal level. All of the really important things that have happened in my life have happened in worship. I first met Jesus in a worship service. I was baptized in a worship service. I was married in a worship service. My two children were baptized in worship services. I was ordained to the Gospel ministry in a worship service. And the most powerful experiences I've had with God have been in worship services. So a lot of my passion about worship comes from my own personal life.

**MERYLL:** I think we can all relate to that. What about our corporate worship... what do you see as the impact of worship on the local church?

**MARTIN:** Worship is the engine that drives the local church. That's true both theologically, and practically. Let me focus for a moment on the practical level. First, worship drives membership. Almost all new members have their first contact with a church through a worship service. So if a church wants to reach new people—and it must reach new people to be viable—worship needs to be done with excellence. Second, almost all the money that comes into the church comes from worship offerings. Finally, good worship builds church morale. Churches with good worship have good morale. Churches with poor worship have poor morale. So for some very practical reasons, worship is the fuel that keeps a healthy church running.

**MERYLL:** Let's broaden the concept even further. What are the theological reasons that passionate worship is so important?

**MARTIN:** I could talk for hours about this. But the bottom line is that God, the ultimate creator of the universe, is worthy of our worship. That theme dominates the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Today's text from Isaiah is a good example. In this passage, Isaiah saw God, high and lifted up, and the only possible response was awe and worship. God is worthy of our worship! Nothing that we do as a church is more important. So for theological, practical, and personal reasons, worship is my first priority as a pastor.

**MERYLL:** I want to ask you to put on your seminary professor hat for a few minutes and give us a history lesson. How has the church arrived at the current way we structure our worship services?

**MARTIN:** The first thing I need to say is that no one right way to worship exists. Through the centuries, the church has worshipped God in many diverse ways. For example, many evangelical churches today practice what liturgical scholars call the frontier model of worship. I've listed this in the bulletin. Please take a look. Frontier worship developed during the evangelistic camp meetings of the early 1800s in the American West. The basic pattern for frontier worship orders worship services into three basic parts: a time of praise and prayer, with great emphasis on music; a sermon, usually evangelistic in nature; and a public invitation challenging people to respond to the gospel. Many churches in America today still follow this pattern.

**MERYLL:** But when you compare that pattern to the way the first Christians approached it... wasn't worship very different in the early centuries of the church?

**MARTIN:** Absolutely. While there is nothing wrong with this frontier worship pattern, it differs significantly from the 1,800 years of worship that preceded it. Early on in the life of the church, a basic five-fold order of worship developed. It's also listed in your bulletin. Early Christian worship consisted of a time of gathering and praise, especially the singing of songs. Then they had the service of the word, including scripture and sermon. Then they had a response to the word, which included the offering. Then they had the service of the table, where they celebrated Holy Communion. And finally they had a brief dismissal, sending the congregation

out into the world to serve God and neighbor. This five-fold order of worship has been the mainstay of Christian worship for most of its history.

**MERYLL:** So how is this historical pattern reflected in the way we worship today?

**MARTIN:** This historical pattern is the model that most Christians still follow today, including the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, most mainline Protestant churches, including most UM churches. If we put this ancient pattern of worship together into a modern worship outline, it would look something like the outline in today's bulletin, which is blocked out as: "We Gather to Worship God, We Listen to the Word of God, We Respond to the Call of God, and We Depart to Serve God." On communion Sundays we would add, right before the departure, "We Celebrate at the Table of God." That's how I structure worship, that's how most churches structure worship, that's how most UM churches structure worship, and that's what worship has looked like at BUMC for some time now.

**MERYLL:** And yet across the country, we're hearing about "worship wars"... with churches even splitting up over major disagreements about worship style. Some people want high-church traditional worship, others want low-church traditional. Some want moderate contemporary worship, and others want all-out "rock and roll" contemporary. It can be a volatile situation... how do you navigate it?

**MARTIN:** Well, I've considered taking off every Sunday but I don't think that will work! To answer your question, let me tell you about Thanksgiving at the Thielen household. Every Thanksgiving we are faced with a dilemma. My son-in-law and I want ham, my wife and daughter want turkey, and our son and his wife are vegetarians. So what's a family to do? Well, we put out a small ham, and we put out a turkey breast, and we put out lots of veggie dishes. That way everyone can have their needs met, and we can have a peaceful and happy Thanksgiving dinner. I think the church has to do the same. We have to offer a mix of worship styles. We need to offer traditional services, we need to offer contemporary services, and we need to offer blended services that mix both the old and the new.

**MERYLL:** So here at Brentwood... traditional services aren't going away... and contemporary services like Awakening are here to stay... are you saying it's possible to please everybody?



**MARTIN:** Absolutely not! I used to joke with my last congregation that if we didn't offend you today come back next week and we'll try to offend you then! No worship service will please all the people all the time. It's impossible. But I do think you can please most of the people most of the time by offering a mix of worship options. But the best answer I have to the worship wars that are raging across American churches is to remember that WORSHIP IS NOT ABOUT ME OR YOU OR OUR PERSONAL PREFERENCES. Worship is about God. And worship is about the family of God, all of whom have different preferences. So we come and worship God and enjoy the parts we like, and we tolerate the parts we don't like, because some of our brothers and sisters in Christ find those parts very meaningful.

**MERYLL:** And then there's that word "passionate"... it may scare some people... but what I think you're talking about is making worship more meaningful...showing up on Sunday morning and not just going through the motions, but being open to the ways God wants to work in each one of us through the worship experience. So how do we do that?

**MARTIN:** If I had an easy answer for that question, I'd write another book on passionate worship and make a lot of money! There is no easy answer for making routine worship become passionate worship. But I will say this. The preacher and the choir cannot make passionate worship happen. We can help facilitate it. But for true passionate worship to occur, the CONGREGATION has to be passionate. They have to come to our worship services expecting and anticipating they will meet God in a significant way. They have to sing with gusto. They have to pass the peace with one another with genuine warmth, love, and compassion. They have to be open to new ways of worshipping God. And they have to pour their heart and soul into the worship experience. In short, for passionate worship to occur, the congregation must worship God with abandon. If not, the best preacher in the world and the best choir in the world won't make passionate worship a reality. So in the end, passionate worship occurs when the congregation makes it occur.

**MERYLL:** So that's the challenge for each one of us... to find the passion to take our worship to the next level... both personally and as a congregation. If you need some inspiration, you'll find lots of good ideas in Chapter Two of the book we're studying this month, "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations". If you haven't picked up a copy yet, they're available in the Outpost store just outside of the narthex. This is the time when the producer in my earpiece

would be telling me to wrap it up... so we'll close with that thought... and Martin, thanks for letting me be part of the conversation today!

**MARTIN:** Thank you Meryll, for facilitating today's discussion. And thank to all of you for your attention. May God help us all, both personally and as a congregation, grow in our passion for the worship of God. Amen.

###

## Core Practices of Healthy Churches

### Part 3, Groups

#### *Selected Passages*

If you are a guest today, or have not been here the past two weeks, we are in the middle of a series on the five core practices of vibrant and healthy churches. The series is based on a book by a United Methodist Bishop called *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. The first practice was **radical hospitality**. The second practice was **passionate worship**, which we looked at last week. Today's practice is **intentional faith development**. But when the Bishop talks about intentional faith development, he's really talking about group life in the church. He's talking about connecting to other people in a group for mutual support and for spiritual growth. Groups would be SS classes, or a choir, or a support group, or a mission group, or one of a hundred other groups that this church offers on a weekly basis.

Let me tell you one of my favorite stories. An atheist, a middle-aged man named Fred, regularly attended worship at a Jewish synagogue. Finally someone got up the nerve to ask him about this. They said, "Fred, everyone here knows you don't believe in God. So we can't help but wonder—why do you come to worship every week? We're glad you are here, but it's a bit confusing." Fred smiled and pointed to a man across the room. He said, "Do you see Mr. Simon over there? "Mr. Simon comes to worship every week to talk to God. I come to worship every week to talk to Mr. Simon." I hope you come to this place every week to talk to God. But I also hope you come to this place every week to talk to and connect with other human beings.

One of the deepest needs we have in life is the need to connect with other people. Human beings crave connection—we are wired for community. We see that truth throughout the Bible. Several examples are listed in today's scripture readings, which are printed in your order of worship. Genesis 2 says, "It is not good for man to be alone." From the very beginning, God created us for connection with others. Ecclesiastes 4 says, "Two are better than one." The text goes on to say that we cannot survive the obstacles of life without the help of friends. Proverbs 15 says, "With many advisors plans will succeed." In other words, when we make plans and decisions, we need the advice of friends. Romans 12 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." What a beautiful image of Christian

friendship. Galatians 6 says, “Carry each other’s burdens.” In short, God calls Christian believers to connect with one another. And the best way to do that in the life of the church is to connect to a group. That’s what Jesus did. In Mark 3 we read, “Jesus appointed twelve, that they might be with him.” The Bible tells us that Jesus formed a group of 12 disciples to be together, to learn together, and to support each other. Christianity literally began as a small group movement.

I cannot overemphasize how important group life is to our church. In a church this size, the only way you will find true community is to get connected with a group. Groups serve at least two vitally important purposes. First, groups provide an arena for Christian Support. It’s a tough world out there and we need the support of fellow Christian friends to survive. Second, small groups provide an arena for Christian Growth. Through group study and discussion, we learn and grow and mature as Christian believers. Christian discipleship and growth happen best when we learn together in community.

I could talk all day about connecting to a group. Group life is a great passion of mine, partly because it’s an essential part of my own life. I would not survive without a support group. Like many of you, I have a demanding job. Pastoring a church, especially a huge one like this, is complicated and sometimes overwhelming. It is full of massive challenges and relentless criticism. I love this work. But the only way to survive it is to have a support system. So I gather regularly with a group of clergy friends for mutual support, and for personal and professional growth. Without this group, I would drown. I share that because the same thing is true for you. All of us need a group of folks to walk with us and support us through the journey.

Since we are focusing on group life today, it seemed appropriate for today’s sermon to be a group effort. So, at this time, two members of our congregation are going to come and briefly talk about the importance of group life in our church. First, \_\_\_\_ will share his/her testimony about being in a small group. Then \_\_\_\_ will come and talk about some of the small group opportunities offered at BUMC.

- Group Life Testimony (*a lay person shared how important being in a small group was for them*)
- Group Life opportunities (*one of our group life staff members told about group life opportunities in our church—an insert listing the groups was included in the bulle-*

*tin and used for this presentation. The insert included the phone number and email address of our group life staff persons so members of the congregation could get more information about various small groups in the church)*

Thank you \_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. A couple of years ago, I heard about a northerner who came down south for a business conference in Durham, North Carolina. His first morning in town, he went to eat breakfast at a little mom-and-pop diner close to his hotel. The waitress came to take his order. He ordered eggs, sausage, and toast. When the waitress, a southerner, brought this northerner his order, he noticed a little pile of white stuff on his plate. "What's that?" he asked. "Grits," she said. "What is a grit?" he asked. "Honey," she drawled in her southern accent, "they don't come by themselves." Well, grits don't come by themselves. And neither do Christians. The Christian faith is not an individual faith, but a community faith. You can't do Christianity by yourself. You do Christianity with others, as part of a church community. And the best way to do that is by connecting to a group.

To conclude today's sermon, one of our groups in this church, the Sonshine Choir (youth choir) is going to sing a song. This song is not a religious song per se, but its message is about as Christian a message as you'll ever hear. (Song: *Lean On Me*)

###

**Core Practices of Healthy**  
**Part 4, Service**  
*Matthew 25:34-40*

Today's scripture reading is not ambiguous in the least. This text tells us that when we serve others, we serve Jesus. This text tells us that the best way to serve God is to serve people in need. One of the things that most excites me about BUMC is that we get that. That's why we put so much time and energy and money into ministries like Harvest Hands, and Habitat for Humanity, and Room in the Inn, and 61st Avenue UMC, and Grace Works, and Sunny Day Club, and our work in South Africa and Russia, and dozens of support groups including Career Transitions, and Camp Barnabus, and mission trips to Mexico and Costa Rica, and on and on and on. I want to show you just one example of our service to others. This brief video introduces Harvest Hands, our inner-city ministry in the Wedgewood community in South Nashville. **[VIDEO of Harvest Hands]**

BUMC understands the words of Jesus, "to the extent that you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me." Can we do better? Of course we can! One of my dreams is that even more people in our congregation will engage in hands on ministry to others. To help facilitate that, we have placed in your bulletin a list of service opportunities. *(I quickly walked through the card so they would be familiar with the service opportunities we offer at our church).* Please carefully look it over and find a place to serve. Information about our ministries can be found on this card, along with a contact person. Our church is engaged in many community ministries, and I hope you will find a place of service soon if you have not already done so. As we focus today on missions and service, I want to tell you one of my all-time favorite stories.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Jews were expelled from Spain. Many went to France, Germany, Greece, and some went to the Holy Land. Among them was Jacoby, a shoemaker by trade. Jacoby was a kind man; but most of all, Jacoby was a devout man. He went to the synagogue every Sabbath and listened to what the Rabbi was saying, even though Jacoby spoke Spanish and the Rabbi spoke Hebrew.

One Sabbath, the Rabbi mentioned in his sermon how at one time loaves of bread were offered to God. Jacoby heard and understood the words bread and God, and he got excited.

He ran home and said to his wife, “Esperanza! Guess what? God eats bread! And you are the best baker in the whole country! This week make your best bread, and I’ll bring it to God.” That week Esperanza kneaded in the best ingredients and braided the dough with such love. Jacoby then took the seven loaves of bread to the synagogue. “Senior Dios,” Jacoby said to God. “I’ve got your bread. You will love it. My wife Esperanza, she’s a wonderful baker! You’ll eat every crumb!” Then Jacoby took the bread and put it into the holy ark.

No sooner did Jacoby leave than in came the shammes, the man who cleans up the synagogue. “Lord, you know I want to be here in this holy place; that’s all I want to do. But for seven weeks now I haven’t been paid. Lord, I need for you to make me a miracle. I believe you’re going to; maybe you have done it already. Maybe I’ll open the holy ark, and there will be my miracle.” He walked to the ark and he opened it, and there was his miracle. Seven loaves of bread! Enough for the whole week. The next day, when the Rabbi opened up the ark and Jacoby and Esperanza saw that the bread was gone, you should have seen the look of love that passed between them. The next week it was the same. And the week after. This went on for months. The shammes learned to have faith in God, but if he hung around the synagogue, or came too early, there was no miracle. And so, thirty years went by.

Now an old man, Jacoby came one day to the synagogue with his loaves of bread. “Senior Dios,” he prayed, “I know your bread’s been lumpy lately. Esperanza’s arthritis—maybe you could do something? You’ll eat better!” He put the bread in the ark and started to leave when suddenly the Rabbi grabbed him. “What are you doing?”, the Rabbi demanded. “I’m bringing God his bread,” Jacoby replied. “God doesn’t eat bread!” said the Rabbi. Jacoby said, “He’s been eating Esperanza’s bread for thirty years.” The two men heard a noise, and they hid.

No sooner did they hide, than in came the shammes. “I hate to bring it up Lord, but you know your bread’s been lumpy lately. Maybe you could talk to an angel.” When the shammes reached into the ark for the loaves of bread, the Rabbi jumped out and grabbed him. The Rabbi angrily told the two men that what they were doing was sinful, going on and on, and all three men began to cry. Jacoby began to cry because he only wanted to do good. The Rabbi cried because all this happened because of his sermon thirty years ago. And the shammes cried because he realized there would be no more bread.

Suddenly they heard laughter from the corner. They turned and saw the great mystic, Rabbi Isaac. Shaking his head and laughing, Rabbi Isaac said, “No Rabbi, these men, they are not sinful. These men are devout! You should know that God has never had more pleasure than watching what goes on in your synagogue. On the Sabbath, he sits with his angels, and they laugh, watching this man bring the bread and the other man take the bread, while God gets all the credit! You must beg forgiveness of these men, Rabbi.” Rabbi Isaac looked at Jacoby and said, “Jacoby, you must do something even more difficult. You must now bring your bread directly to the shammas, and when you do, you must believe with perfect faith that it is the same as giving it to God.”

That sounds a lot like another rabbi named Jesus who said, “to the extent that you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me.”

Response: A child sang, *“Make Me a Servant.”*

###



## Core Practices of Healthy Churches

### Part 5, Stewardship

*Luke 21:1-4*

A few months ago I heard about an African American pastor who went to a new church. This pastor was a visionary, seeing not only what the church was, but also what it could become. As you probably know, in the black church tradition, the congregation helps the preacher along during the sermon. Well, on his second Sunday, this new pastor told the congregation that the old church had been sitting still too long. “Amen, preach,” the congregation responded. “Been sitting too long.” “This old church needs to get up and move,” the pastor said. “Amen, preach, let her move.” This old church needs to get up and walk,” the pastor continued, only to be met again with the enthusiastic response, “Amen, preach, let her walk.” Greatly encouraged by the congregation’s response, the pastor reached another high. “This old church needs to get up and run.” “Amen, preach, let her run,” came the response. With great excitement, the preacher concluded by saying, “This old church needs to get up and fly.” “Amen, preach, let her fly,” the congregation said with one voice. “Ladies and gentlemen,” said the preacher, “it takes money to fly!” All of a sudden there was dead silence in the congregation. Finally someone said from the back of the church, “Let her sit preach, let her sit.”

Today we conclude a series on the five core practices of vibrant churches. Today’s core practice is **financial generosity**. As most of you know, this series has been inspired by the book, “The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.” If I had written this book it would have been called “The Four Practices of Fruitful Congregations.” That’s because I believe if you do the first four core practices well—evangelism, worship, small groups, and community ministry—adequate financial resources will follow. But since a UM Bishop wrote this book, and Bishops are concerned about finances, especially apportionments, he added a fifth practice on “extravagant generosity.” And that’s certainly a valid emphasis. The fact is, it cost a lot of money to support a vibrant church. Our church budget here at BUMC is 6.7 million dollars. And, as many of you know, we are a little behind budget. For us to carry out God’s kingdom work here, we all need to practice generosity.

And that brings me to today's text. This passage in Luke 21 is all about extravagant generosity. It's an interesting scene. People are parading by the temple, giving large contributions. Then a poor unnamed widow slipped in, gave a tiny gift, and went out unnoticed. However, Jesus saw her and praised her as a model of the true spirit of giving. So today, I'd like to note three things about this woman—very simple things, yet very important.

The first thing to note is that she gave. This seems so simple that we almost forget it. But it can't be taken for granted. The sad fact is, in the average American church, 50% of the people on the roll don't give anything. I don't look at giving records, but I would guess our church is no different. There are a lot of reasons why people don't give. The economy is bad, the market is down, our mortgage is huge, or we have kids in college. If anyone had a reason not to give, it was this woman. She was poor, she was a widow, and all she had was these two copper coins. But she gave anyway. She wanted to be in on God's work, and no excuse was big enough to stop her. You see, there is a deep human need to give to something bigger than ourselves. If we don't give of our resources to something bigger than ourselves, our soul shrivels up. If we do give to something bigger than ourselves, it enlarges our soul. This woman knew how important it was to give to a cause bigger than herself, to give to God and God's work. So the first thing to note about this woman is the simple fact that she gave.

The second thing to note is that this woman gave to the right place. She gave her gift to the temple. In today's terms and in our Christian context, that would mean she gave her gift to the church. Although every church is imperfect, it's still the best place to financially support God's work. The local church is where our children learn the stories of Jesus and learn about values and character. The local church is where we grow as disciples. The local church is where we worship God and serve God. The local church visits us when we are sick and performs our baptisms, our weddings, and our funerals. The local church offers support and friendship for the Christian journey. And, when we give to the local church, we support God's kingdom work in our community and throughout the entire world. I'm not saying we should not support other Christian and even secular causes. I support many good causes beyond the local church, and I hope you do as well. But for God-centered kingdom giving, you cannot do better than the local church. Well, first this woman gave, and second, she gave to the right place.

The final thing to note is that this woman gave sacrificially. She only gave two copper coins, a small and insignificant amount. But Jesus said she gave more than all the others put together.

The others gave out of their surplus, but she gave out of her poverty. She gave sacrificially to God's work because she loved God, was dedicated to God, and wanted to be involved in God's work. I mentioned earlier that I don't look at giving records. But given all the millions of dollars a year this church receives, there is no doubt that many of you give sacrificially and I deeply appreciate it. Our church is blessed with many sacrificial givers, and that pleases God deeply.

Well, this unnamed woman in Luke 21 is an incredible model for us. She gave. She gave to the right place. And she gave sacrificially. In short, she practiced extravagant generosity. Because of that Jesus admired her, and affirmed her, and lifted her up as a model for us all.

I heard an interesting story not long ago that I want to share with you. A man made an appointment with the pastor of a Methodist Church. He told the pastor he wanted to become a member of the church. But, he added, "I am a very busy man. Therefore, I won't attend worship services very often, and I certainly don't have time to serve on a committee or teach a class or sing in a choir or anything like that." Then he added, "I also have a lot of financial obligations, so I will not be able to give much money to the church either." The pastor thought for a moment and replied, "Sir, I believe you have come to the wrong church. The church you're looking for is ten blocks down the street." The man was surprised by the pastor's response, but he left the office in search of the other church.

He followed the pastor's directions, and went ten blocks down the street, where he saw the church. When he pulled into the parking lot he saw an abandoned, boarded-up church building. It was a dead church. It was out of business. I've thought a lot about that story since I heard it. You see, it costs very little to support a dead church. But a live church—a vibrant, growing, active, serving church like BUMC—takes a lot of time, and a lot of energy, and a lot of work, and a lot of money to support. So may God help you, and may God help me, and may God help our entire congregation to practice extravagant generosity.

