

Giving Outside the Box

In the last week of Jesus' earthly life, on Tuesday evening, picking up in Mark 14:3 (although there are parallels in both Matthew and John), "And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly perfume of pure nard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head. But there were some who were indignant among themselves and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than 300 denarii [about a year and a half's wages] and given to the poor.' And they criticized her sharply. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, whenever this good news is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.'"

Sharing with the poor is a good thing, but it is only one of several ways we might share with others. Further, our sharing must not be bound up in rules so that it becomes mechanical and impersonal. We can even become like those described in a rock song from 1969, "Easy to be hard, especially people who care about strangers, who care about evil and social injustice. Do you only care about the bleeding crowd? How about a needed friend?" And, no, I'm not going to sing it.

Of course, help people as you have opportunity. Helping widows and orphans is listed in James 1:27 as "pure and undefiled religion." When Peter understood that Saul of Tarsus had been commissioned by God as the apostle to the Gentiles, he had one request (Galatians 2:10), "Remember the poor." Or, from Acts 2:44 – 45, "Now all who believed were together and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone had need." There is a similar description in Acts 4:24. But, looking at this practically, if each of us were to cash out all our assets and distribute them to the poor, we would not make a significant change in the percentage of poor people in Missouri, let alone the whole world. In fact, we would add ourselves to that category. Like everything else in Christianity, God expects us to think. Pray for wisdom (James 1:5 – 8), then trust the indwelling Spirit.

Remember the poor, but also remember that the poor you will have with you always. Their needs are endless. So, be on the lookout for humanly impossible opportunities which you can take up by faith. Remember 2 Corinthians 9:8 – 11, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. As it is written, 'He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever.' Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God." God promised an abundance for every good work. The trick is seeing it – by faith. Giving in a way that is carefully included in the household budget is sight, not faith. Be open to humanly impossible opportunities. Be open to odd sources of assets. Having fundraisers is good. If we are not diligent with what we can do, I don't think God will have much respect for how we might handle doing something well beyond what we can do – which is one of the points in the parable of the unrighteous steward in the first half of Luke 16.

Sometimes, an extravagant gesture, like that of the woman with the alabaster flask of pure nard, is appropriate. The vial was a family asset. They did not have banks or financial advisors so that she could park money safely somewhere. As some small amount of money beyond what was needed for daily life accumulated, a family would buy a readily marketable asset, in this case

a gypsum vial of pure nard, to be saved for a family hardship. By the way, so you can visualize it, the vial was made of the same stuff as sheetrock, except without the paper. When it was oiled, it became translucent and slightly malleable. So, after filling, the stopper would be worked into the neck and smoothed out so it had to be broken to be opened. This sealed environment kept the nard from oxidizing and developing a disagreeable odor and becoming worthless.

How can we make a similar extravagant gesture? Jesus is not with us physically on this earth, so we cannot do extravagant and symbolic gestures for Him. How can we apply the example recounted in this passage in our time and place?

The woman who brought the alabaster flask of pure nard had insight that the others had failed to grasp despite repeated teaching on the subject; Jesus had told His followers (more than just the twelve) that this was the last trip to Jerusalem and that He was going to be executed. Apparently, this woman got it. She acted accordingly. She didn't wait for Jesus to be dead to anoint Him with a perfume commonly used in preparing the bodies of really rich people for a tomb. It was a gesture, not a necessity. She let Jesus know that she understood and that He was of great value to her.

So, just to get our thinking unstuck, what sorts of extravagant gestures might fit? I'm not talking about our well-planned sharing, like congregational support of missions or the benevolence fund or the building. Those are good but ordinary ways to share that we are fully capable of handling by ourselves. What I will address this morning are examples that are outside the box, events to which people respond, "I can't do that." Good. You are right. You can't. The following examples are not encouragements to being fiscally irresponsible. They are examples of what can happen when we pick up opportunities by faith. First, it takes faith to see the opportunity. Then it takes faith not to be overwhelmed by the opportunity. Then it takes faith not to give up on the opportunity because you cannot accomplish it. Instead, you patiently take the opportunity under advisement and start looking for the humanly impossible path to getting it done, by faith.

Here are some examples of actions that qualify as "giving outside the box" that I have seen over the last 50 years:

When we lived in Oklahoma, we knew a family in our congregation: dad (an ordinary working guy), a stay-at-home mom, two medium-sized kids. Dad got sick and, after a lot of expensive treatments, died. The remaining debt was crushing. Mom did not have any skills to enable her to immediately step into the breadwinner role. Because they were relatively young, they had not found it necessary to have life insurance. Of course, the congregation rallied around to help with this and that. One couple, who were in their eighties, he was a retired librarian, donated their burial plots in the local cemetery.

What made this "outside the box" thinking? They were thinking in terms of the recipient, not the giver. They saw the grief and the immediate need. The new widow was going to be dealing with selecting a place to bury her husband within days. They took that terrible task off the table. Do you suppose that simple gift had a lasting effect? I remember it clearly, and it was 45 years ago. I know that several others gave the family gifts of larger dollar amounts than the value of those plots, but this gift had impact. Like the woman with the alabaster vial of pure nard, she used a family asset to demonstrate that she understood and that she wanted to participate in the process. By the way, that elderly couple, both of them, died within the next three years.

Here's another one. Have you ever been to an event, sometimes called a retreat or a family camp, in which a lot of church people from various places all come together for the published purpose of listening to about 16 or so hour-long Bible lessons by different people over a three-day

weekend? The attendees sometimes camp in tents or trailers. The less hardy opt for motels. But the real draw is not the lessons, although the organizers do their best to get speakers who are both informative and entertaining. The real draw is the interactions between the faithful, which covers many more hours than 16 sermons over three days.

As an example, on our first such trip, we were trying to get the lay of the land, so we asked one of the organizers about two middle-aged couples who were obviously in animated conversation at a table in the big room where the meals were served. I asked, “How long do you suppose those two couples have known each other.” The organizer looked at his watch, “About twenty minutes.”

Looking at this from a “sharing” perspective, what does such an event cost? Travel is expensive, no matter which method you choose. The organizers generally plan all the meals, but, obviously, everyone in attendance needs to chip in to cover those costs. And, there is lodging, whether you bring camping equipment or stay in a motel. How do you get the time off for the travel? Fortunately, you can take the kids, it being a church event. There are a goodly number of reasons why this is just not practical. Plus, you don’t know anyone. It could be deadly dull. Be honest; how many hour-long sermons are you up for in one weekend? Our expectations of the presentations being interesting can be pretty low. So why do I count this among the “sharing” exercises? Because when you go to a good one, you not only have to go back, you have to take an equally skeptical couple with you and pay their way just to get them to go.

Isn’t that just me giving me a present, a vacation? No. The enthusiasm and knowledge you gain on the trip infects your congregation upon your return. You are making a gift to your congregation of a greatly improved version of you. Like the woman in the story, you are using up a family asset in time and money to make the point that you understand the nature of fellowship and the importance of connections between faithful people.

Another version of the get-away weekend is the ladies retreat, organized similarly, just slanted toward the interests of faithful women rather than faithful families. An additional benefit is that the husband can stay home and take care of the kids. Once again, the time and the expense are hard to find. But, this kind of sharing happens when you come back, recharged and excited. You are making a gift to your congregation of a new and improved version of you.

We have been to such family events in Montana, Colorado, and Virginia, plus Germany and Ghana. The locations are an added plus. Sharon has been to ladies’ things in half a dozen states, sometimes taking a large van of ladies along. Before very many such visits, the ladies she brought with her were being asked to speak at the next one. Of course, there are events all over the country. Unfortunately, many are plastic knock-offs, focusing on eloquent speakers but neglecting the connection between the participants, the fellowship, so it is best to get a personal recommendation.

Another example is the Let’s Start Talking program. Very few of us are bilingual, and few foreign countries have American English as the primary language. However, people in other countries want to learn English because there are certain business advantages for those who can communicate with English-speaking buyers and sellers. So, quite a number of years ago, a group came up with the Let’s Start Talking program, which teaches conversational English using the book of Luke as the source material. The attendees read sections of the English text of Luke, then explain what it means – which allows you to check their reading comprehension. The length of the course depends on the time available to the teacher, generally three or four weeks. Local Christians use whatever advertising is effective in that place to assemble a class of non-church people – with full disclosure that they are going to use the Bible as the English text. In the morning

or afternoon, you rest, do a little sightseeing, and prepare for class, because the students are working. You teach in the evening. The methods for conducting such classes are taught on-line by video, or you can go to a class in the US to learn how it is done. You have the expense of the travel, your food, lodging, and whatever you want to do about tourism. It's expensive, not to mention the three or four weeks. But it is amazingly effective.

Certainly, you could find many good places to put that same time, money, and effort. The poor you will have with you always. But, you are making a statement to those in that other country whom you meet. They understand money, and non-Christian cultures do not include a lot of putting yourself out for strangers. The students marvel at the fact that you are spending your hard-earned cash and precious time to help them get ahead in business by teaching conversational English. So, the gospel accounts from which they are learning that English become a lot more real to them. Like the woman with the alabaster flask of pure nard, you are making a statement about sharing.

Another example, perhaps you are not a wage-earner with expectations of a regular paycheck. Instead, like farmers, you get paid at most a few times a year. Or like contractors, you get a minimal wage for a while, then a balloon payment at the end of the project. Or like a retired person who has to take a required minimum distribution from a retirement account. When you come into a lump of income all at once, you have the opportunity to give a lump, all at once, rather than week by week. I processed some money through our 501(c)3 non-profit just last month from a couple who decided to buy a car for a missionary family in Ghana. By the way, buying a car here and shipping it to West Africa is rarely cost effective because the import duties are, typically, 100% of the Kelly Blue Book value of the car, and it usually takes about that much again in bribes to get it released from the port of entry. Sending \$15,000 allows the missionaries to buy a car that, here, would be worth about \$5000. But, by sending the cash instead of the car, the missionaries don't need to deal with the ethical dilemma of being the one who pays the bribes. Someone did, just to get the car into the country, but it wasn't you or them.

Is there a real difference between giving a big amount at one time versus a small amount week by week? In theory, no. But the impact on the recipient is much larger, and the amount doesn't dribble out and get lost in the overhead. The lady with the alabaster vial of pure nard gave a year-and-a-half's wages in one gift, and used it in minutes. As others at the dinner commented, it could have been sold and distributed in small amounts to 300 different poor people so each of them could eat for a day. To be clear, helping the poor a little at a time is a good thing, but a big donation all at once is much better remembered, has greater impact.

Another example, education in a Third World country is extremely valuable. But, tuition is completely out of reach for the poor. That's why economic class barriers cannot be broken in those places. Student loans do not exist. One physically cannot earn enough money to have both food and shelter plus pay for tuition. But in our world, their tuitions are cheap: perhaps \$3000 to \$5000 per year, depending on the country. If you were to pay their tuition, they could earn enough to survive until graduation. All the while, you are instilling in them the responsibility to which they have committed themselves: to do the same for someone else. Personally, I would not pick the best and brightest church kid from some Third World congregation. Certainly, pick someone who has displayed the intelligence to succeed, but the slightly troubled youth in a congregation will gain more substantively. The top church kid is already well set, ethically and spiritually, so that kid will succeed anyway, albeit perhaps not financially. The slightly troubled kid receives a

life-changing transfusion. One caution: this is not a situation in which you expect to make an impact by throwing money at it. That's what the government does, and we know how well that works. Rather, you would need to stay connected to the student on a regular basis, developing an ethical foundation in a truly corrupt culture. You have to be able to say no when they want more money for food or shelter. The recipient has to struggle and be responsible. Again, helping the poor is a good thing, but generally just helps that poor person get through the day or the week or the month. The tuition process changes a life that, in theory, will continue by changing others.

A last example, one we have seen played out in our own little group – adoption and fostering. Kids are phenomenally expensive in terms of money, time, and emotions. Those families chose to concentrate their assets onto one child in need, rather than a little bit of help to many. I suggest that the impact on the one will be greater than the sum of the impacts on the many.

If you are hearing these examples and thinking, “I can't do that,” good. You are right. You are sensible. That's a good starting place. Now, be open to humanly impossible opportunities and humanly impossible ways to accomplish those opportunities. God promised, as I read in 2 Corinthians 9, that we, the faithful, would have an abundance for every good work.

Something I have learned in the last 17 years that Jeremiah and Brittney have been in the mission field, there are Christians who have a little more than others. In general, those people also are good with money – perhaps explaining why they have a little more. Being good with money, they often have been unimpressed with the creativity with which the church finances have been handled. Although they contribute generously to the weekly collection, they are not doing all they could do and they know it – not out of selfishness but because contributing to the congregational budget is not very exciting. But when they see something outside the box, they respond. Having confidence that the finances will appear is easy for me to say, since I just process the money through our non-profit. It's quite a bit more faith-testing for Jeremiah and Brittney who have to live it. Nevertheless, somehow, the money always shows up.

My point is that financing an outside-the-box idea does not necessarily have to come from your pocket. God said you would have the necessary resources, but did not specify from where those resources would come. If you can't do it yourself – which is most of the time – let your idea be known. Have confidence in both God and the faithful. Just present the facts. Here's the idea. Here's what it will cost. I understand that it is a little out there. But wouldn't it be cool if we could pull it off. Listen to suggestions. Don't try to lay a guilt trip on anyone. Those who hear about the idea have their own situations and are responsible for their own decisions.

In summary, we should not be fenced in by what we think we can accomplish. Certainly, we need to do what we can, or God will have no confidence that we can handle anything bigger. But we must not reject an idea because we cannot see any possible way to get it done. Adapt. Be open to strange ways to get things done. Be patient. The idea may not be fully developed or the resources may not have arrived. Trust God. If the idea is not progressing fast enough for you, don't give up on God, but also do not be so enamored of your idea that you can't recognize its fatal flaws or flimsy logic. God may be saying, “Try again.” Wisdom is necessary, so pray for it.