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## Giving Birth

James 1:17-27

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, September 2, 2018,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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James, the brother of Jesus or whom I sometimes call “Bro. Jimmy,” teaches that “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...” (v. 17). Every generous act of giving is from above, is from God. That means that God is a generous God and generosity with all of its manifested acts is a revelation of who God is. God, according to James, “gives to all generously and ungrudgingly...” (v.5). This isn’t a God who withholds gifts from us because we’ve been naughty and not nice. This is a God who unleashes gifts lavishly upon his creation even without our asking. This is not an image of a mean, stingy, furrow-browed-Napoleon-like, deity who wears Tarheel blue. This is a gift-giving God, a philanthropic God, a God who, literally *philanthropos*, that is, ‘loves humans.’ God is the CPO, the chief philanthropy officer, of the kingdom. We’ve seen the biblical banner raised in the boisterous crowds at NFL football games. John 3:16, which says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son...” God loved thus God gave. It cost God something to give; it cost God his Son in the end. To be generous, to give, to love, comes with costs, if it’s worth anything. God is love thus God is generous. This is who God is. The One “with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” Generosity is a part of the unchanging nature of God. We sing in a hymn, “God of grace and God of glory.” But God is also a God of giving. God is generous, not a miser with mercy.

Wherever and whenever we see giving happening, we see a sure sign of God. Every generous act of giving is from above. A kind word of encouragement. A gentle gesture of a physical embrace or touch. A helping hand to assist someone walking down a steep staircase. Donating to a charity. Volunteering at a local nonprofit. Giving organs and blood. Planned estate giving. Generosity in its many forms is God at work through us, whether explicitly named or not, for God doesn’t have to be named in order to be present. God is, whether we are or not. Giving is a gesture of God, whether you are a Christian or not. Bro. Jimmy tells us that every generous act of giving is from above because generosity is who God is and when we give of ourselves as God gave himself and give ourselves over to the generous spirit of God, we give ourselves over to God’s giving, birthing way.

God “gave us birth by the word of truth...,” James says. God is Father and God is Mother. God gave us birth. God’s giving led to our living. God’s giving is a birthing. God’s generosity is a birth. We are born by God’s word of truth, the Word made flesh, “full of grace and truth” (John 1). God’s word of truth bore us because truth gives birth to amazing things and we are fearfully and wonderfully made as the marvelous amazing handiwork of God. Truth doesn’t only set us free; truth gives birth to life just as through God, truth births human beings into the world and into the kingdom. Without the truth, we aren’t fully human, fully enfleshed, in the way God desires us to be. This shouldn’t be shocking because the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life and through him, through the truth, we are reborn. God “gave us birth by the word of truth.” We need more of this truth in our world and on this campus and in the church so that the triumphant litany of lies would cease. God is so generous that his truth sets us free into the world with new life. God gave us birth. God’s generosity is a birth. And the English word, generosity, comes from a Latin word (*generosus*) meaning ‘of noble birth.’ God gave us birth. God is so generous.

And since God’s generosity is a birth in that God gave us birth, physically and spiritually, through every generous act of giving, something new is born, in us and in others. Giving, our giving, is a birth rooted in the divine source of the love of God. Our generosity is a sign that we are born from above, reborn into the giving nature and image of God in Christ. We give birth each time we are generous with our time, our talents, our money, our energy, and

our efforts. When we give of ourselves, whatever it might be, the love of God is born afresh in the world and more of God's virtues is born through us. By giving, we demonstrate that we are "doers of the word" and this is fitting because the word, even the word of truth, does something. It gives birth to something. It generates new life and gifts. According to James, the word is implanted in us, which means something is born in us in order to be born out of us. Our giving is the gift and a birth of God's life in the world. In giving, we embody "pure and undefiled religion" through caring for the orphan and widows in distress. Giving birth to the generosity of God brings new life to others in our society.

When talking about giving money, sociologists Christian Smith, Michael Emerson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, challenge the notion that Christians are naturally more generous people in their book, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*. Some of the reasons they name are: mass consumption and consumerism, discomfort by pastors on the subject, tension between biblical admonitions to give and a strong belief in private property, mistrust of institutions, shyness about discussing the issue with others, and a habit of spontaneous giving.

On the other hand, an essay from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education points to 'why people give.' Their reasons include: "giving is like eating chocolate cake" "it's an innate trait" "it makes us feel like big shots" "givers are repaying a gift" "peer pressure" "they connect with a personal story." This essay even suggests religious beliefs are a motivator for giving. I believe there is a theological pulse and purpose of your generosity as we kick off this year.

By giving of yourself in whatever way, you participate in the ongoing birthing process of God. God is continually birthing a new day. God is continually birthing new life and creation through every generous act of giving. God birthed the world and was born in a manger to be born in us and gave us birth in order that we might give birth generously, abundantly, and eternally so that others might experience a new birth, new life, and new hope in God every day.

And love is the root source. The love of God is the midwife of our giving birth. Love ushers generosity into the world. God gave us creation. God gave us redemption. God gave us sustenance. God gives us Godself forever because God couldn't contain God's love so it spilled over into the communion cup of giving. God's generosity overflows daily and births a new creation every day. What will you give birth to this academic year? What will be born from your life?

My wonderful colleague and director of development and strategy at Duke Chapel, Amanda Hughes, speaks of how people of faith give in order to embody their faith and make it tangible for future generations. This is what she calls "mustard seed giving" and people of faith embody gratitude through giving and give to God for what God has already done for us, making gratitude visible, which is in her words, "memory giving." For you, it may not be money as in these kinds of giving or almsgiving. Maybe, it will be thanksgiving for you this academic year. Maybe, it will even be forgiving. What will you give birth to this year? God gave birth to you so that you would give birth too. Give birth for as the old saying says: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

And many times, we receive life when we give. We don't give to receive but often in our giving, we are the ones who receive more than we could imagine. A few weeks ago, on the very, same day, I had a meeting with the President of the university and had another gathering with prison inmates at a correctional center. I went to this facility to speak. I went with the intention of giving and I gave what I had. But I came away recognizing that I wasn't the only one giving. In fact, I received so much more from these men. I received my life. I was given the perfect gift of unconditional friendship and gratitude. They gave thanksgiving and I was redeemed by the so-called

rejects of society. I was reborn to grace through God's imprisoned children. Their gratitude gave birth to a fresh sense of God's love in the world that I don't often find among the so-called free people of society. It makes me wonder who is really free. These bound brothers gave me more than I ever expected. And I give thanks to God.

And I give thanks to you. I don't know how hot your generosity temperature is but know this. You've already started being generous because you've been so generous as listeners this morning. You've given me your time, attention, your ears, and your mind and in the process I hope you've given God your heart to be born anew. Thank you for giving, even forgiving this imperfect, feeble attempt at a sermon.