



Cheerful

Week 4: Give It Away

Brian Mattson - 10/18/2026

Bluegrass Sunday! What fun. It's always a nice change of pace to switch things up around here, especially when we actually get a little fall weather, bust out the flannels, and our bellies are still full from pizza on the farm. I've never been a connoisseur of bluegrass music, but I appreciate the different instruments represented in the genre and the singability of the songs. It also reminds me a little bit of Silver Dollar City and funnel cakes, which is never a bad association. But, boy, is this music fun. And I love music. As far back as I can remember.

On Christmas Day 1989, I bobbed my five-year-old head and grooved to the beat of the massive hit, *Pump Up the Jam*, once my brand new cassette tape rolled in the boombox. It connected with my soul! I sang along to all the greatest hits of *Boyz II Men* in the early 90s, and tried to out-angst the grunge and early pop-punk bands of the late 90s and early aughts. In my teens, I would go to concerts and tap my legs in sync with the drummers or try to match the strum patterns of the guitarists, even though I had no clue how to play either instrument.

Music was in my bones by that point, it just hadn't manifested into skills. So I took matters into my own hands. I bought a drum set when I was 16, despite my parents' mild protestations, and taught myself how to play. I picked up the acoustic guitar at 19 in my college dorm. In my late teens, my musical

tastes broadened, and I got into indie-folk artists, heavy metal, electronica, and even some classic country. I started paying attention to the lyrics more, beginning to see the music and words as beautiful dance partners that worked together to create a complete song. Not only something that I felt down deep, but something I was left thinking about long after the track finished.

I've re-discovered an album recently that was especially meaningful to me in my early 20s as my musical interests were maturing, and my guitar playing was still in the beginning stages. The album's sparse instrumentation, simple chord structures, and imperfect vocals also meant it was accessible to my limited skillset. The band is Bright Eyes and the album was *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning*. Released in 2005 amidst the background of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, its songs told the stories of young love, political disillusionment, and, at times, a pessimistic outlook on life as a young adult. The perfect combination to connect with 20-somethings.

One of the songs—*Land Locked Blues*—always stuck with me as a highlight on the album. Simple music. Meaningful words. The songwriter spends nearly six minutes and twelve verses expressing anger, frustration, hope, and love while trying to figure out the meaning of life.

In verses six and seven, he tells of how mixed up the world feels and how he can't find an anchor. He tries to solve the problem on his own. Then he reads all the books and all the wise words from humanity's past, but comes up with only one clear answer. He sings:

**And the world's got me dizzy again
You'd think after twenty-two years I'd be used to the spin
And it only feels worse when I stay in one place
So I'm always pacing around or walking away

I keep drinking the ink from my pen
And I'm balancing history books up on my head**

But it all boils down to one quotable phrase
If you love something give it away

As I was listening to the album on repeat over the last week, I kept coming back to that line—*If you love something give it away*. I thought to myself—*that's an apt definition of generosity*. It kinda fits with our whole theme, too. This idea that it's easier to be generous—even cheerful about it—if we really love something. If we find enjoyment and meaning from something, we tend to want to share it with others. We want to give it away so someone else can experience the joy we've found.

Then I wondered if maybe I had that album and song on my mind because I used a scripture translation last week about giving your life away as an act of generosity. Do you remember that passage in Luke 6:38 from The Message?

Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way.

Perhaps the songwriter of Bright Eyes, Connor Oberst, in his search for life's meaning, discovered a truth Jesus talks about. It's actually an oft-repeated idea that Jesus comes back to again and again. He says it in one way or another to anyone who would listen. Jesus seems adamant that the way to become fully alive is to hold onto life with a loose grip. And perhaps if we are willing and able to let go, or give away, some aspects of our lives, we will, in fact, gain more in the end. Here's how that sentiment sounds from the Gospel of Matthew:

Jesus told his disciples, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in

return for their life?"

- Matthew 16:24-26

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written in the late first century—around 80 or 90—when Christians were facing some of the worst persecution from the Roman Empire. These words of Jesus would've had serious implications for those early Christian communities when martyrdom was a very real threat. These words would've represented an exhortation to keep the faith in the face of fear. Because to give up the faith—this newfound life in Christ—was to forsake real life.

We don't face the same fears of persecution and death today, but we have different decisions to make. Are we only seeking safety, comfort, and ease with our lives? Is our time and energy dedicated to amassing more stuff? That's not the kind of life Jesus is talking about here. To follow Jesus means to deny our worldly desires and sacrifice our needs and wants for the sake of our neighbors.

Now, I don't understand these words of Jesus to be a call for all of us to live a monastic life, where every moment, every action, every possession is reserved or forfeited for spiritual pursuits. But there is a deeper, nuanced set of instructions here. What Jesus means is that nothing in our lives is off the table to be used by God to further the Kingdom. We don't set limits on what we make available to God, whether that's time, money, skills, etc. *God, you can use my hands, but not my voice. My time, but not my money.* When those are our red lines, we aren't actually opening ourselves to what could be—a human being, fully alive. Because when we imitate Jesus' character and way of life, we embrace God's fully realized vision for humanity. A mere 100 years after the Gospel of Matthew was written, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon, succinctly captured that sentiment, which often gets translated this way:

The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

- Irenaeus of Lyon

The human being Irenaeus was referring to is Jesus. We talked about this a couple years ago during our Atonement theories series. It's the idea that Jesus was the perfect revelation of God's plan for us, and thus, when we imitate the life of Jesus we share in that divine essence. Our generosity is but one way we mirror Jesus.

I would argue that when we give of ourselves, we are doing at least three things. First, when we give something away, we take a leap of faith. Whatever we loosen our grip on—money, time, control—we are proclaiming our trust in God's divine plans. Plans we are a part of, not in control of. It can be scary. It can be difficult. It can cause us to be ridiculed. All three can be true at once, even. Still, by freely offering something we have to be used by God, we are following Jesus' example and saying, "God I trust in you."

Second, giving something away is an act of humility. Over and over again in scripture, the theme of self-sacrifice and selflessness jumps from the pages of the New Testament. In the stories of Jesus and the early church, nothing is as radically counter-cultural than the idea of forgoing your own needs for the sake of others. Abandoning our deep seated desires for glory, honor, or power to see others lifted up is what God's justice looks like. If Jesus emptied himself of status, we are called to do the same as an act of humility in solidarity with humanity.

Third, giving something away is an investment in hope. It's future focused. When thinking about investments, we look for ones that will grow. And in the Kingdom of God, compound interest happens when we give ourselves away.

Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it

forever, real and eternal.

- John 12:23-25 MSG

In this passage, Jesus was talking about the path that lay before him. It included a very real, physical death, but through resurrection, his one death meant real life for all of us. I believe our generosity works like that, too. When we give of ourselves—when we put everything on the table—God multiplies what we offer far beyond what we could imagine.

If you are wondering what you can give or where you can give, I'd invite you to think about the things you already have or already like. Start there. You don't need to reinvent the wheel. If you love lawn care like Wade Shelton, we have other needs here. If you enjoy spending quiet time in a quiet church like Mark Sponsler, we've got other rooms that could benefit from your care. If you have skills, or wealth, or ideas, share it! What you have, when given away, will be multiplied. You can also follow Michelle Clements' lead. She showed up at The Downtown Church after moving from Nebraska ten years ago and didn't know anyone. All she knew was that she liked helping kids so she decided to share that love and became a volunteer almost from the start.

<MICHELLE CLEMENTS VIDEO>

Earlier this week, I listened to a podcast titled *When AI Comes For Your Purpose In Life*. I expected it to be a real downer. Another doom and gloom story about the end of humanity's purpose. Instead, I was treated to some of the most touching 30 minutes of a podcast I can ever recall.

A Cornell University mathematics professor was discussing what it was like when AI solved a math problem that had been confounding professionals around the world for 25 years. The entire math department—professors and students—were all in disbelief that artificial intelligence had solved this difficult equation, and done so in such a short amount of time. It caused the professor—Steven Strogatz—to wonder *what's the point? What's the meaning*

of this life if robots and computers can do everything better and faster than humans?

The host asks him, “So what have you come up with?” half joking, and he launches into this poignant story of his own existential crisis. In his search for answers, he recalled the song *Turn! Turn! Turn!* by The Byrds, which is a reference to the famous passage in Ecclesiastes. In that Old Testament book, the writer has the same questions as Professor Strogatz. *Does anything matter? Is life all in vain?* Aren’t we all living that existential crisis right now with the speed at which AI is improving and, I daresay, threatening humanity’s purpose?

Strogatz offers this heartwarming conclusion to his journey to understand the purpose of life, or what to do when he doesn’t know what his purpose is anymore.

I don't want my life to be in vain. So if you take that away from me, what am I doing? So you could see why I'm looking to this ancient wisdom. And as I understand it, I'm no biblical scholar, but as I understand it, the lesson is, well, that your life is precious *because* it's short. That you have to make the most of it while you're here.

I’ve been thinking about this podcast all week. It made me realize, maybe for the 100th time—maybe for the 1000th time—how valuable our existence is. And it’s true that the scarcity of our days leads to mental anguish, but it also amplifies just how valuable and meaningful it is when we give it away. Because the more of ourselves we give away, the closer we become to being fully human—that is, Christ-like. In his commentary on today’s passage, William Barclay writes:

There is all the difference in the world between existing and living. To exist is simply to have the lungs breathing and the heart beating; to live is to be alive in a world where everything is

worthwhile, where there is peace in the soul, joy in the heart, and a thrill in every moment.

During our last song, I invite you to bring your pledge card forward and place it on the altar. As I mentioned the very first week, this is not an oath or a covenant. It's simply your best guess at how you can support the work of the church in the coming year. But don't view this moment as simply an act of obedience. I hope it comes from a place of peace and joy. A place of cheerfulness and excitement for how God will multiply our lives in due time. I'm going to keep listening to that podcast. I'm going to keep spinning that old album I listened to as a 22 year old. Now, at 42, I still get dizzy from the world around me, but the truth stays the same—if you love something, give it away.