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The Practice of Generosity MP3.mp3

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START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00]**

The following is a message from Wellspring's congregation.

[00:00:10]

Good morning, Wellspring's. I want to start by admitting something I woke up this morning knowing that I had written a message, printing it out, reading it over, getting ready to preach it for you all. And yet, even though I knew I had written a message to share with you all this Sunday, I realized that somehow at the same time, I still have no idea.

[00:00:42]

What to say? I have no idea what to say about this week.

[00:00:48]

I had heard people as maybe you had give warning that there might be some violence this week in D.C., I had heard that January 6th would be a day for us to look out for.

[00:01:04]

Ahead of the congressional vote that was planned, of course, for Wednesday to certify the results of this November's election. I had heard people warn of the potential for violence and I agreed, I believed that that potential was real, but I guess I just I imagined something different in my mind, to be honest with you. I think what I imagined was a lot more like what I had unfortunately grown accustomed to seeing this summer. When Black Lives Matter, protesters were out in the streets, in cities, and they were pushed back by local police and military reinforcements, I remembered what seeing that kind of violence looked like.

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I guess that was all my brain could picture. And so I imagined a different kind of ugly than what we actually saw.

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I never could have envisioned what happened on Wednesday with a crowd of people able to storm our Capitol building and push the lawmakers and staff and journalists and everyone inside into hiding. I didn't imagine that because I had never seen anything like that in my life.

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And I'm still processing what we saw. Maybe I'm not alone in that, maybe you are too, in fact, maybe your week has been busy and this Sunday service might be the first chance that you've had. To really sit with your feelings about what you saw. On Wednesday afternoon.

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I know that I feel multiple layers of anger and sadness.

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When I sit with all of this and I recognize that I'm still processing not just this right.

[00:03:03]

But a big, messy, confusing layer cake of ongoing trauma and hope from all of the events of this past year. So if you can't make sense of all this yet, please know that you are having a normal response. The Buddhist teacher, Ethan Nicturn, said on Thursday this week, he said, if your nervous system was shaken by these events, that's how you know you're not a robot.

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We're not robots, friends.

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When the world gets wild, we need the spaces and the communities and the practices that rein it in a little bit, when things are wild, we need a little bit of domestication. We need a little bit of the safety and the sense of mutual care that a home is supposed to give us.

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We need practices of coming home. Now, I think as much as we ever have.

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Our message series that I'm starting, that I'm kicking off this winter is called Coming Home. I have to give credit where it's due to Deb Soderland on our spiritual development ministry for the idea for us to do a series like this.

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Because we know that our spiritual practices are the things that ground us.

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And center on what's most important when the world is spinning and the world is certainly it has been spinning around us. This month, in January, next month in February, we will be here every week on Sunday and we will spend the actually some of our morning in worship learning about and then actually trying out a different spiritual practice together.

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Each week. The hope is that you might find one one of these eight weeks, you might find, a practice that you actually **recognize** does something grounding and centering for you, a practice that you might decide you want to continue on your own. The world needs that right now, it needs all of us to be showing up with our groundedness and our clarity and our values right now.

[00:05:49]

I had originally planned to start the series with a practice that is close to my heart, a practice of generosity, and I wondered if I should change today's practice after the events of this past week, write something like the practice of democracy or activism or justice, that it all seemed natural and all of which, of course, are important things that we do practice in our lives. But the more I thought about the practice of generosity, the more I saw its connection.

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To what is going on between us in this country at the most human level. There is so much pain and fear around us. There's so much suffering around us right now.

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And what we saw this past week was an extreme parable, I think an example of the ugliness that can grow and the real harm that we saw for each other. When we refuse to give up and lose and give away and let go. Practising generosity offers each of us many things personally, but in a collective sense, it's also how we push back against the tide of a toxic kind of individualism that's all around us. A toxic kind of individualism that says, I've got mine and you've got yours. Good luck. Generosity reminds us that we actually can't survive this life alone. That everything is a cycle of give and take. When we insist on staying untouchable and on top.

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Even if we don't see the effects of our actions in our immediate circle, we are refusing something that is core to the nature of life. And giving and receiving in those cycles of taking in and leaving go. And when we do that, we only bring more hurt and more pain into this world, but when we share what we've won.

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When we reach behind us to help those who are not as far along the path. When we give the fruits of what we have gained away, then we actually can alleviate and heal some of that suffering. That's around us. Even if I said. All of politics and party and policy differences to the side. I think at this point, it is clear that our current president has demonstrated many times a willingness to use suffering.

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To use suffering to manipulate the levers of that suffering that is felt by his own supporters, not for their benefit, but for his. There is an orientation of the heart in that.

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That is rooted in so much un-generousness, so much scarcity and fear. So much stinginess. That is the root of the sort of power grab that it requires in response that we saw play out this week.

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It's an orientation of the heart that has become so afraid to lose that it will do anything to hold on to what it has.

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I think a true leader and a moral person. Does not use suffering.

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A true leader and a moral person does not use suffering in the world to sow chaos for their own advantage or to pit one group against another and point fingers and blame or to enact cruelty and create suffering as deterrents.

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Or blame individuals for their own pain and suffering.

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When I think about what the great spiritual traditions have to say about how we should respond when we see suffering, I see nothing that justifies taking advantage of a community suffering for gain. I see everything, by contrast, about the practices that encourage us to give of ourselves so that we can alleviate the suffering that we see in the world. The entire aim of the Buddhist tradition is to relieve suffering through the transformation of ourselves through right action with one another, all of the practices of the Eightfold Path. The Jewish tradition of inquiry pushes us to dig deep and investigate and question the root causes of suffering to act in ways that bring healing that Hebrew phrase tikkun olam, which means world repair.

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One of the five central pillars of Islam is zakat, the duty to give that is born of our faith. That's borne out of a collective mutual responsibility to one another. And Christianity asks us, above all other teachings, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

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To take what we have and give it away and trust that in sharing will find that there actually is enough to go around for everyone. For what shall it profit us? The gospel says if we gain the whole world but lose our soul.

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When suffering is seen and addressed. Not used. But mended and healed, each of these religious traditions teach us when that happens, we all win.

[00:13:18]

Now, our congregation has been building this muscle, I think, of generosity for a really long time. We baked generosity actually right into the Wellspring's cake from the start, committing to give away a portion of our collective funds each year to a community partner, Chester County Futures has now been our partner organization for nearly a decade. We built an addiction and recovery team to address a particular kind of suffering that we saw in our area. And I know dozens and dozens of people have found and maintained their recovery with our congregation's support to this day. I've heard a lot of people talk this year. About how these past however many months it's been now almost 11 months. Have changed us. It's been hard and it's also been a time that is transforming so many of us. Some of us I know, I am including myself in this, we are just starting to wrap our awareness, wrap our heads around how this period of history that we are living through is changing us. I know that for me, there are some things I've noticed in myself that I actually want to hold on to from this time, maybe you feel that way, too. There are actually some habits I probably couldn't have cultivated in myself without being forced to stay home as much as I have without all of the changes that this year has brought. I'll give you a few examples, I've actually learned how to cook three meals a day for myself and enjoy that instead of just picking up food on the go from Wawa. And while I do love wah wah, I am grateful for the new habit that I have and I want to keep it. I've noticed for myself that I've actually become less self-conscious and more accepting of my body. Because I'm not constantly practicing the every single morning worry of whether I look right now, whether my makeup and my clothes projects what I want them to project every single day as I get ready to leave the house.

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Unbreaking, that habit has been good for me. And at least for me, one unexpected benefit of all of this time that we've been through all of these changes. Is that I've actually become more generous.

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Now, before you hear a big self pat on the back there, I want to be clear. I wasn't very generous before this year.

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Much of my life. Has been kind of shaped by a feeling of scarcity. Particularly around money and material things. That's a nice way of saying, right, that I haven't always felt like I had what I needed. And so I haven't always been very generous.

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But I've had an experience that is sadly not universal that many of you have not had this year, but many of you probably have, especially if you're a white collar worker like me who's been able to keep our jobs in the pandemic, most of us working from home. The podcast Freakonomics Radio actually did two episodes about this in October, about the way that our economic system is set up. And how the pandemic has unfortunately only widened the gap. Those who have been burdened by our economy, low wage workers, hourly workers, essential workers, many of them who have had to continue to work while putting themselves at risk. Many of them are now burdened more than ever.

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While many people like me have seen the opposite happen, our income has stayed the same. While our expenses have actually gone down, I can count on one hand still the number of times I've gotten gas since March, probably five. I'm pushing it. I'm about to go to Hanta. That's not how it would have been before.

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I'm saving money and at a higher level, the people who already had some access before this pandemic to things like assets and property, those folks are able to take advantage of things now, like low home interest rates and refinancing rates and investment. As the podcast talked about, those people are able to take advantage of this time to grow their wealth while other people sink deeper in this time into terrifying levels of debt.

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I watched this happen this year in my own bank account. And in the world around me. And at some point, I just decided. That part of my response would be to give.

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Honestly, I mostly did it because it felt good. In this time, when I felt trapped and there were so many things I didn't like that I was seeing in the world around me, it was a way giving away money was a way to feel like I could take some action in this maddening world. It was a way that I could say that the whims of this particular economic system that we live under, that set some of us up to fail in times like this and others of us up to succeed was not going to get the last word. I was sticking it to the man with my giving as best I could, and I was reminding myself.

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Of the deeper truth that we all deserve to have our basic needs met at a minimum, especially in times like these.

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Now, I've seen our community as a whole become more generous this year to I think other people have also seen this change in practices and habits. I mentioned on Christmas Eve that we gave out nearly 7000 dollars more than I have ever seen before in my now almost eight years here from our emergency assistance fund this year. Our HeartWorks team, Justice Works, Youth Spirit, all of these groups within our congregation have been helping to channel our whole community's energy and resources to others ever since we stopped meeting in person in March and over and over as leaders and his staff at Wellspring's, we kept noticing that our community was eager to have these opportunities to give, and we had a feeling that it was because other people also wanted to feel like we could take some action to help.

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Generosity. It feels good. And it does good. Sometimes it's that simple. Or at least it should be right. I'm grateful that our community has been building this muscle because I think we know what to do when we see suffering in the world around us.

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And I think that that is a skill that will do us good to keep practicing.

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In 2021 and in the years ahead. I think it's a skill and a habit that could have an impact far beyond the things that we've already done together. I'm proud of it. In this message series for the New Year coming home, we will be sharing in a practice together every single Sunday.

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And today's practice is a generosity practice, and I learned about in a book about, of all things, the spirituality of running, which I don't do, but I love this practice. And you'll see that you can adapt it not just for a runner's life. In the book, the practice is called Running with Arms, the author of this book is an Episcopal priest named Roger Jocelin, and he decided as he was exploring his running practice, which he does almost every single day, he wanted to infuse this practice with other kinds of spiritual depth and experience. And he decided that he was going to slip a five dollar bill into his pocket every time he went out for a run.

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The goal, he said each time he laced up his sneakers and left the house was to give away that five dollar bill on his run before he got home. It would be gone. There were no other rules. Rogers said he didn't have to give the money away right to a certified 501C3 nonprofit organization. He didn't have to give it to someone who looked like they needed it, whatever that means or deserved it. He could give it away without a word or he could use it to say thank you. Or to start a conversation with someone. He could wait and look for an opportunity to come to him on his run or he could actively seek out and create an opportunity to give. He did this every day for a while, so he had lots of opportunities to try different things. Sometimes he left the money somewhere and explored what it felt like to not know who might find it or to pick certain places and imagine who might find it there. And sometimes he said he put it directly into the hand of someone whose eyes he could look into sometimes someone whose story he knew completely.

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He learned a lot all along.

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About what spiritual practices can do when they are not only internal in their transformations. But also connective. How will these practices can stretch our hearts and change us and also build?

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Build bonds between us. Instead of tearing them down.

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And so this is actually the practice, the practice that I'm going to invite all of us into today just to try, you don't have to write if you want to go now, right now and grab your wallet. And pull out an amount that makes sense for you. Let's say you're just going to try this once, right? Maybe it's five dollars like it was for Roger, maybe it's one dollar, maybe it's 20 dollars. Maybe it's 25 cents. But pull out an amount of money that you can part with. And she was a pocket pick out, your winter coat, your fleece, whatever you wear outside. Slip that money into what you know will be your giving pocket.

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Put it in there now.

[00:25:38]

Right. Put it in there now so that the next time you put on the coat and leave the house, you will reach your hands in your pockets for some warmth and you will feel the gift that's there and you will remember the intention that you set to give it away. All of these practices that we will share over the next few weeks in this series are up to you to participate in, of course, but this is your chance or your excuse, if you'd like it right, to try something new, to do something a little different, to shake up the monotony of these winter days, to feel like you are having an impact maybe on this wild, disjointed world around you.

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So I hope you will try this. You can even type it into the chat if you want. Just type. I did it. You don't tell us how much. Tell us that you picked your giving pocket.

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See what happens, see what questions come up for you.

[00:26:44]

See what you notice emerging as you go out into the world with an intention to practice generosity.

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Amidst all the other horrible pictures that we've seen on the news, the videos and images that have flashed over and over before us this week, you may have seen this one or one like it. This is New Jersey Congressman Andy Kim. He's inside the Capitol Rotunda early, very, very early on Thursday morning.

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You see, after the riot at the rotunda, after the lockdown, the shelter in place orders.

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After the lawmakers were safe to return to the floor of the House and the Senate to finish their business late, late into the night, after all of that, Andy Kim walked down to the rotunda to look and see what the damage was like. And when he saw maintenance staff cleaning up, he found that he was overcome with emotion. The Burlington County Times in New Jersey, his home districts paper. Reported that he walked up to some of the workers and he asked for a trash bag. He told the paper, it just broke my heart when I walked through the Rotunda and saw all the mess and debris.

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It broke my heart. So I just started cleaning up, I just did that for a little while, he said.

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It was important for me to do something.

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The congressman picked up trash for about an hour and a half. The paper said. Everything from a deck of playing cards to body armor to cigarette butts.

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This is the practice.

[00:29:15]

This is the cultivation of a generous heart. And these are the choices I want the people we trust with leadership to practice.

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This is how it gets built.

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You know, the same way we exercise muscles in the body on a run lifting to build and maintain our strength the same way we exercise our body, we can exercise our giving practices, the muscles in the heart that change our orientation to the world.

[00:30:00]

And so this week, may we give more?

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I mean, we give up and to ourselves out of the good of our communities and back to each other. For we live in a world that is threaded through with suffering.

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And it needs all that we have to give.

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Amen, and may you live in blessing. I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer.

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God, who is the giver of our lives

[00:30:56]

The giver of a gift that we cannot imagine not having. The giver of a gift that makes everything we know possible. May we feel something stirred inside of us when we remember that everything we are and have and have experienced at its core was given to us? May we feel something stir inside of us when we realize we can take part in that same practice? That we can have a small part in giving away what is good in creating something through our gifts. And may we build a life and surround ourselves with people who reflect back to us the beauty and what it is that we have to give this world who remind us that that thing that stirs inside of our hearts is so good. It's so good that it deserves that it demands and calls to be shared, not kept secret, not hoarded, not closed off and tight, but open and flowing. We feel the ease in our bodies when we live from that place and recognize that that too is a clue that this is what we were made to do. For the prayers that I've spoken and for the prayers that each of the people with us this morning is holding quietly in their hearts, we say amen.

[00:32:47]

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END OF TRANSCRIPT



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