



## Chapter 7 Generous

### Sharing Among the Believers (Acts 4:32-37 CEB)

*The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.*

*Joseph, whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (that is, "one who encourages"), was a Levite from Cyprus. He owned a field, sold it, brought the money, and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.*

I adopted Charlie when I was a senior in college. I had wanted a dog for as long as I could remember, and I wanted a Yorkshire Terrier for most of those years. When his little face showed up in my email, I knew he was my dog.

When we first met, he was so tiny and energized. He pulled me through PetSmart even though he was only eight pounds at the time. He and I were an instant match. When I sat down to sign his adoption forms, he curled up in my lap and fell asleep. My heart melted.

That was 13 years ago. My sweet Silky Terrier (He's not a Yorkie! Whoops!) has been with me through it all: moves, new jobs, divorce, marriage, and now, parenthood. Charlie was always along for the adventure—until he discovered I was pregnant.

Charlie's attitude toward me in those early, early days of pregnancy is what tipped me off to the possibility that I was in fact, finally pregnant. He went from being my constant companion to hiding anytime I talked to him. Once, I called him and he buried himself under a giant pillow so he didn't have to see me! It was a stark difference from being unable to even go to the bathroom alone, to being hidden from.

Dogs have an incredible sense of smell. My scent was changing along with all my hormones. Charlie did not like my new scent, but I had hope he would like my baby. I had dreams of Baby snuggling my sweet Charlie boy. I had dreams of Charlie playing ball with Baby. I knew Charlie loved me and he was going to love my child. It was a requirement for my soulmate-dog, right?

No, it's not a requirement. Charlie was afraid of my pregnant belly. Charlie was afraid of the stroller. Charlie was very upset when I had to move him out of our bed once my belly got so big he was in the way. I washed baby clothes ahead of time and put them in the dog crate, hoping that would get him acclimated to some of the baby smells. Charlie avoided the crate. But I held onto hope that once Rowan arrived and Charlie met this baby of mine, he'd see his new playmate in a happier light.

It has taken over a year to get Charlie on board with Rowan being in our pack. And Charlie is only okay with Rowan because Rowan is generous with his food.

Rowan relishes sharing his food with Charlie. Rowan will ask me for a snack and then give that snack to Charlie, giggling all the while because they tricked me into giving Charlie a snack! It's maddening sometimes. I don't want Charlie to eat a bunch of "people food." I want him to be healthy, and I want him to eat the expensive dog food that I buy for him. But Rowan knows that sharing and being generous with Charlie creates joy for each of them.

In the early church, before it was even called a church, the followers shared everything. There was no one in need of anything because everything was held in common and distributed equitably among all the community. If a follower had a resource—a field, for instance—they would share it or its earnings with the entire community. They operated in a different economic system than the rest of the Roman Empire. They were generous with each other. They believed there would be enough and shared out of a mindset of abundance, instead of hoarding out of a mindset of scarcity.

I am not great at living in a mindset of abundance. I remember what it was like growing up with a fear about having enough, and sometimes not having enough to make ends meet. I can be greedy about food—ask my husband. I forget that I have enough money to buy another box of crackers if he eats some.

My default mindset is one of scarcity. "What if we one day hit a hard spot because one of us loses our job, and we can't find another job and we go bankrupt?" is a common fear running through my head. So, I try to stockpile. I hoard. I keep things I don't need. Someone else in my neighborhood goes without the things I refuse to share.

That's why Christian community was so radical. They didn't get caught up in their individual survival, they got caught up in the survival of the community. Scripture tells us each person was given what they needed. It wasn't "fair," but it was equitable based on need. And people with an abundance generously gave what they had to ensure the others in their faith family had enough.

In the United States, we are hardcore individualistic capitalists. Even without my childhood, I would probably still fear what would happen when my employer has to lay me off because the economy has tanked again. We have no communal safety nets. There are some amazing organizations that can help with immediate needs, but even they are stretched thin. Sometimes you must meet specific requirements set by a board that doesn't know you, and that you might never be able to meet.

So, I grasp at what I have. I hold on for dear life and pray that I never end up in a situation that I haven't prepared for. Do you ever feel like that?

Rowan has taken this experience sharing with Charlie and has begun sharing his food generously with his preschool classmates. If Rowan thinks a friend is interested in his yogurt melts, he shares one. It makes Rowan happy to be generous. It makes Rowan's friends happy to be shared with. It's a mutually beneficial practice. Giving and receiving generously creates equality and intimacy.

This generosity has extended from food to wooden mulch chips at the park. Rowan met a little girl who is younger than him, Ginny, and he plays with her a couple times a week. We very rarely have food at the park, so Rowan grabs handfuls of mulch chips to share with his new friend. They pass them back and forth, and sprinkle them down like rain. Sometimes, they bring the mulch chips to their adults hoping to share the joy they have discovered with us.

I always hold out my hand for those small wooden pieces of mulch, even though I don't really want to hold mulch in my hands. But the smile on Rowan's face when he puts those wood pieces in my hands is priceless. The joy he has in his generosity—the joy he has including me in his wonder—is worth the weirdness of the gift.

Watching Rowan share generously has made me reflect a lot on my experiences ministering in nurseries. We take note of the use of “no” and “mine” during the toddler stage. Our toddlers are building autonomy and learning how to have some semblance of control in their lives. This is important because humans can’t be dependent on their caregivers forever. We all must create independence and move toward a mutual interdependence. But we miss the generosity when we only focus on “no” and “mine.” \

This strikes me as funny, because we tell our toddlers they must share a lot during this phase! But we also tell them we don’t want their half-chewed crackers. I hypothesize that our kids are actually pretty generous, we just don’t like a lot of what they want to share.

When I was in seminary, I took a church history course that I loved. I learned a lot about the early church. What still sticks with me from this class was a fictionalized story of what life would have been like for the lower classes in the Roman Empire in the first century. It was brutal!

In that story, we met a family who had gotten pregnant again. The father had been working as a slave in exchange for food for his family, and there was no way they would have the resources for another child. When the baby arrived, they had to make a hard decision: allow the child to eventually starve to death, or drown the baby in the river. It was common for families to grapple with something like this.

As they were walking to the river, they were approached by followers of The Way (what early Christians called themselves) and were given a third option: the family could join their community. They wouldn’t have to drown their child. The community would take them in and the resources of the community would support their whole family. The catch was that they also had to contribute in some capacity. The community functioned as a body and each part had an important job. The family accepted the deal and found not only generosity, but belonging.

Generosity leads to belonging. I get to be a part of Rowan's world when he hands me playground mulch. He is including me in his joy. When I receive these gifts of his with open hands, he too is being accepted just as he is—weird interests and all. My job as his mom is to make sure I recognize the ways he's contributing and applaud them.

In her book *Hunt, Gather, Parent*, Michaelleen Doucleff chronicles her journey to learn how parents in the Yucatan, the Arctic, and Tanzania raise their children compared to the ways we raise our children in America. Doucleff was having a hard time with her daughter, and in her reporting for NPR she encountered these different cultures. She noticed the parents didn't respond to their children the way she was responding to her daughter.

In her time with these (mostly women) parents, she witnessed children who were contributing to their households and communities. Doucleff asked the parents why their children were so helpful, and it was because the parents *let* them be helpful. The kids were generous because they were a part of the family and that was the expectation—communities are mutual and value what each person contributes, no matter how little.

I've been trying this with Rowan. He helps me bring in groceries now. He gets to hold one item, usually his box of granola bars, and he walks the box in from the car and puts it in the pantry. He's also started "sweeping" when I sweep and throwing his trash away. I am so grateful for his help, and I tell him how important his contributions are. This is generous! It's not what we'd usually expect from a 16-month-old, but Rowan can and wants to do things. I want to see his joy when he is valued for his whole being.

I think that is what Paul meant when he said, "Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). We should all give what we can out of our joy, and we should receive out of that same joy. We are interdependent, and our kids show us how beautiful and generous interdependence is.