

Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

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The first church I served practiced what they called “Faith Giving.” What this meant for the church leaders was that there were no stewardship drives or pledge cards. We just planned what we wanted to do that year as a church and how much it would all cost..and then we would have “faith” that people would give to meet the needs and dreams (and proposed budget). “Faith Giving” among our members meant that they would give freely and generously out of their overflowing gratitude to God for all that God had so freely and generously given to them. Apparently, if you tried this in Macedonia, it was wildly successful. In New Jersey, it didn’t always turn out so well.

Like a bunch of quarrelsome Corinthians, those New Jersey Presbyterians got upset or angry about this or that and it almost always affected the offering plate, the bottom line. Or they would just lose their enthusiasm and discipline for giving...and we’d have to ask, beg people really, to give to the ministry of the church. For them, as for most of us, our gratitude rarely rises to the level of God’s generosity. The last church I served before coming to Columbia Seminary had stewardship campaigns and pledge cards..but they felt that money was a private affair between the individual and God. The pastor was not to know what anyone gave to the church.

The early church, of course, saw things differently. In those heady first days and years, people of the Way apparently sold what they had and pooled their money and no one was in need at all. But by around 54 A.D. when Paul wrote this second or maybe it was his third letter to the Corinthians, things had changed. There were poor saints in the Jerusalem church in need of a special collection. And there were grumpy saints in Corinth who had agreed to take up a collection for them a year ago; but then they got mad at Paul. And Titus turned out not to be the most effective Campaign Chair and well..let’s just say that a year later the Corinthian collection hadn’t amounted to much.

In all the stewardship campaigns I’ve been a part of, I have to tell you I never tried the tactics Paul does here. Of course, I was trying to keep my job whereas Paul, as a traveling pastor, didn’t have the same concern! He moves

from shaming the Corinthians into fulfilling their pledge to flattering them into it. First, he tries shame—or perhaps competition. One scholar says that Paul would have known very well of the ethnic and political rivalry that existed between Macedonia and Corinth. So, he tells those Corinthians that the Macedonians were so poor and dealing with such persecution and hardship, that he didn't have the heart to even ask them to participate in the collection for Jerusalem. But when they heard about it, they begged him to let them contribute. And then Paul says he couldn't believe how much they gave...far beyond what he could have imagined! Now surely the Corinthians weren't going to let the Macedonians get the best of them!

This still seems to be the case in terms of giving—that those least able to give are more generous than four-fifths of the rest of us. The latest survey from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that the poorest fifth of American households contributed an average of 4.3% of their income to charity in 2007. The richest fifth gave less than half that—2.1%. None of us in the middle fifths gave away as much as 3%. The Macedonians would still be out-giving the rest of us.

Maybe shame—or competition—is what's needed. England tried it recently. A church insurance company held a national competition in church fund-raising to see who could come up with the most innovative fundraising ideas—and results. One church held a 3-day music festival on its grounds to showcase local talent. Around 2,000 people came and they raised 8,000 pounds. All Saints organized an exhibition of life-sized paintings of angels by a local artist on its property. Local businesses were invited to sponsor an angel. Musical evenings and the on-site offerings of a local brewery helped them raise money to repair their church. The winner was St. Katharine's, which encouraged families all over the village to host dinner parties which were visited by a celebrity chef. Guests donated money in a raffle. They raised 5,000 pounds to repair their roof. The top 12 national winners were featured in the Insurance Company's calendar. If only Titus had been that clever!

Once Paul had piqued their interest and pricked their egos, he moved to his next tack: flattery. Paul tells the Corinthians he knows how they excel in everything—faith, speech (especially speaking in tongues), knowledge, eagerness, love (you *know* he was stretching it there)...so he is confident they

can excel in this “generous undertaking,” this *grace* as he calls the collection. He is so confident he is sending Titus back to give it another try.

But then Paul moves to the theological heart of the matter. The theological heart of the matter for us and for those who with us are part of Christ’s church. He reminds the Corinthians of the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, who sacrificed his own richness for our sakes. He became human, poor, despised, put to death. . .so that we might become rich. So that we might have a share in the generous, abundant life of God here and for eternity. In response to that kind of amazing generosity, how can you and I be anything but eager—*eager*—to respond in great generosity, too, toward others in Christ’s name?

Maybe this isn’t the best time to bring up money and generosity. After all, no one has a stewardship campaign in the middle of the summer! And the constant reports of unemployment figures and foreclosures rates and credit card debt has everybody in a financially defensive posture.

Or is this precisely the right time for us to talk about money and generosity? A friend of mine, a pastor in New York City, wrote recently that he has been fundraising for a capital campaign in his church for the past year. He has spent time in people’s homes and offices talking with them about the church and about money and about the way both relate to their lives. He finds that people are doing a lot of soul searching. One bank trust executive in his 60s said that he is reassessing what has been the worth of a life lived by getting wealthy by helping other wealthy people plan strategies to get wealthier.

My pastor-friend writes, “The economy has done something for my congregation that all the preaching I have ever done has not. It has driven home in experience the truth that Jesus proclaimed when he said, ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’” (From a paper by the Reverend Jon Walton presented to the Moveable Feast in January, 2009.)

He has found that in his congregation the cheerful givers are those who know what the church means to them. . .what their faith means to them. They understand and receive the generosity, the grace of Christ, in their lives. And they respond in grace, freely and generously. That word “grace” is used ten times in chapters 8 and 9, and is translated here as the “generous undertaking.” Grace and the collection, you see, are the same thing. There are others in the congregation who have never given a gift to any great or important cause in their

life and they aren't about to start with the church. Grace, a generous undertaking, is not their driving force. Holding onto what they have, often out of a fear that they do not have enough—or may need more—puts the clamp on their generosity—and so puts a clamp on their experience of grace overflowing.

Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia, believes that this issue of generosity, of the place our money and consumerism has in our individual and collective lives is **the** issue we need to confront most truthfully. He writes that while the Bible offers a long, continuous liturgy of abundance...of God's generous provisions for us in every realm of life...you and I actually live according to the myth of scarcity. As if we are always about to run out...out of everything: basic necessities, money, time, forgiveness, grace, life.

He says it has become a crisis in North American life. Brueggemann writes:

“We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.” (**The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity** in *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.)

Perhaps our present economic downturn provides an opportunity for all of us to rethink our relationship with money. To redefine our previous notions of abundance and scarcity. To improve our own practice of generosity in this world of such deep and pervasive need.

I was struck to the core some weeks ago now when Lilabet read the letter from the Dimmocks, missionaries working in with orphaned children in a Crisis Nursery in Lesotho. They were thanking us for the several hundred dollars we sent to them. It came from the spare change you drop into that big glass container that sits at the back of the church every Sunday. You call the loose change in that jar the “Change the World” campaign. After a few months of giving your change, we gave it to a good cause. And then came that letter...of such profuse thanks...for our spare change. The Dimmocks told us how our

donation was helping to take care of little ones like the baby they had just found, left by a mother who could not feed the baby herself or care for it. The child was loved; love was not the problem. The child was left in the shade, where it was sure to be found. Dressed in nice clothing with more clothing, clean and folded inside the small basket. Money, enough food was the problem. And we were helping to save that child's life with our collection...just by dropping in whatever spare change we had if we happened to remember the "Change the World" jar on a Sunday morning.

Imagine what ministries you and I could do, not only across the globe but also right here in our buildings for our neighborhoods, if we gave not only spare change but also money that doesn't seem so spare with more discipline and desire and cheerfulness...even eagerness. Paul says he isn't asking the Corinthians to give what they don't have...but only to give eagerly, generously, out of what they do have.

What Paul is seeking by his collection is a better balance between the Corinthian's abundance and Jerusalem's need. He was there to be a fairer balance. Surely we want that, too. A better, fairer balance between our lifestyles and that little baby in Lesotho...and the mother who did not lack love, but did lack money and food enough. What a worthy cause for our generosity!

But let me tell you how gutsy and provocative Paul was on this subject of generosity. Paul was calling the Corinthians to more grace, deeper generosity for something a little less sympathetic. Here Paul is asking the Gentile Christians in Corinth to give money to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem—asking them to be generous to the very people most opposed to any mission that would include them, Gentiles, in the church at all! He does mention that it is going to be a test of the genuineness of their love. No kidding. I mean, it is one thing to give generously to a great or important cause, but to engage in such a generous undertaking for people who don't like us...who are even out to do us harm? That *is* gutsy. Even outrageous. According to the usual line of thinking, it is unwise.

I mean, who would do that?

God would. God did. Still does...gives us more than we can ever deserve. And the question Paul puts before us is whether we will respond with likewise generosity toward others in need—whether we think they are deserving or not.

It is a test of the genuineness of our love, isn't it? Our practice of generosity. Yet it seems that Paul, and certainly God, too, thinks it is possible that even Corinthians* can become generous, eager, grace-overflowing children of God.

Amen.

*There is evidence that the Corinthians did indeed come through on the offering. See Romans 15:24-29 where Paul tells the Christians in Rome he is planning to visit them, but first will go to Jerusalem to deliver a collection from Macedonia and Achaia (which includes Corinth)!