

Abundant Giving, Abundant Living
from the pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

by

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Reading: 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

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Conventional wisdom teaches that we should be prudent and responsible with our riches. Our riches include our humanity, our intellectual gifts, our monetary resources, our capacity to love, our faith in God, our contribution in the work place, our education, just to name several. Yet, we know that the biblical literature challenges this

conventional wisdom with suggestions, if not commands, that we think paradoxically here. That is, the biblical injunctions to share our gifts liberally are just unavoidable. They are there in the teaching of Jesus and the letters of Paul and in other New Testament material. Call it a bias or call it God's truth, those people believed that the way to fulfilling our humanity is through being generous with our gifts. That is what the parable of the prodigal father is about: He was a spendthrift with his wealth, his forgiveness and his love.

Watch closely our behavior and you will see that many of us know this from our own experience.

“When Sameer Bhatia, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, came down with acute myelogenous leukemia (AML), a business associate sent an e-mail to more than 400 acquaintances about Bhatia’s situation. Those e-mails were forwarded to others, and Facebook and YouTube videos were used to promote the Help Sameer campaign. Nearly 25,000 people registered in a bone-marrow database and eventually a match was found. The key to using social media for promoting causes like Bhatia’s,

says Malcolm Gladwell (in the New Yorker, Oct. 4, 2010) is not making high demands on people.” (Noted in the Christian Century, Nov. 2, 2010, p.9).

As impressive as the turnout of some 25,000 people to such an appeal is, it is the last line of the report by Malcolm Gladwell that intrigues me most. He tells us that (in his opinion) the key to such a response is found in “not making high demands on people.” In other words, he is suggesting that we can trust people to be generous human beings if we will just give them the chance to act generously, often with abandon. Present an opportunity and watch what happens. Make a need known and folks will look for ways to respond with generosity.

Maybe the young Anne Frank was right, after all: “Despite everything, I believe people are really good at heart.”

The challenge and opportunity before us, contradictory to much conventional wisdom, is that whatever power we have is multiplied if we will use it on behalf of others. Giving away our power is the road to discovering even greater power. Our power may be possession of a

particular blood platelet type that can save another's life or it may be courage to act on behalf of Anne Frank's family hiding from the Nazis in the attic of a house in Amsterdam. Power for us may be the ability to see an opportunity and then to bring together people who are in a position to make a difference for the community.

Our featured teacher today at the 9:00 AM Adult Education Class was Dr. Louis Weeks, author of *To Be a Presbyterian*, a basic text for new member classes and officer training. He graciously accepted our invitation to come by for a visit while in town for a meeting of The Presbyterian Historical Society downtown.

Louis and Carolyn Weeks now live in Williamsburg, VA where they have retired. Anticipating their visit from Williamsburg this week while thinking about Paul's text on abundant giving reminded me of something about giving and vision. The very reason we have a restored Colonial Williamsburg is because one man, an Episcopalian clergyman at William and Mary College named Dr. W. A.R. Goodwin, had an idea in the 1920s that this deteriorating town could still become a vibrant

educational resource for Americans to learn about an important time in their early history. He approached philanthropists and convinced them that it would be rewarding to them and to the nation's people to restore this treasure of history and early buildings. They responded with abundant support.

What Dr. Goodwin was able to do was to focus on the assets that he had, none of which, by the way, were financial. What he did have was a vision and the energy and imagination to share it with others, particularly John D. and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Jr. Now, talk about a contrast in social status, financial resources, religious affiliation and occupation! Dr. Goodwin and Mr. Rockefeller were so opposite that they attracted each other. Each was able to do something significant for the other. And neither said something like, "It would surely be nice if someone out there would take the initiative to manage his assets to the benefit of (in this case, Williamsburg, VA)." They each grasped the challenge before them and acted with what gifts they possessed, to the benefit of thousands and, now, millions.

What I take from these stories is that God has given us *the ability to understand and define ourselves* and in the process of doing that, discover how rich and abundant are our assets. Instead of giving our power away to others to the point that we complain about how we never have time or money for what *we* want to do, we focus precisely on what we can and want to do with our lives and proceed to do it. We, thus, live our lives with direction and purpose. No wonder it is said of such people that they seem to be so cheerful or joyful. They are using the gifts God has given them, including their power to make a difference in the lives of others, and they have found the exercise to be rewarding. Abundantly rewarding! Surprisingly rewarding! *

And guess what? They have, at the same time, taken control of their lives by no longer trying to control the lives of others. They see opportunity and act on it. They are so busy pursuing their goals, their relationships, their vision that they have no time or motivation trying to figure out why God and people they know act the way they do. Who can say “why” God allows a good man in Silicon Valley to get a life-

threatening disease such as AML? The truly wise person realizes that we will not ever know the answer to that.

But what we do know, better than anyone else, is how we can respond to that person's need. The focus in that moment is on our power, our ability, our assets, and our abundance. That is much different from spending a lot of time trying to figure out why God or others don't act the way we think they should act.

The Apostle Paul knew that Christians in the early church, human beings that they were, would always seek ways to avoid focusing on themselves as the ones in need of course correction. It is always so much easier to suggest to others how they could benefit from a change in habits, life style, use of money and other assets. Imagine what might happen if we gave all the people we know the room they need to change and grow and come to the truth naturally and on their own schedule.

Our relationship with others is the place where we exercise the most powerful influence any of us has to use. Once again, I am reminded, that is what the parable of the prodigal son is about: a parent

who was willing to give a child the freedom to discover his gifts on his own. He gave him the freedom to make a few mistakes along the way. But when that boy finally did come “home”, he knew how rich he was and he knew the Source of his abundance.

It is the same for you and me in the family we call the church. God has given us the freedom to find ourselves and to define ourselves in our relationships with others, and with God. It is the secret to our maturity and it is the way we discover how rewarding it is to use our power to be generous with our gifts, whatever they are. No one can motivate you to be a cheerful giver. But each of us is capable of discovering for ourselves how such abundant giving leads to abundant living.

Thanks be to God.

*With appreciation to Dr. Edwin Friedman, author of *What Are You Going To Do With Your Life?* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009) pp. 117 and 118.