

The Unifying Grace of Giving

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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2 Corinthians 8:1-15

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.

⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. ⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

The fun, and frankly the challenge, of understanding the Apostle Paul's letters to the early church, is that we only have one half of the correspondence. Corinth was a large, prosperous seaport with a diverse population, and the early church there reflected that diversity – a congregation of rich and poor, with a working class in between. There was also ethnic diversity with some variation in religious sensibilities.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is a vigorous presentation of the gospel and testifies to the unifying power of Christ to bind such a diverse community together in love and service. So in First Corinthians, Paul reminds the church – it doesn't matter whether you were baptized by Pastor Apollos or Pastor Cephas, for we are all baptized into Christ. There are varieties of gifts, but the same Lord. Love is patient, love is kind.... Love does not insist on its own way, but rejoices in the truth. Read Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, and you find a sort of love letter between a beloved former pastor and his congregation.

Well, something happened between the First and Second letters to the Corinthians. The notes of love in the first turn into grumpy defensiveness in the second. There is evidence that the relations between Paul and that congregation had soured; a rift developed. Paul promised to return to Corinth earlier than he was able to sort some things out, and now there is a crisis of confidence between the apostle and the Corinthian community. This second letter is a bit argumentative, and reading between the lines you can tell that Paul is now at odds with the church at Corinth. In the passage we just read, Paul says he is testing them to see how genuine they are. He pits their giving against that of another church. He says he doesn't mean to pressure them – all the while putting the pressure on with a snarky passive aggressive appeal! A falling out between Paul and the Corinthians is clearly apparent.

It reminds me of a story my friend Jody Welker shared with his congregation about a Ship Captain out in the ocean. One day he passes what he thought to be a deserted island, but he sees smoke rising over the island. He has his crew pull up to shore and is met by a lone shipwreck survivor.

The man he is so happy to be found, he says he has lived alone on that island for five years. The captain looks around and he notices that three huts have been built. He says, “If you have been living here alone all this time, why are there three huts?” The survivor says, “Oh, That. Well I live in one and I go to church in the other.” “What about the third hut?” the captain asks. “Oh... that’s where I used to go to church.”¹

Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians has the tenor of “that’s where I used to go to church,” if you know what I mean! So what we find in our text this morning is a fervent stewardship appeal, but tinged with a bit of competitive shaming on Paul’s part. The goal of this first documented Christian stewardship drive was to organize a collection for the impoverished church in Jerusalem. The Corinthian church had responded with enthusiasm to Paul’s appeal with financial support. Then Paul moved on to the much poorer province of Macedonia in northern Greece. When Paul arrived up north, he found the Macedonians filled with joy and gratitude for their share in the gospel. And, out of their more modest means they too responded to Paul’s asking and gave with extraordinary generosity.

Paul writes these words, the Macedonian phase of the campaign is all wrapped up and he’s headed back down to Corinth. He is more than a little nervous that the Corinthians’ enthusiasm may have withered in his absence. He tells them about the sacrificial generosity of the Macedonians, for when he had taken out his calculator he discovered that they, with fewer resources, had given much more than the richer Corinthians. He is boasting about that to the Corinthians – almost to the point of insult.

Now, there is one extraordinary aspect of this ancient stewardship campaign that is easy for contemporary people to miss. This church offering cut across one of the great cultural divides in the ancient world. Corinthians were Greek. Macedonians were Greek, more or less. Both were Gentiles. The people in Jerusalem, who would benefit from this offering, were Jews, meaning early Jewish Christians, but they were still Jews. A veritable chasm

¹ Jody Welker, “Parable of Weeds and Wheat,” 8/26/18, kirkofkildaire.org.

separated Jews and Gentiles – even early Jewish and Gentile Christians. They lived in separate neighborhoods. They did not eat together. They didn't socialize with one another. We cannot help but imagine the mutterings that might have rippled across those Greek-speaking churches when Paul promoted his Jerusalem offering. Aren't there mission needs right here in Macedonia? How about the urban poor in Corinth? Charity begins at home, right? But the Spirit of God led them to embrace Paul's campaign pitch: "Give of yourselves first to the will of the Lord."²

Both congregations caught Paul's vision. They recognized that all of life is a gift from God. They believed that in Christ all good things are possible. They committed themselves to the expansion of the church – the reception of diverse members, and mission among the poor. Now, we do not know all of the reasons why Paul resorted to both shame and flattery in his appeal to the Corinthians, first by flaunting the superior generosity of the Macedonian church, and then flattering the Corinthians for their excellent Christian virtue. But whatever his reason for making this multipronged appeal, one thing shines through. Paul is not only pressing them to give, but also to understand why giving is so important. The church gives in response to the grace of God which has the power to unify diverse believers. If the grace of Jesus Christ truly resides in us, we cannot keep it inside. It is meant to be shared. We love God's diverse human family through a fair and equitable sharing of life's necessities – food, water, shelter, as well as acts of kindness and justice. We demonstrate that love of God by giving to the church's mission in the world. Because across every potential barrier that might divide us – socio-economic, political, cultural, you name it our giving has the power to unify us, to make us one with each other.

David Brooks wrote an important op-ed piece about a week ago entitled, "Here's the Mind-Set That's Tearing Us Apart." In our complicated world, our minds have limited capacity to understand all things, so we create categories to help us make sense of things. We divide the social world into types and associate traits and characteristics with each. "These judgments

² Daniel Harrell, "Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, 6/27/06, paraphrased.

involve simplifications and generalizations. But we couldn't make sense of the blizzard of sensory data each day if we couldn't put things, situations and people into some form of conceptual boxes," he writes. "But it becomes a serious problem when people begin to believe that these mental constructs reflect underlying realities.

This is called essentialism. It is the belief that each of the groups we identify with actually has an 'essential' and immutable nature, rooted in biology or in the nature of reality." "Essentialism may imagine that people in one group are more alike than they really are, and are more different from people in other groups than they really are. They may believe that the boundaries between groups are clear and hard... America is awash in essentialism," Brooks observes, noting how it feels that contemporary politics is almost all about identity – about which type of person is going to dominate. "Politics is no longer about argument; it's just jamming together a bunch of scary categories about people who are allegedly rotten to the core. Worse, you find yourself in a society with rampant dehumanization, where people are barraged with crude stereotypes that are increasingly detached from the complexities of reality and make them feel unseen as individuals." He concludes: "We're a big, diverse country; whether we see that diversity through a fixed mindset or a growth mindset makes all the difference."³

Today, in our increasingly polarized state of affairs, the Apostle Paul's stewardship appeal invites us to a growth mindset. Across everything that divides us, giving to the common cause of God has the power to unite us. Writing to one congregation about the stewardship success of another congregation for the benefit of yet a third church, Paul was imploring these diverse Christian people to be united in Spirit and for the Mission of God's work among them and in the world.

Everyone knew the distinctions between the Macedonians, the Corinthians and the Jerusalem church. But Paul resisted categorizing those diverse congregations and dividing them into this wing and that wing, into

³ David Brooks, "Here's the Mind-Set That's Tearing Us Apart," *New York Times*, 10/7/21.

categories and into dehumanizing stereotypes. His appeal was made on the unifying power of Christ to reveal God's grace in the life of each person who made up those congregations, and upon their corporate need for mutuality. The poorer Christians up in Macedonia gave with amazing joy and generosity. The diverse, urban Corinthian church could be a model for others to show forth their oneness as the body of Christ. The Jerusalem church was strapped for resources, and gave the Macedonians and the Corinthians a reason to unite around a common cause.

We at Bryn Mawr know that what happens within the walls of this building, equips us for lives of faith far beyond this church campus. Our regular gathering around the word of God – in worship and church school; our music ministry, our Christian education, and our congregational fellowship nurture us to follow Jesus Christ... into the world where there is enormous need. In our relative diversity – from different perspectives and points of view about all manner of things – our giving to the work of the church is a gracious privilege. Our giving unifies us to God's purposes for the common good. What a blessing for the time in which we live.

AMEN.