

The Needs of the Saints

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” ¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

One of the joys of preparing for last year's 150th anniversary of our church, at least for me, was reading through the church's archives, especially from the turn of the 20th century to celebrate the remarkable history of mission in this community. My very favorite thing to read are the letters written by the mission workers sent and funded by this community to Japan (in support of the work of the Presbyterian Seminary there) and to India (in support of the medical mission of Dr. Wanless). Maybe it is because I was an overseas mission worker myself. Still, I love the details that they include about their work and their daily lives, the ways that they try to help the church understand the importance of what they are doing, allowing the church get to know and have a relationship with the people who they are serving, and their expressions of gratitude for the church's generosity in financially supporting them. In fact this was almost the exact template we were given over 100 years later when we wrote to the churches who supported our work in Egypt.

In thinking about today's celebrations of World Communion Sunday, our sharing after worship of news from one of our current and deeply compelling mission initiatives in Peru, and the start of our annual stewardship season, I plunged back into those missionary letters to remind us all of the expressions of gratitude shared so frequently in the past.

Writing in January of 1892 in response to the third annual report from the BMPC missionary committee, Dr. Wanless included these gratitudes at the start of a letter updating the church on the building of a new hospital.

Dear Friends, Yesterday I received the copies of the newsletter which you so kindly sent me. We were very agreeably surprised and much gratified in looking over the missionary committee's report in the December issue to find that you are again bearing all the expenses of our work for the present fiscal year. It is a source of real joy to us to know that you have so earnestly and so lovingly held up our hands

during the past year, both by your gifts and your prayers. This encourages us for the New Year upon which we have entered. May the Lord make us more truly worthy of such unstinted generosity and unmerited interest.

Your work of faith and labor of love of the past year is, I am sure, an earnest expression of your warm devotion to Christ. We pray that God may give you all your heart's desire, and reward you with his choicest blessings.¹

The Apostle Paul also used a certain template that he returned to repeatedly when he wrote his own missionary letters, which we consider to be treasured sacred texts. He, too, always included expressions of gratitude for the generosity of whatever church he was writing to at the time.

Gratitude for their friendship, gratitude for their faith and faithfulness to the Gospel and to the building of the church, gratitude for their hospitality to him or to a colleague who he had entrusted to their care. Even in a letter like Galatians, where he mainly criticizes and corrects their theology and their behavior, he reminds them. He gives thanks for their previous care and extreme generosity towards him - saying, "If it had been possible, you would have even torn out your own eyes and give them to me.

Paul's exuberant expression of gratitude that we just heard from 2nd Corinthians relates specifically to a fundraising campaign that Paul has himself earnestly undertaken to support the impoverished members of the church in Jerusalem.

The book of Acts tells us that early on in their parallel ministries, Peter and Paul, along with other apostles, met to divide the work of growing the church into two paths. Sharing the Gospel and building

¹ BMPC Messenger January 1892.

congregations among the Jews -claimed by Peter, and evangelizing among the Gentiles, taken by Paul.

But from the very beginning of Paul's ministry to far-flung places, he committed to building an international and in some way ecumenical church that included prioritizing the needs of the saints of the church in Jerusalem impacted by persecution and famine.

And so, as Paul began to build and grow churches overseas in Macedonia and Greece, Galatia, and Rome, Paul ensured that these new flourishing Gentile Christian Churches understood that they were intrinsically connected to the Jewish Christian Churches in Jerusalem. He writes frequently of the collections for the needs of the saints; he encourages congregations like the one in Corinth not just to send their donations with Paul for him to carry back with him but to send representatives themselves as a kind of delegation of givers to deepen the relationships among the earliest Christians across geographic and cultural boundaries.

In this 2nd letter to the Corinthians following up on the generous pledge they have made toward the needs of the saints, he reminds them that the benefits of giving aren't just felt by those who receive the financial support but that through the very act of regular giving as an outgrowth of their discipleship in Christ, they glorify God, and celebrate the grace already bestowed upon those who believe. He reminds them that God has abundantly provided for them, which should compel them to give abundantly to others.

Paul's lessons in giving, stewardship, cross-cultural partnership, and generosity towards the most vulnerable are all intertwined and continue to be the blueprint of the ministry of the church today, baked into the earliest Christian communities and the foundation around which this church was formed now 151 years ago.

In the third annual report published by the missionary committee in 1891, to which Dr. Wanless had referred, they celebrated pledges made towards the church's mission, which in today's dollars would be \$100,000. Today, this congregation has eight separate mission committees, which receive and distribute over \$600,000 in mission funds each year.

That kind of giving in mission is possible because of a web of generosity - the saints who have come before us who have given generously whose legacy continues through our foundation, gifts given towards special priorities in mission such as our fight against hunger, the work of making peace that we collect today through our peace and global witness offering, as well as the work of compassion to support newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in our community. Most essentially, it is the gifts given through our annual stewardship that fund not just our generosity in mission but all of the essential supportive components that allow us not just to write checks but to build relationships, which Paul describes as *koinonia* - partnerships.

The generosity of this congregation extends even beyond that through the giving of time and talents by the countless members of our mission committees and mission volunteers who are in a fairly constant process of building relationships, reading and evaluating funding requests, meeting with our partners locally and around the world to understand the root causes of poverty, to recognizing the human assets within communities that more than any financial resources we can provide will be the solution to their struggles, and doing all of this in a constant state of recognition of dynamics of power and influence that we carry with us as primarily white and affluent people when we enter into spaces of need.

It is challenging and rewarding work. It is privileged work. Especially when we are regularly moved as individuals and as committees by the innovativeness, the courage and the passion, and the generosity of our partners - environmental activists in Peru willing to risk their safety to

stand up to corrupt politicians, food pantry staff who reach into their own wallets when shelves get too bare, artists in Philadelphia schools teaching children how art and poetry can help process trauma, mothers who provide compassion to one another after the loss of a child to gun violence, a refugee who has walked away from everything she has ever known to find safety for her family.

On more than one occasion, we are all so moved that we would give them everything that we have to support their work, families, and communities, privileged to be just one small part of their story. Maybe even as Paul describes it, we would have torn our very eyes to allow them to keep doing the vital work to which God has called them and us alongside them.

When we lived in Egypt, as mission workers, a small part of my work was helping to care for a set of apartments and guest rooms where not only we lived but where generations of mission workers to Egypt had lived located at the first school for girls in all of Egypt build by Presbyterian missionaries and funded by churches like ours. That space allowed mission workers from around the world to live and work among our Egyptian partners and for delegations from around the world to come and visit with and build relationships with the church in Egypt.

My partner in this work was Nadia - who had cared for the space and the people who lived in them since long before we arrived. Through a translator, Nadia confessed to me that, working among missionaries for so long, she should have tried harder to pick up some simple English, but she never did. So that meant that most of our conversations consisted of my very elementary and broken Arabic and a series of hand gestures on both of our parts.

In anticipation of a new resident or new delegation, we would walk through apartments and determine together what preparations needed to be made. When guests were among us, it was often me who went to Nadia with their special requests or needs, and then when they left, she

and I would walk through the spaces together and figure out what needed to be done to prepare for those who would come next.

In addition to all of this work, we did together, most importantly, Nadia lovingly cared for all three of us as we navigated living through often too interesting times in Egypt.

Nadia ended almost every “conversation” that we had with one particular hand gesture. She would take her index finger and touch it beneath one eye and then the other. I always assumed it meant - “I’ll see that it gets done.” I found it very charming.

It wasn’t until almost the end of our time in Egypt that I was describing that gesture to an Egyptian friend who told me I had misunderstood the gesture. In fact she was repeating an old Egyptian expression of friendship and generosity. What it actually meant was that she would do anything for me - even give me her eyes.

We have been given much in this life and as a community, and we are called to give generously in response. We give towards mission not just because there is a need but because we are called to be connected, to be in relationships, to be inspired and awed by the work of so many people who give all of themselves to transform their corner of a wide and hurting world.

It is a privilege to give. It is transformative to work alongside one another as a church to put out into the world the generous giving of this congregation.

We receive back in abundance as Dr. Wanless prayed the blessings of our loving God.

Amen.