

Graceful Giving

2 Corinthians 8: 1-9, 12-14

Fourth Sunday of Easter/ 7th May 2006/

Growing in God's Grace Campaign – Inspiration Week III

What we have here in 2 Corinthians is probably a fragment from one of the earliest stewardship letters ever written, scripted by Paul to the Corinthian church. Having heard through Titus of Corinthian generosity, he invites them to extend their ministry beyond Corinth by supporting the poor in the Jerusalem church. You'll recall, the Jerusalem church gave Paul permission to preach the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles with the understanding he would also make an appeal for this campaign. And that's what we have here.

Before they decide what to give, Paul wants the Corinthians to know what he witnessed in Macedonia. The poor churches of Macedonia – few converts to Christianity came from the upper classes – Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea, caught in, what might rendered from the Greek, as “grinding circumstances of unalleviated pressure,” suffering economically at the hands of the Romans, were also further persecuted because of their life in Christ. We might assume under these extreme conditions they would have little to give to the Jerusalem offering. But Paul learned what happens when one makes assumptions. When they heard about this offering they, quote, “begged...earnestly for the *privilege* of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” And then you won't believe what happened, he says to the Corinthians, something you wouldn't expect. Their abundant joy and eagerness to give to the work of God *combined* with their extreme poverty to yield something completely new: *a wealth of generosity*. Joy combined with poverty to yield generosity.

How did this happen? Each person in the community gave voluntarily – there was no compulsion, no directive, no “You must.” Each gave according to their means. Each person assessed what he or she had and then determined what would be given. Some actually gave beyond their means, beyond all expectations. They went to extremes just for the sake of being part of God's ministry in the world. That's what surprised Paul. But it didn't end there. What also amazed him was the depth of their commitment to Christ.

What did they do? They gave themselves first to the Lord and only then to others. The ministry of Christ took priority. By joyfully, earnestly, eagerly, and

genuinely placing the ministry of Christ ahead of their own needs and desires, they were free to make amazing sacrifices. They set themselves apart for God's glory, so that *giving themselves first to God allowed them to become better givers and in the giving received the greater joy that comes with doing God's work*. They could give up what they had because the work of God took priority. But what compelled them to make extraordinary sacrifices? That's the question.

One of the themes of our **Growing in God's Grace** Capital campaign is the biblical idea, "not equal gifts, but equal sacrifices." You can see this emphasis throughout all of our publications.

For example, we're not dividing the \$1 million need by the number of members (about 500) on the rolls and then sending an invoice with one's share, about \$2,000. That would be an unfair demand placed upon some. But it would also be unfair for those whom \$2,000 is not that much money, *unfair* because it removes from them the privilege that comes with making sacrifices for the sake of God's work. What's more important from a biblical perspective is that one's giving is *proportional* to one's means. This text points us to grasp the blessing that comes when we freely make sacrifices for the work of God. That's why we have been stressing over the last two weeks that we are not engaged in a fundraiser and not being asked to make merely a financial decision, we are being asked to make a *Spirit-led decision that will have financial implications*.

Now all of this might sound super-religious or impractical (which for some is the same thing). What might make this sound so odd is that we really don't like talking about sacrifices, about giving up anything – our rights, our time, our space, our opinions, our dreams, our wants, and our well-earned money. In fact, the Baby Boomer generation and those that followed don't know what it means to sacrifice anything, to go without, unlike those who experienced the Depression or the Second World War. I was born just on the edge of the Baby Boom and I've never had to go without. I don't come from money. My parents didn't go to college. But they worked very hard so that my brother and me would never have to go without. For most of us, our wealth has prevented us from making sacrificial choices. For example, we don't have to wonder whether or not we will eat one or two meals today, or three or four, and maybe a snack before bedtime. Although on our Service Day a few weeks ago we heard from workers at the Maryland Food Bank about parents in Baltimore City forced to choose to feed their children or feed themselves, because they can't afford to do both. What compels people to make such sacrifices?

On the morning I presented our gift of a motorcycle to the pastor and congregation of the Kananga Church in the Congo, something poignant occurred in the worship service I'm not sure many could see. It happened during the offering. Folks were bringing their offerings down the center aisle – *dancing (!)* their way forward with their gifts with incredible joy at the opportunity to give (these people who have nothing) to the work of the Lord. Pastor Manyayipu, was standing behind the offering box receiving every gift of dusty, filthy Congolese money and placing it into the box. A very young woman, tall, thin and carrying an infant made her way forward and placed her offering in the pastor's hands to go into the box. But he nonchalantly received the money and then put it back into her hands and she returned to her bench. I said to Manyayipu after the service that I saw what he did. He said, "She needs the money for her baby. She's very poor." I don't know if she was a widow (she might have been), but she gave like the widow who gave her all (Matthew 22:37), willing to give out of her poverty for the sake of the kingdom. This is an example of Kingdom Economics 101; this is how the economy of God works. When we make such sacrifices, when we exercise this kind of giving to God, putting God first, there is a kind of blessing that comes. The woman in Kananga probably gave what she couldn't afford to give, but in the giving received exactly what she needed. Sometimes we have to give in order to get what we really need. But what compels us to make such sacrifices?

Holding up another's generosity or sacrificial giving as a model or example of what we're suppose to do often backfires. It often leads to guilt and shame, which doesn't inspire one to be generous. "Should" or "ought" never really accomplishes much. Very often it leads to resistance, the closing of our checkbooks, maybe even resentment. There's something about comparison that kills, as Kierkegaard (1813-1855) observed. Paul could have killed his campaign by shaming the wealthy Corinthians to outdo the generosity of the impoverished Macedonian Christians. But he doesn't do that, because Paul knows how the Macedonians became so generous and what compelled them to make sacrifices. Paul doesn't want to provide the Corinthians with giving guidelines or reasons for giving. He doesn't want them to work out some sort of financial formula and then come up with their gift to the campaign.

But he is testing them for their own good. He's testing the "genuineness of [their] love" and whether they really know the reality of God's grace. For if they didn't grasp the power of grace, he knew the Corinthian church wouldn't

last another generation.¹ You see, Paul knows the source of generosity in Macedonia and Corinth and Catonsville – *it is always and forever rooted in the experience of God's grace*. Knowing what God has given us in Christ changes how we give – doesn't it? I believe the experience of grace allows Christians to be some of the most giving people in this world because we are found and saved and loved by a generous God. So we are generous in our love, generous in our giving and *forgiving*, generous with our time, generous with our lives, generous with our resources because we have come to know in Christ that life is not about what we keep, but about what we give away and share; life is not about what we have, but who has us.

If Christ became poor that we might be rich, in what does our wealth consist? “It does not consist in money or in power but in fellowship [with God]. Paul doesn't say how much he needs to meet a goal;” he points them only to Christ, “not to win our money by the hope of reward, even spiritual reward. The final standard of our giving is not to be the result of a careful calculation of how much will be left when we have given....The only standard is the love and grace of Christ. In the light of that can we hold back anything?”²

The funny thing about grace, though, is that you can't simply read about it to know it or know it by hearsay. It cannot be studied, analyzed or measured. It's experienced in the receiving and the giving. It can only be received, because it is a gift and therefore it has to be experienced in the way we live and the way we give. Maybe that's why Jesus gave us this table, not as a memorial meal to commemorate something that took place long ago, but the place to experience something, to know here in the sharing of Christ's sacrifice, the generosity of God's *charis*, the Greek for grace, so that we can celebrate this meal this *eu-charis*, this *eucharist*, this meal of thanksgiving, to experience here and in the world the extravagant grace that transforms our lives.

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¹ See Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 77-81. I am indebted to “Paddy” Best's reading of this text. Professor “Paddy” Best was Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, and was a member of the church I served in St. Andrews.

² Best, 81.