

GOD'S GIFTS AND OUR GIFTS*
II Corinthians 9:6-15
November 14, 2010

Many years ago, during my school teaching days when I had summers off, I had the opportunity to travel to Greece and Turkey through a continuing education course at TCU. The course was taught by Drs. Ken Lawrence and Daryl Schmidt—legendary professors in the undergraduate religion department. These two learned men led us in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul, and we stood on the same ground where the earliest churches were formed by him and to whom he wrote his letters—places like Ephesus, Thessalonika, Corinth.

The latter, Corinth, was a fascinating place. The ruins of the city clearly show the layout of the large, commercial community. Though the water has receded some distance now, Corinth was once a seaport, located on a very strategic isthmus in the Peloponnesus.

When Paul visited the place, Corinth was an incredibly wealthy city. There was a popular phrase of the time—"To live like a Corinthian" meant to live the life of luxury and greed. And yet, Corinth was one of the first places that accepted the Christian message. When Paul arrived in Corinth he met two Christian converts named Priscilla and Aquila, a husband and wife team who were to become co-ministers to that fledgling community.

Our text today comes from Paul's second letter to his friends in Corinth. He is writing to them about another church community that has different circumstances. The core purpose of his letter begins in Ch. 8 when Paul shares,

"My brothers and sisters, we want you to know what God's grace has accomplished in the churches in Macedonia. They have been severely tested by the troubles they went through, but their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they are poor. I can assure you that they gave as much as they could, and even more than they could. Of their own free will they begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping God's people in Judea. It was more than we could have hoped for."

Paul then addressed the Corinthians: “You are so rich in all you have: in faith, speech, and knowledge, in your eagerness to help and in your love for us. And so we want you to be generous also in this service of love.”

Yes, Paul is fund-raising. He is running the first stewardship campaign in the history of the Christian movement. The funds were being raised to help support the mother church in Jerusalem which was struggling in the midst of persecution. Paul invited all the churches that the apostles of Jesus had started to help the mother church survive.

Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to join with him and others in a fuller life of giving. He wanted them to be good stewards of the financial blessings they had been given. He wanted them to know the joy of giving in response to God’s gifts.

And so, we finally come to the crux of the familiar definition of Stewardship—that of sharing of our material gain. I hope that last week’s sermon helped us to understand the depth and breadth of stewardship—that the root of the word calls us to be caretakers for God’s household—for the land, the animals, the workers; for family, for friends—all those blessings that God has given us that’s a part of the Divine gift box of life.

I hope we remember that stewardship is not just about money—it is about helping people at their deepest need, by being good stewards of the good news.

Yet the sharing of our material wealth is part of the deal. It has been since the very beginning of the Judeo/Christian tradition. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy we find the laws of tithing—10% of the first fruits of a person’s labor goes to the temple to help others in need. In the story of Ruth we hear of another practice that went above and beyond the tithe. Boaz and other farmers allowed those who were unable to make their own money—the orphans, widows, and those unable to do physical labor—they were allowed to finish gleaning the fields by picking up any grains of wheat that might have been left behind from the first harvest.

Our Bible has a clear answer to the inevitable question I get every year—“Am I supposed to tithe on my net or gross income? And what if I give money to other organizations—is that considered a part of my tithe?”

According to the Bible, the answer is quite clear. Our earliest Hebrew ancestors gave 10% of their gross income to the temple (they would have thought “net” was what you fished with). Then, they gave more to other needs as they arose.

But Paul in this morning’s scripture wrote this to the Corinthians: “I’m not laying down any rules.” Paul wanted to get away from the legal aspect of giving that made it feel like a dreaded obligation. Instead, Paul wanted people to respond like the Macedonians—those folks in northern Greece who were poor, who had had troubles and struggles that we don’t really know about. Paul told the Corinthians that the Macedonians’ joy about knowing Jesus was so great that they responded extravagantly. Though they didn’t have nearly the abundance of resources that the Corinthians had, their “cup overflowed” with joy—and one of the ways they responded was to share out of their meager assets way more than a tithe.

This is one of those weird inverse facts about human nature—the less we have, the more we seem able to give. The Macedonians who had very little gave more than the Corinthians who had much.

Maybe we can understand it this way: A young man went to his pastor for counsel on how much he should give to his church. The pastor carefully showed him through a study of scriptures, that the tithe is the divinely prescribed standard for giving—10% of one’s income returned to God through the church.

The young man made a promise to God that he’d be a tither. At that time, in his first job, he was making \$50 a week, so he faithfully brought his \$5 tithe to church every Sunday.

But over the years he continued to grow in his success with work, and was paid commensurately. He went from \$100 a week (when he brought \$10 for his tithe), to \$200 then \$300 a week (always bringing the 10% to church.)

Finally, one day he came back to his pastor with the complaint—“Pastor, when I promised God I would tithe, I was only making \$50 a week, and it wasn’t too hard to tithe my \$5. But now that I’m making what I’m making—I don’t see how I can possibly give 10%. Can you do something to release me from my promise I made to God?”

The pastor replied, “Well, I really don’t have the authority to release you from a promise you made with God. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I will pray that God will reduce your income to make it easier for you to tithe.” (C. William Nichols. “May I Give Myself Again?” Joyful Giving ed. by Dan Moseley. Chalice press. 1997. pg. 3).

It is unfortunate that the word “stewardship” in our day and age has lost the joy of giving. Whenever we approach stewardship season, I see some people cringe and scrunch up their faces in distaste like they’re taking medicine that tastes awful. During Stewardship season, I hear more complaints about the church talking about money—like it’s un-Christian to talk about money.

The truth is that many of us have lost the joy of giving. I think it’s because we fear that we are going to be asked to give more than we are able. Paul was very clear in 8:13 and 14 that he was not asking the Corinthians to give so much away that they would impoverish themselves. He wrote: “I do not mean that others be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want at the present time, and someday their abundance may supply your want. It will all come out the same in the wash of time.”

What Paul really wanted from the early Christian Church was to help them find the joy in giving. He wanted them to join with God—the Great Giver of all we have—and experience the heart-lightening moment of genuinely giving to another to make his/her life better.

Paul wanted them to know this type of joy that superseded obligation. And because of his letters, we know he would want us to know the same.

C William Nichols, a former moderator and interim General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) once told this story about a couple celebrating their Golden Wedding Anniversary.

You know the drill of such occasions: Usually the husband and wife being honored on such an occasion are called upon to say a few words to the assorted guests who are standing around, trying not to look too uncomfortable balancing the crystal cup on the crystal plate with the cake and nut and mints. The standard jokes are told, the husband and wife are taking playful jabs at each other, wondering aloud how they could have managed to put up with each other for such a jaw-gaping span of years.

Dr. Nichols related that the husband and wife looked scrubbed and shining for their big moment. She was wearing an orchid corsage on her left shoulder—quite possible the first time in her life she has received such an extravagant floral offering. The children and grandchildren were gathered around them as they cut the decorated cake. Then, in reply to the friendly urging of their guests to make some remarks, Slim kissed his wife Betty on the cheek, squeezed her hand gently, and moved to the microphone.

Slim was not known for his speech-making ability. He was a quiet, stocky, hard-working man. He stood silently for a moment, staring at the microphone. Then he lifted his eyes toward the gathered, offered a simple, sincere thanks to his family and friends, and then began to relate a story he had read somewhere.

“When Victoria was queen of the British Empire,” he began, “she once visited the Punjab in India. Her empire stretched around the globe. Britain ruled the seas. When Queen Victoria spoke, the world listened.

“One afternoon while in the Punjab, she was told that a young prince of a minor province would like to make a presentation to her. She said ‘Show him in.’

“The young prince—really just a small child—knelt before the queen. Then he stood, reached into his pocket, and held out a small cloth bag. The queen’s attendant opened the bag. A large, brilliant, polished diamond fell into his hand. The audience gasped a little, each one whispering to the other about the

gigantic size of the stone. Queen Victoria thanked the child-prince and promised him that his generous gift would become a permanent part of the royal treasury of the crown jewels in London.

“Many years later, the young prince made a trip to England. He asked to see the aging Queen Victoria. She was reminded of the young man’s earlier gift and granted him an audience. After the proper introductions were made, the young man asked if he might see the diamond he had given to the queen many years before. It was brought from the vault and handed to him. ‘Your Highness,’ he said, ‘Years ago when I was a small child I gave this diamond to you. At that time I had no idea how much this stone was worth. Now I am a man. Now I know how much this stone is really worth.

May I give it to you again, with all my heart?’”

Slim pauses and turn toward Betty. “I am not a fancy stone,” he says. “Nobody would give many dollars for this weathered body. Once I stood at the altar of our church and gave myself to you in marriage. Like that young child prince giving his priceless gift, I did not really know at that time what I was giving you. But now, after fifty years, the Great Depression, a World War, a chorus of laughter and an ocean of tears, much hard work and countless prayers, two wonderful kids, beautiful grandchildren, and a lot of scrambled eggs and bologna sandwiches. I know how much this life means to me. Betty, now that I know what it’s worth—how much joy I’ve received from you all these many years—may I give myself to you again—with all my heart?” (Ibid. pp. 1,2)

As we move toward our Thanks for Giving Sunday next week, I really hope for each one of us that we find our joy again. We are a people who have a lot—and as we’ve seen, the more we have, the harder it is to give away.

And yet it is in the sharing with others that we find the genuine joy of being like Jesus—of giving with all our heart because we want to, because we really understand and know what it means.