

SEASON OF LOVE: WEEK OF COMPASSION
II Corinthians 9:8-15
February 20, 2011

There was trouble with a capital “T” in the big city. There was a bit of chaos in Corinth, in the church community that had been the Apostle Paul’s pride and joy.

Corinth, in the first century was a major metropolitan center of trade, tourism, and the focal point for religious pilgrimages to the temples of the goddess Aphrodite, (ooh lah lah) and the god Apollo.

Acts 18 narrates Luke's account of how Paul came to Corinth as a missionary, met fellow tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla, and stayed with them after they converted to Christianity.

At first Paul spent time teaching in the synagogue, but after facing considerable resistance there, he found a new audience, and proceeded to teach the Gentiles. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. Before he continued his journey, he left behind an established community of Jewish and Gentile believers. The Corinthian letters arise from Paul's relationship with this young church after his first visit and between succeeding visits with them.

The Corinthian believers were a diverse group. There were Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freed persons, and people from the upper classes, reflecting most levels of the hierarchical stratification of Greco-Roman society. Varied social classes, genders, religious and ethnic identities, places of origin, levels of knowledge, and spiritual giftedness all contributed to their diversity—and, let’s be honest--to their resulting problems which Paul addresses in his two letters he writes them. (partially from “Letters from the Ancient World: Issues of honor and shame permeate Paul’s letters.” Sojourners March/April 2000 by Katrina Poetker)

We’ve seen in our own community in the last few weeks what happens when diverse groups see the world differently. John Wiley Price and those who got his goat experience truth very differently from each other, the results ending in the public conflict that has grabbed the Breaking News on local television and the headlines of newspapers.

Similar tensions had arisen in the early Corinthian church between the diverse communities. There were disagreements about the big things—such as the nature of the doctrine of God and how God was made manifest in the Body of Christ. And there were disagreements about the small things, such as what kind of table manners should be used when they had fellowship dinners that included the Lord’s Supper.

In both his letters to the Corinthians, Paul attempted to unruffle feathers, mend frayed relationships, and guide the floundering community to a place of stability.

One of his solutions to the discord is found in today’s reading, which some might call a love letter, of sorts.

Now as you listened to the scripture being read this morning, you might have thought to yourself—“Haven’t we heard this same text read in recent months?” And it’s true—I used this very same passage as a foundation for my Stewardship sermon back in November.

But I wanted us to hear it again with fresh ears today as having more depth than just being a fundraising speech by an early development officer. I wanted us to hear this as a genuine gift of wisdom that Paul had probably discovered for himself—a gift that gave him peace, and most of all—joy.

Paul’s solution for the church’s division was that all the members—no matter what their financial status--should come together in a unified project to give aid to their brother and sister Christians in need. In Chapter 8 of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul reported on a group of churches that had seen particularly rough times. Again from the Message translation we hear Paul’s words:

“Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province. Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there

and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.

What was the fierce trial the Macedonian congregations experienced? Probably old news to the Corinthians and others of that time.

But think about this—it might have been an earthquake; or it might have been a drought the led to a famine. It might have been civil unrest, as was common in the Roman empire at that time—as it seems to be more and more common in the Middle East and northern African nations of our time.

Whatever it was, the Macedonians were not defeated by the event, but had found ways to help themselves—to help others in their own communities—and through the act of helping others had found an abundance of hope and joy that gave them the strength to endure their hardships.

In our reading today we hear that Paul invites the Corinthians to come together and to give as one; to join together by helping their brothers and sisters in the Macedonian churches.

Paul is encouraging an act of philanthropy as a way of unifying their own community of faith.

Now those of you who were here last week for Rev. Nathan's great Valentine's Eve Love sermon may remember that he laid out for us the different way that the Greeks differentiated the concept of love. He spoke about Eros—which is the sensual, desirous type of love; Agape—which is the uniquely Christian concept of unconditional love between God and God's people; and philia—or brother/sisterly love of each other.

Phil-anthropy is a Greek word that is a concept made up to the combination of two words: philia—brotherly/sisterly love; and anthropos—"human kind." Philanthropy is the loving act of a person or community of people for the benefit of human kind.

Paul believed Philanthropy was the cure for what ailed the Corinthian church. He was convinced the love was the answer to all the world's problems—and Paul was one of the brightest lights in the marquee of great thinkers of his time.

Paul had earlier urged the Corinthians to their highest calling in his first letter, chapter 13—which we read last week in worship, the powerful poetry of that verse read over and over again at weddings and anniversary celebrations.

In this 2nd letter, the Corinthians were encouraged to respond to God's love by loving each other in spite of their differences. He felt they could overcome their factions and divisions, that they could respect all members of the community by ending discrimination on the basis of social class; and they could seek to build each other up by coming together on a project that was more important than their own internal squabbles. He challenged them to philanthropic praxis—to love their brothers and sisters more than they wanted to fight amongst themselves.

Did you hear the gist of Paul's rationale behind philanthropic giving? He said in verses 12-15 of our scripture today that:

“Carrying out this social relief work involves far more than helping meet the bare needs of poor Christians. It also produces abundant and bountiful thanksgivings to God. This relief offering is a prod to live at your very best, showing your gratitude to God by being openly obedient to the plain meaning of the Message of Christ. You show your gratitude through your generous offerings to your needy brothers and sisters, and really toward everyone. Meanwhile, moved by the extravagance of God in your lives, they will respond by praying for you in passionate intercession for what you need. Thank God for this gift of joy. No language can praise it enough!”

The unifying factor of philanthropic action is joy. There is joy in the giving.

Paul's lesson is still being taught, and learned, in our own day and age.

If you noticed your bulletin insert, you'll notice our invitation to give today to the Week of Compassion. The theme of the offering for the next three years is Sharing Brings Joy to us. To Others. To God.

For those of you who are new to our church, let me briefly tell you about what the Week of Compassion offering is. It was originally established on "May 5, 1941 at the International Convention (i.e. General Assembly) when two major recommendations were made concerning relief. The first was that one organization called the Committee on Relief would cover broad relief appeals around the globe, including efforts such as Stranded Missionaries, the missionary work of the brotherhood's British Churches, and other calls issued by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America.

The second major recommendation was the launch of the Emergency Million Campaign. This one-time campaign was held in order to "meet unprecedented demands made upon the brotherhood cooperative work by situations created by World War II, to clear agencies of the burden of indebtedness, and to under gird brotherhood activities for a forward looking program." (from the www.weekofcompassion.org/history website)

What our foreparents in the Disciple faith found out was that the need was so great that they were compelled to set aside an annual date that they called the Day of Compassion, designated primarily for war relief, to be observed every March 1st.

As the war continued, the Day of Compassion was extended to a Week of Compassion, observed for the first time between February 20-27, 1944. Funds raised through this week of collections went to the Wartime Service Fund. On the advertising material, there were pictures of malnourished children and American troops receiving aid. (*Ibid*)

In 1953, the Week of Compassion began to expand its mission. In February, the offering gave to those suffering with long-term societal problems. The World Call magazine showed a photograph of German patients in a TB Sanatorium learning a new trade. This project was maintained by Week of Compassion funds and supervised by a skilled craftsman. Then in May of 1952, the Week of

Compassion responded to a flood in Holland. This is the first evidence of Week of Compassion responding to natural disasters, a mission which remains constant today. (Ibid.)

Today, our Week of Compassion dollars are used everywhere, in every situation there is a need. Last week's email update reported that our Week of Compassion dollars were used here in Texas. We heard that "following last week's winter storms, many of the people served by Disciples mission center and Week of Compassion partner Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries near Los Fresnos, TX, in the Rio Grande Valley found themselves in dire need. The temperature had dropped to well below freezing, an unusual drop in south Texas, even in February. Snow and ice made their way to Los Fresnos, and refugee families aided by SWGSM were among the most vulnerable to the effects of the snow and cold. Because of your faithful partnership and support, we were able to contact our partners at Church World Service and get more than 1000 blankets from their Blankets+ program to the refugees and other vulnerable populations served by SWGSM." (update-- Wednesday, February 9, 2011 at 02:23PM)

What I wish I could do is to bring all of you to the General Assembly that will be held in Nashville this summer in July. The one event I wish all of you had the opportunity to experience is the Week of Compassion breakfast. Every year I've been to Assemblies there is always a huge crowd clamoring to attend that event—and it is one of the few events that is sold out early.

Why? It is because there are so many people who have—for years—given money to the Week of Compassion offering who suddenly find themselves in need of help from all of us.

That's certainly going to be the case for the Tennessee Disciples at this Assembly. Some of you may remember that last year, a team from the region of Tennessee just happened to have scheduled their Week of Compassion funded mission trip to Haiti on exactly the week that the horrendous earthquake tore up that nation and ripped the hearts of the world open with their despair.

Glen Stewart, the regional minister of Tennessee, wrote about having their guesthouse collapse onto all their luggage and possessions, about the ordeal of trying to find a way to Dominican Republic as their only escape from the country, and though the Tennessee team made it home without physical injury they did find themselves close to harm a couple of times. He said, "We all missed some meals and some sleep but we were strong in the face of difficulty. I was aware of comfort and sustenance from God as I led the group to safety and through a long process to get us home."

Though none had physical scars—all of them had heart-scars of worry and concern for the people they left behind—and became ardent encouragers for the Church as a whole to give to the Week of Compassion—Haiti earthquake relief program.

Then, in May of last year—after the Tennessee mission team had been home for just a brief while, a storm stronger than that state had seen in over a hundred years hit the Nashville metropolitan community. The Cumberland River flooded—ruining the famous Ryland auditorium where the Grand Ol' Opry used to be held—and the current Gaylord Opryland hotel where it is currently held.

Many Disciples congregations were damaged, as well as the regional office which is the home base for Glen Stewart's regional work. Even the homes of some of our Disciple members were ruined by the deluge.

Glen Stewart, that same regional minister who reported on his mission teams experience in Haiti, wrote a thank you letter to the whole Disciples of Christ denomination, while in the midst of his own trials and tribulations with the flood. Amy Gopp, executive director of the week of compassion, was the first phone call he received after viewing the destruction to his office—and she offered him an initial check of \$5,000 plus more help to those in need in our community of faith in Nashville.

After having given for so many years, Glen Stewart and the members of Disciple congregations in Nashville just like ours found themselves humbly in need of the help of brothers and sisters around the country and around the world.

Stories upon stories like that are going to be shared this summer—of people who have given and of people who have received—and at the end of the event, there will not be a dry eye in the house.

This is the kind of joy that unifies when Christian brothers and sisters come together—the joy to which Paul testified in our scripture today. This is a joy that makes a difference—a joy based on philanthropy—giving because we love all of human kind—even those we don't know around the world.

You know—the offering moved from first being called the Day of Compassion to the Week of Compassion, which we've now observed for 67 years.

Maybe we should name it for what it really is—a Season of Love—that is for all seasons—for all of God's people—because we love one another as God has loved us.

The faces you saw in the video at the beginning of this sermon invite us to a season of love.