

"The Grace of Giving"
2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

July 1, 2018

6th Sunday After Pentecost

Nobody, it seems, likes to hear a sermon about money. Brave is the pastor who steps into the pulpit to preach a sermon about money. I figured that I was safe from all fall out if I preached about money today with my dear children and cute grandchildren here with me. Why the tension and uneasiness about sermons about money? Why do people start to feel uncomfortable and begin to squirm in the pews whenever the subject of money comes up? Why? It seems that money and giving strike many people as being "unspiritual" topics compared with more spiritual topics such as faith, love, speaking the Gospel and knowing Biblical doctrine. Money and giving are a secular necessity to keep the institution going.

Yet the Bible talks about money all over the place. In fact, I read somewhere that money is the most frequently discussed topic in all of Scripture. Our text for today discusses giving as a very important part of the Christian life, which is just as spiritual as any other aspect. Paul writes about giving, "But as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you – see that you excel in this act of grace also."

So, why don't we like to hear about it? It makes us feel bad. We may feel guilty because we may know that we aren't giving more to support the Lord's mission in our congregation, in the church as a whole, in our community or in our world.

To cover up our guilt, we lash out in anger. We shoot down any message about money and giving by saying such things as, "All the church talks about is money!"

We come up with excuses for why we give so poorly or give nothing at all: "We are saved by grace. We don't have to give anything in payment for that." "I'm only a kid (young parent, hard worker at a low-paying job, retiree -- fill in the blank here) and I don't have much money." "I have so many bills. Surely God knows how hard it is to make ends meet."

These arguments seem compelling at first glance. Yet, even after making these excuses, it's still hard to feel at peace inside. Why? The Law of God is working on our consciences. The Law of God always condemns. When we see ministry challenges which God has put before us as individuals, as a congregation, and as a church body failing despite the abundance of resources that God has provided, we can make all the excuses in the world or get as angry as we want, we still stand condemned.

We need some good news regarding money and giving. That good news is not "you don't have to give anything", nor is it a lecture on how you should give more. That's more law. The good news, which God brings to us today through the writing of St. Paul today, is about the "grace of giving."

The background to our text has to do with a great famine in Jerusalem. The saints at the home church of Jerusalem were suffering. The people were in poverty and great need. Paul, in his missionary journeys, was making a collection of money to supply the needs of the saints in Jerusalem.

The church to whom Paul was writing was in the large cosmopolitan city of Corinth. Corinth was the New York City of the day: wealthy and cultured, seemingly having everything they needed and most of what they wanted. You would think that they would be in perfect shape to help out the Christians in Jerusalem with their financial gifts. Yet the church had been torn apart by controversy over matters of doctrine and practice. Because of these problems and strife, the collection of money for the saints was not going well.

Paul could have lambasted them for their lack of giving or burdened them with more guilt by telling them they ought to feel grateful for their blessings and should give more (as some pastors have done to their congregations today). But Paul doesn't. Instead, he tells them about the churches in Macedonia.

Unlike Corinth with the wealth and culture of the big city, the churches in Macedonia were in small towns. Paul said that they had experienced "severe test of affliction" (perhaps persecution for following Christ) and extreme poverty. Here, you would think, would be poor stewardship and lousy giving. They couldn't possibly do anything significant, could they? Apparently, Paul and his coworkers thought so and tried to talk them out of giving anything because they were so poor.

Yet these Christians had a different attitude. Instead of trying to get out of giving by pleading poverty, Paul writes, "[they were] begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints." Notice that. They were begging to be allowed to give to support the Lord's mission to His people in Jerusalem.

They saw giving as a "favor" or privilege which they begged to be a part of and not as a duty or drudgery to be avoided. You hear people say that you should "give what you can." The Macedonians did that and more. Paul writes, "For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will." They had every excuse in the world not to participate, but they begged to be able to. They had little to give, but they gave more than they could afford. And they were not coerced to do so. They did it of their own free will. Why?

It wasn't that they had more money. The Corinthians had much more. It wasn't that they were a bigger or better church. Corinth was much bigger. It wasn't that Paul had reamed them out so that they tried harder to give and gave out of guilt or shame. In fact, it wasn't anything they had done at all. It was because of God's action in them. It had nothing to do with what they gave. It was all about what they had received.

Remember how Paul began his description of the Macedonian churches? He said, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia." They had received God's free and undeserved favor toward them, which had changed them. Paul goes on to say what that change meant: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

The Macedonians recognized that their poverty extended past their pocketbooks. It was a spiritual poverty due to their sin, which earned them only physical and eternal death. But Jesus Christ extended His undeserved favor to them. He, who was so rich as the Son of God and king of heaven, gave all that he had, becoming so utterly poor by setting aside the use of His divine power, assuming a human nature, becoming a

man, taking on the task of the servant, and suffering everything, including death on a cross. He did this so that they, who were utterly poor by their sin, would become infinitely rich by becoming sons and daughters of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

This richness completely changed them, even though it did not add a single cent to their pocketbooks. It not only transformed their status before God from miserable sinner to exalted saint, but it also transformed their lives, even beyond what Paul had thought. Paul expected them to make excuses as to why they couldn't give money. But Paul says "And [they did] this not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us." It was the effect of God's grace in them which caused them to give themselves to the Lord. This allowed them to have great joy at the opportunity to give, despite their "severe test of affliction", and to give beyond their means, despite their "extreme poverty".

The same thing applies to us as 21st Century Christians as it did to 1st Century Christians. On our own, every one of us - from inactive member, to faithful worshiper, to active leader, to pastor - is selfish and self-centered when it comes to material things. Let's be honest about this. We view our money and our resources as precisely that - "ours". We see the purpose of our possessions as serving ourselves, our needs, and our wants. If we are noble sinners, we might toss the leftover scraps to the Lord and those in need. Attempts to lay guilt trips on us or lecture us about how we "should" give more, at best, produce a grudging (and often temporary) increase in gifts and often bring anger and defiance.

But you and I have received far more than our material possessions. We are wealthy beyond our wildest dreams. You and I have received the grace of God, as the Macedonians did. Jesus Christ became utterly poor so that you and I could be infinitely rich in the things of God. Whether we have money or don't have money doesn't matter in this accounting of wealth. We have what really matters. Through the payment made by Jesus on the cross and the guarantee made by His resurrection to life from the tomb, you and I have become children of the Almighty God who rules the universe and heirs of the Kingdom of God for all eternity. All this has come to us as a free gift from God's undeserved favor.

This grace of God not only impacts our status before God but also our lives as God's people in this place. It transforms our attitude about material goods. We understand that all of the material things which we have are not really ours, but gifts of God belonging to God which have been placed under our care. He never relinquishes ownership. But He does allow us to manage His resources and use them. When we give up that idea of ownership, it frees us from worry or being controlled by objects.

The grace of God also transforms our use of these possessions from our purpose to His purpose. God has placed these things in our control to serve Him. Someone once said that what we do as Christians is not so much giving our stuff to God but is really taking our hands off of what is already His stuff and releasing it to be used for His purpose.

When we give ourselves first to the Lord as the Macedonians did everything else will follow. When we immerse ourselves in the grace of God as it's given in His Word

and in His Sacraments, our attitudes and actions will be transformed by that grace. Even in the most severe trial - whether it be terrorism, war, civil conflict, or persecution for our faith - we can have overflowing joy, as the Macedonians did, because our joy is in God and His love, not in our possessions.

Even with the cost of things going up and wages and benefits declining or remaining stagnant, I don't think we can even come close to approaching "extreme poverty" as the Macedonians did. But whatever financial state we find ourselves in, rich generosity can well up in us, too, because we know that God will supply our need and will use us to supply the needs of others. Therefore, whether it is the needs of individuals, the needs of God's people in this congregation, the needs of people in our community, or the needs of people in other parts of our country or the world, God's grace will move us to see giving as a privilege and to give as much as we are able and even beyond our ability.

In the Lutheran church, we are good at certain things. We are good at emphasizing salvation by God's grace through faith alone. We are good at knowing the Word of God and teaching the doctrines of God's Word in our Sunday Schools, confirmation classes, and Bible Classes. There is nothing wrong with those things. Those are fine things, which we excel at. However, as we leave today, keep in mind Paul's words to the Corinthians as they apply to you, me, and our congregation: "But just as you excel in everything --in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us --see that you also excel in this grace of giving." For it is by God's grace and His grace alone not only that you are saved eternally, but by which you live, give, and serve Him. Excel in all facets of that grace, even the grace of giving. Amen.