

A Passion for Giving

25th Weekend in Kingdomtide – November 5/6, 2005

Sermon Background Study

[Paul is writing here to Christians he knows. He founded the house churches in Corinth. Paul is collecting money to take to the Christians in Jerusalem. The Christians in Macedonia have been generous, despite their poverty. Paul hopes the Corinthian Christians will follow their example.]

2 *Corinthians* 8:1-15 (NLT)

Now I want to tell you, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done for the churches in Macedonia. ²Though they have been going through much trouble and hard times, their wonderful joy and deep poverty have overflowed in rich generosity. ³For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford but far more. And they did it of their own free will. ⁴They begged us again and again for the gracious privilege of sharing in the gift for the Christians in Jerusalem. ⁵Best of all, they went beyond our highest hopes, for their first action was to dedicate themselves to the Lord and to us for whatever directions God might give them.

⁶So we have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return to you and encourage you to complete your share in this ministry of giving. ⁷Since you excel in so many ways—you have so much faith, such gifted speakers, such knowledge, such enthusiasm, and such love for us—now I want you to excel also in this gracious ministry of giving. ⁸I am not saying you must do it, even though the other churches are eager to do it. This is one way to prove your love is real.

⁹You know how full of love and kindness our Lord Jesus Christ was. Though he was very rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

¹⁰I suggest that you finish what you started a year ago, for you were the first to propose this idea, and you were the first to begin doing something about it. ¹¹Now you should carry this project through to completion just as enthusiastically as you began it. Give whatever you can according to what you have. ¹²If you are really eager to give, it isn't important how much you are able to give. God wants you to give what you have, not what you don't have. ¹³Of course, I don't mean you should give so much that you suffer from having too little. I only mean that there should be some equality. ¹⁴Right now you have plenty and can help them. Then at some other time they can share with you when you need it. In this way, everyone's needs will be met. ¹⁵Do you remember what the Scriptures say about this? "Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough."

There is just no getting around the fact that money expresses our passions in a way that little else does. Those who tithe give out of their passion of Christ and their commitment to be generous and obedient disciples.

A "stewardship" letter

Like the rest of Paul's writings in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians is correspondence. Indeed, 2 Corinthians is probably pieces of two or three of Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth that were later stitched together and circulated throughout the larger Christian community.

Today's passage is as close to a "stewardship brochure" as we are going to find in the New Testament. We need to hear it as an appeal from pastor to congregation, an appeal that strikes all the right notes as Paul speaks to them, and to us, about "this ministry of giving."

The example of the Macedonians

Paul opens his appeal to the Corinthians by pointing them toward the giving of the Christians in Macedonia, which included at least the communities in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea. Despite their extreme poverty and even

Paul's Collection for the Saints in Jerusalem

In Galatians 2:10, we learn that the Christians in Jerusalem (all believers are "saints") have asked Paul to take up a collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem from his new Christian communities in places like Macedonia, Greece, Asia Minor, and even Rome.

Paul is eager to do so. For him, this collection becomes a symbol of the unity of the church, in which all would participate, from the poorest communities to the richest. Paul also sees the collection as a way for the gentile Christians across the Roman Empire to show the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that they are full members in the body of Christ.

This collection, this "stewardship campaign," figures prominently in the New Testament. Paul refers to the project in Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Luke refers to Paul's project in the book of Acts.

It may not be that all these passages refer to the same collection, but clearly, Paul understood that money is about as concrete a way to demonstrate commitment, sacrifice, and generosity as we can find. We can learn a great deal about giving from a careful reading of today's passage.

persecution, the Macedonian Christians have given freely. “Their wonderful joy and deep poverty have overflowed in their generosity,” Paul writes. The Macedonians begged again and again for the privilege in sharing in the collection for Jerusalem. Indeed, they exceeded Paul’s highest hopes, as their giving was an outgrowth of their dedication to Jesus.

In Paul’s world, people learned nearly everything by modeling others. It is natural for Paul to lift up the Macedonians as role models so that the Corinthians might learn about Christian giving. Of course, Paul knows that comparisons can be dangerous. They are even more so in our world. I doubt many stewardship appeals begin by talking about the generosity of another congregation! But Paul has softened the comparison by emphasizing that this is God’s work. God has been kind to the Macedonians, opening their hearts and giving them direction. The Macedonians’ joyful giving is not really so much about them as it is about God.

In the same way, Paul emphasizes what God has done for the Corinthian Christians ~ they have such faith, such knowledge, such enthusiasm, such love. Paul prays that they will also now share in the ministry of giving. They don’t have to. This is not about requirements. The Macedonians gave “of their own free will” (v. 3). Paul isn’t saying the Corinthians have to participate in the collection, but he does remind them of others’ eagerness to share. More pointedly, Paul says that participating in the campaign is one way for the Corinthians to prove that their love is real (v. 8)!¹ And just so the Corinthians don’t lose sight of what really matters, Paul points them toward Christ, who gave up all the riches of heaven for them, so that they would be rich in what really matters – fellowship with God and one another.²

Advice: Finish what you started

Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians has been strained, so he walks carefully here. Paul is not commanding them to do anything. Instead, he urges them to finish what they started a year before. Evidently, they had made commitments to Paul that he now hopes they will fulfill.

I couldn’t help but read this and think of St. Andrew. We have made such a substantial commitment to the future. We undertook a huge building campaign so that we can live out our vision of inviting, worshiping, learning, loving, and serving for decades to come. Our response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are only the latest example of the difference we can make. We are a large and growing church able to take on large and growing tasks and commitments. But, like the Corinthians, we have to finish what we started. Our 2006 budget calls for us to pay \$200,000 in debt service from our operating budget. This will have to grow to more than \$800,000 in the next few years. The commitments we’ve made to the future are substantial, but we’ve made them and now we need to follow Paul’s advice.

Paul is a practical man. Commitments made need to be fulfilled. Everyone needs to participate. Those who have more ought to give more. Those who have less ought to give less. Those with more now might one day have less and be in need. Those with less now might one day have more and be able to help those in need. Paul urges these Christians to give proportionally so that there might be greater equality. Bear in mind, Paul lived in a world of scarcity. He isn’t speaking of equal abundance here (v. 13), but of equal poverty so that the needs of all will be met. We can also be sure that Paul’s definition of “needs” would be much different from our own. For Paul, unity in the body of Christ would necessarily mean that the needs of all the saints would be met. Caring for one another is simply a given, both in the immediate community and in the larger body.

The Passion

What Paul wants the Corinthians to see more than anything else is the *eagerness* and *joy* with which the poverty-ridden, persecuted Macedonian Christians participated in his collection. For them, Paul’s campaign to help the poor in Jerusalem is not an obligation but a “gracious privilege.” Paul hopes that God will ignite a similar passion for giving among the Christians in Corinth. In the same way, we have prayed this year that God would ignite a true passion for giving in the hearts of us all.

¹I’d guess that a lot of pastors read verse 8 of this passage and say to themselves, “I’m glad Paul said it, because I never could.” Giving money as a proof of one’s love! It seems so . . . concrete. Clichés are clichés for a reason, they often carry truth. In essence, Paul says, “Put your money where your mouth is.” Tough . . . but true.

²The best way to grasp Paul’s meaning here is to read the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. Any sacrifice that we might be asked to make pales next to the sacrifices Jesus made for our sake. This is why Paul can hardly find a subject that he doesn’t take to the cross for understanding. Sacrifice is the essence of Christian love.

Daily Bible Readings

(more about the collections for Jerusalem)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Galatians 2:1-10 In v. 10 Paul speaks of this work for the poor in Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 Paul's instructions regarding the collection for the saints. Each person's giving is to be commensurate with their income.</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Corinthians 8:16-9:15 This follows today's passage. Paul speaks of sowing and reaping bountifully.</p>	<p>Day 4 Romans 15:25-32 Paul speaks about the final stages of the collection as he prepares to take it to Jerusalem.</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 11:27-30 & 24:17 More references to the ministry of giving among the early Christians.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

November Book Recommendation

Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World

by Thomas W. Lippman (Second Revised Edition)

I get many questions about Islam, as a religion, as a culture, even as a political movement. I've found Lippman's book to be an excellent introduction to all three. Lippman tackles the basic beliefs and practices of Islam, Muhammed, the Koran, law and government in Islam, and the various strands of Islam. This book will provide reasonable and informed answers to most of your questions and will give you a good base from which to learn more. Lippman is a journalist, so this book is very readable and is best when he explains the basics.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Today's passage is an appeal for money from Paul to Christians in Corinth. Paul is gathering together a collection for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem. You might begin by sharing your reaction to Paul's appeal. What is its tone? Is there anything here that would inspire you if Paul were writing to you? Upset you? How about the comparison to other Christians? Why do you think Paul makes the comparison? How about this business of the collection being an opportunity for the Christians to *prove* their love? This strikes me as being pretty bold, more bold than most pastors feel like they can be in their own stewardship appeals. What makes Paul so bold and pastors so nervous?

Perhaps the key is to see that Paul does not use the language of obligation or even obedience. Instead Paul speaks of *wonderful joy . . . rich generosity . . . gracious privilege of sharing . . . dedicate themselves to the Lord . . . ministry of giving . . . give whatever you can according to what you have*. We at St. Andrew are talking about tithing like we never have before. Trust me, this was a bold step on the part of the lay and staff leaders. It has taken a lot of trust and faith. Paul understands that this is all God's work. It is God who "in his kindness" opened the hearts of the Macedonians to rich generosity. In the same way, if you talk to those who tithe, most (all?) will tell you that it begins with a transformed heart. It must begin with the heart because beginning to tithe takes trust. Perhaps this is what Paul means when he hopes that the Corinthians will excel in their giving as they've excelled at so much else. He wants them to excel in their trust of God, in their faith in God, and he knows that their generous giving will be the certain outgrowth of that trust. Not many Christians tithe or get anywhere near it. Why is it so hard for us to trust?