

2 Cor. 8.1-15. (St. Michael's – October 18th 2020)

Today's passage from 2nd Corinthians is the first and maybe the greatest fundraising letter ever written. One scholar notes that '[This kind of letter] was virtually unknown in antiquity.' It was unprecedented. Who would have thought God cared about fundraising?

Our text actually falls into that unique category of literature where every couple hundred years or so, some genius comes along who pioneers or perfects a form of writing in a way never seen before. And so we think of Homer, Plato, Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, and Tolstoy.

Our passage falls into this category of genius. Yet even more than this, Paul's letter reveals things about money, and our relationship to money, that can change our lives. There are insights here that can literally bring us a joy we have never imagined. And Paul so explores three great themes...

1. The subtlety of greed.
2. The joy of generosity.
3. How we move from one to the other.

First, the subtlety of greed. Paul is writing to a group of wealthy Christians in Corinth, and he's asking them to give money to the poor in Jerusalem. Pretty standard philanthropy.

And yet, unlike many fundraising practices, Paul never mentions a specific amount. He never says, 'I want you to give XYZ.' Or I want you to give a certain *percentage* of your income. Instead, as Paul reaches out to these donors, his focus is not on their pocketbook, but on their hearts.

In verse 8 he writes, 'I say this not as a command, but to prove your love is genuine.' Later, in chapter 9 he writes, 'Each must give as he has decided in his heart, NOT reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'

Paul's priority is not to collect a certain amount of money, but that the gifts be given *whole-heartedly*. Because at the end of the day, what he really wants is for the Corinthians to be liberated from greed and to know the joy of generosity.

And Paul is so brilliant. He knows how hard it is to discern when we are greedy or when we are generous. It's hard to *quantify*. Tim Keller notes that greed is one of the slipperiest of all sins. It's very hard to recognize, even within ourselves.

In contrast, say, to stealing. If you steal, you're probably going to be aware of it. It's not going to be like, 'Wait a second, this isn't my car.' Or take adultery. Again, you're not going to be like, 'Wait a second, you're not my wife.'

But greed is far more subtle. It can't be quantified in the same way. You could be giving billions of dollars away to charity and still be enslaved to greed. It all about your *motivations*. And this why Paul focuses not on the amount, but on the heart. He doesn't command them to give, but he invites them to give generously and joyfully.

And we see the same thing with Jesus. Jesus talks about money all the time, even more than he talks about sex. But he never commands a certain *amount* of giving. And the one place he talks about tithing, he rebukes the Pharisees for tithing the 'correct' amount, but with the wrong attitude. Luke 11: "Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint...and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God.'

You see, the pharisees are tithing with exacting precision. And yet they're not tithing out of the love of God. They're greedy. They're doing all the right things, but they're estranged from God.

What a dilemma! Do you feel the existential tension? What if I'm a greedy person and I don't even know it? Where can I find a diagnosis, let alone a cure? This is the subtlety of Greed. And it leads us to point two, the joy of generosity.

The Bible tells us that one of the key indicators of true generosity is - are we giving sacrificially?

In verse 1 Paul writes, *'We want you to know brothers...about the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means...and beyond their means of their own accord...begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.'*

This is astounding. The churches of Macedonia are extremely poor. And yet, out of their affliction, they gave joyfully beyond their means, literally begging Paul to take their money. It would be like a church in South Sudan giving to a church in North Korea. It would be like an orphan in an orphanage giving their only toy to a friend.

They're giving sacrificially, and Paul celebrates them. And again, we see the same thing with Jesus. In Mark 12 we read:

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And Jesus called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all [of these]. For they contributed out

of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Jesus goes out of his way to celebrate her sacrificial giving. This is what God values.

So let me ask you - are you giving sacrificially? Is the amount that you're giving impacting your lifestyle? Is it keeping you from having the things you want? Is it keeping you from *doing* the things you want? As followers of Christ, these are the questions we need to ask.

To be perfectly candid with you—and because I believe in transparency—I'll use myself as a case study. When Caity and I first arrived in Charleston 10 years ago, I completed a chaplain residency at Roper St. Francis. But after I finished I was unemployed for five months and Caity was working a couple of part-time jobs. Sometimes we had less than \$100 to our name. And yet by the grace of God, He gave us faith to continue tithing even the little we had. And God was faithful. Unexpected gifts would arrive in the mail just when we needed them. And then God led us to St. Michael's, where we've been blessed more abundantly than we ever dreamed.

And for the last eight years I've served at St. Michael's, Caity and I have continued tithing at least 10% and we have tithed over \$60,000 dollars.

My friends, 60 grand is a good chunk. There are a lot of things we could have done with that money. I drive a 14-year old car that shakes at 70mph. I could use a newer car. There are all kinds of trips Caity and I would love to take - to Europe and Israel and we haven't. There are lots of Star Wars Legos I could have got for the boys, but I haven't.

And yet, at the end of the day, the joy and the satisfaction we find in giving, more than makes up for what we don't have. And our hope and prayer is that every year we will give more sacrificially than we did the year before. I have great admiration for Pastor Rick Warren of

Saddleback Church, who does the ‘reverse tithe’ and tithes 90% of his income. That’s the kind of giver I want to be.

So greed is subtle, and joy is found in generous sacrifice. How then do we move our hearts from one to the other? What will actually change us? Paul tells us there are two things that will begin to move our hearts out of the clutches of greed.

First, focus on the fruits. In verse 14 Paul writes, ‘*Your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need.*’ Paul is saying that the body of Christ is a dynamic, mutually-upbuilding relationship. And when we give to others, in some way, they will give something to us.

I’ve been reading Aesop’s Fables with my boys. And in one story, a Lion captures a mouse and is about to eat him. But the mouse begs for his life and tells the lion that one day he will save his life. The lion laughs, but lets the mouse go. And some time later the Lion is caught in a poachers net. He’s about to die, when who should show up, but the mouse, who chews through his bonds and sets him free. Paul is saying this is how giving works in the body of Christ.

In the real world I’m reminded of the Anglican Church of North America and our relationship with the Global South. You know, for many years America poured missionaries and money into Africa. But when we left the Episcopal church, we literally had no place to go, no denominational affiliation. Our diocese was basically a lifeboat in the ocean.

But at that crucial moment, the Anglican Provinces of Rwanda and Nigeria and South America, came to us and took us under their wing and said, ‘We will support you...until you can get on your feet.’

Yes, the Bible tells us that what goes around comes around. Paul reiterates this in chapter 9. Emphatically he writes, *‘The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.’*

And so when you tithe, think about the fruits. The harvest. How it will change the world. The people who will come to faith through Alpha, who will be healed through healing prayer, the trafficked children who will be rescued in India. As Bishop Lawrence reminded us last week, *‘Think about these things that are true, and good and beautiful.’*

Yes, look at the fruits. But even more importantly, look at the savior. In verse 9 Paul writes, *‘You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.’*

Yes Jesus’ whole life was a gift wasn’t it? The king of heaven laid aside his glory and took the form of a servant so that he could give himself to us. As Isaiah prophesied, *‘For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.’* And Jesus’ entire life was marked by giving...Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will **GIVE** you rest. *‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I **GIVE** to you. Whoever drinks of the water that I **GIVE** will never be thirsty again.’*

And most importantly, Jesus did not give out of his surplus. No, he gave sacrificially. *‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to **GIVE** his life as a ransom for many.’* Jesus giving ultimately cost him everything. The king of kings was born in a borrowed manger, ate his last meal in a borrowed room, and as he was dying on the cross, the soldiers gambled for his last earthly possession, and then he was laid in a borrowed tomb.

And he did this for you. He did this for me. *‘God so loved the world that he **GAVE** his only son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.’* My friends, if

you focus on what Jesus gave for you, it will literally melt the greed out of your heart, and you will know the joy of generosity.

Let me close with a quote from Robert Murray McCheyne, the great Scottish preacher of 200 years ago. He once said this in a sermon.

My dear Christians, some of you pray...to be made in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like him in giving.

Objection: my money is my own.

Answer: Christ might have said, 'My blood is my own, my life is my own'...Then where should we have been?

Objection: the poor are undeserving.

Answer: Christ might have said the same thing. They are wicked rebels against my Father's law: shall I lay down my life for these? I will give to the good angels. But no ... he gave his blood for the undeserving.

Objection: the poor may abuse it.

Answer: Christ might have said the same; yea, with far greater truth. Christ knew that thousands would trample his blood under their feet; that most would despise it; yet he gave his own blood.

Oh, my dear Christians! If you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and the poor, the thankless and the undeserving. Christ is glorious and happy, and so will you be. It is not your money I want, but your happiness. Remember his own word: '*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*' "