

Tracy Daub
6/27/21—University Presbyterian Church
2 Corinthians 8:1-15

A MATTER OF THE HEART

The New Testament passage today is about fundraising. It's comforting to me to know that just like churches today, the ancient Christian community also had to engage in that not-so-popular activity of fundraising. In our reading today, the Apostle Paul writes to the Christian Church in Corinth about a fundraising effort that had stalled. It had lost its momentum. And Paul writes to them to try to re-ignite the program.

Paul's mission was to travel to the far reaches of the Middle East and parts of Europe to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to start churches. Sometimes he would visit these new churches several times to support and sustain them in their early days. And when he couldn't be with them in person, he would write them letters of encouragement. Parts of these letters are contained in the Bible.

Another aspect of Paul's job was to get these churches to take part in a special collection of money to help the poor Christians back in the mother church in Jerusalem. This collection was very important to Paul. There was the obvious need that the money would address—it would help people living in great poverty. But the collection was also important because it would help cement greater unity between those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and the Gentile Christians living in farther regions. It was their common faith in Jesus Christ that brought these two very different communities together, two communities who apart from Jesus Christ, would never have anything to do with one another. The generosity of the Gentile churches Paul had helped start would go a long way toward overcoming lingering alienation and would help unite these communities as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Christians in Corinth initially made a commitment to this stewardship appeal. But somewhere along the way, they lost their enthusiasm for the project. This is a very relatable issue. How often has this happened to us? We may embrace a new project with enthusiasm but after time, or when other matters or distractions arise in our lives, we lose interest and our commitment may peter out. This can be especially true when it comes to money. We humans tend to be reluctant and cautious when it comes to giving our money. Something like this seems to have happened to the Christians in Corinth. So Paul writes them a stewardship letter to encourage them to fulfill their commitment.

There is a humorous quip about how Christians regard a pastor's efforts regarding stewardship. "When you preach about giving, that is good. And when you preach about stewardship that's fine. But when you preach about my checkbook, that's meddling!"

It's fair to say that Paul crosses into meddling. But Paul is not just meddling with the Corinthians' pocketbooks. Paul meddles with what is going on in their hearts. Because as much as Paul wants their money, what he wants even more is their hearts. Paul tells the Corinthians, "it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to *desire* to do something." Paul wants them to *want* to give. Paul wants them to *want* to give.

And that sets Paul's fundraising efforts apart from most other fundraising campaigns you and I encounter in our lives. The Red Cross, PBS, the Girl Scouts, the Police Athletic League-- they don't care whether we want to give when they ask for money. They don't concern themselves with the inner nature of our hearts. They are simply grateful to take our money.

For sure, Paul wants the Corinthians' money. But he also wants their hearts. He wants their hearts to be transformed. He wants their generosity to flow from a place of deep faith in Christ and from a deep understanding in what Christ means for them.

We tend to think of generosity as an activity. Generosity is measured by what a person gives or how often a person gives. But Paul understands that generosity is not an activity; generosity is an identity. Generosity is a mark of what it means to be a Christian, of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In his efforts to motivate the Corinthians to give and to want to give, Paul does not follow the typical fundraising techniques used by so many churches and other organizations. He does not offer them naming rights to the Fellowship Hall. He does not sell memorial bricks for the sidewalk outside the church. He does not promise to place a plaque on the communion table or baptismal font to commemorate the giver. Instead, Paul motivates the Corinthians by telling them, or really *retelling* them, the story about Jesus.

Paul tells the Corinthians the story of how Jesus, who though rich, for their sakes became poor. The poverty Paul was referring to was not an economic poverty—although certainly Jesus was born among the poor. What Paul was referring to was Jesus' willingness to impoverish himself by leaving his status at the right hand of God and to be born among us humans in order to enrich us with God's love. Christ joined us in this human existence, where his stomach would rumble with hunger, and where his body would ache with pain and fatigue and shiver with cold, and where his spirit would know sorrow and grief and times of discouragement, and where he would even know the agony of death. All this outpouring of generosity was for our sake—to save us from lost and meaningless lives, from the fears which paralyze us from living, from our misplaced priorities, from our selfishness and cruelty. Jesus gave himself away without reservation so that our lives might be saved from everything that diminishes them.

And Paul tells us that as a result of Christ's impoverishment, we are made rich. Our lives know the richness that comes from being loved, from receiving God's forgiveness, from

knowing that God is steadfastly with us, from being taught how to love others, and from being shown a way to live in this world that has meaning and purpose.

And here is the interesting and important thing. Paul does not tell the Corinthians that if they give their money they will discover Christ's rich and abundant love. No. What Paul tells the Corinthians is *that they are already rich*, that Christ has already made them rich, so they should begin to live and act on the basis of that new reality. They are already rich.

And we are already rich. And we can begin to live and act on the basis of that new reality. Generosity was essential to Christ's identity and it is an essential ingredient to the Christian identity. Generosity is not something we do occasionally when we are prompted by a sad or compelling story. Generosity is who we are as followers of Christ. Generosity lies at the core of what it means to be a Christian. We are those people who are generous with our money, generous with our forgiveness, generous with our time and talents, generous with our compassion and our love. Generosity is part of the Christian's DNA.

Paul wants the Corinthians to want to give. But truthfully, sometimes we do not feel especially happy parting with our money or our time or our forgiveness. Despite our desire to follow Christ, generosity does not always flow joyfully from our hearts. How great it would be if we could always be happy givers. But that is not always true about us.

So what can help inspire us to make generosity a more integral part of our identity? What can help bring generosity into our hearts so that, as Paul hopes, we don't just give, but that we desire to give?

We know that Paul holds up Christ as an example, but Paul also employs a technique of using other people as a role model. Paul tells the Christians in Corinth about the generosity of the churches in Macedonia to this fundraising effort, and he literally gushes with praise about

how abundantly generous the Macedonians were and how even in their own hardships they “overflowed in a wealth of generosity,” and how they gave beyond their means, even “begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.”

Now, I can’t help but wonder how all this praise of the Macedonians’ generosity sat with the Corinthians. If I know human nature, my bet is that it didn’t sit too well. If I were the Corinthians, I might be tempted to say to Paul, “well good for them! Why don’t you go back to the Macedonians and ask them for more money since they were so generous!”

This reminds me about a story when my children were small. By the way, I never tell stories in my sermons about my children without first getting their permission. But when Zachary was maybe 7 or 8 and Abby was 5 or 6, I was putting Zach to bed one night and I reminded him that Valentine’s Day was in just a few days. I asked him if he had given any thought to what gestures of love he might do for his family members—a homemade card or gift or some other gesture of kindness. Zach confessed that he had not given any thought to it whatsoever and it sounded like he had no plans to change that. I wanted to encourage him to become engaged in this occasion of expressing love and I said to him, “Your sister Abby has been busy planning and preparing for many days now the things she plans to do for the rest of us.” That’s when Zach said to me, “Well Mom, did you ever think that maybe Abby is just more naturally thoughtful than I am?” And I laughed. I told him that while that may be true, I believed that thoughtfulness could be nurtured.

My efforts to motivate Zachary to thoughtfulness by highlighting the virtues of his sister were not terribly helpful. And I have my suspicions that Paul’s use of the Macedonian example was probably not terribly well received either. Invoking the virtues of some people as a means of

motivating others can often result in resentments and shame and may even backfire altogether. By the way, I am glad to say that Zach has grown up to be a very thoughtful person.

But it is true that generosity can be nurtured through the example of other people—not through examples that are foisted upon us, but rather by our voluntarily surrounding ourselves with those people whose generosity inspires us. Surrounding ourselves with those people who make generosity a part of their core identity helps us in our own journey and can enlarge our own hearts. And generosity can also be nurtured through personal practice. The more we practice generosity, the more our hearts open to the capacity to embrace generosity.

That is what we try to do for one another as a community of faith. We strive to create a place where generosity is celebrated as part of our identity as Christians, where generosity is not just a duty but a blessing. As a church community, we lift up opportunities where people can live out generosity and practice generosity. And we gather together each week to remind one another how rich we are, how very rich we are!