

Sermon: November 14, 2010 First Presbyterian Church, Martinsville, VA

Scripture: II Corinthians 8:1-15

Title: Unraveling the Paradox of Giving

Hymns: #263 Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

272 God of the Sparrow

#375 Lord of All Good

Good morning! I want to begin by expressing to you, the Session and your pastors how delighted I am at being asked to be your preacher for your fourth "New Consecration" Sunday. I must confess to you, however, that the task before me this Sunday is daunting. Any time you set about to preach on the subject of stewardship, you run the risk of speaking in clichés to which every member of the church has grown accustomed, and therefore has become slightly immune.

Everybody knows why I'm here this morning. They (pointing to Randy and Jennifer) brought me in to astound you with pearls of wisdom about supporting your Church with your financial gifts. So, here goes.

1. Pearl of Wisdom #1: Make it a habit to support the ministry of this congregation with your financial gifts because it really is true "where your riches are, there will your heart be also."
2. Pearl of Wisdom #2:well, I really don't have a #2 Pearl # 1 pretty much covers the bases.

So, there you have it, your stewardship pep talk sermon for 2010. Are you ready to fill out the cards so we can get to the catered meal?

Well, before you do that, I thought I might share a little of my experiences down through the years. I can remember in my first church out of seminary standing up in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday saying something like, "Let us now receive our tithes and offerings." And it always flashed through my mind that what I was really saying was, "come on folks, put enough in the plates today, so the treasurer can pay my salary on time this month. And that is pretty much how it was for 38 years of ministry in small, mostly rural Presbyterian congregations. And fellow ministers who have served rural churches have shared with me the same feelings. These congregations almost always balked at Presbytery's askings back in those days. Remember when churches were asked to support the work of Presbyteries and Synods and the General Assembly based on a per capita head tax? If nothing else, it nudged the sessions to review the rolls each year to get the dead wood off the active list and lower the amount they would send to the higher judicatories. And the sadness that almost always overwhelmed me was knowing that "pastoral support" was the largest line item in the budget and that things like outreach and missions only got a nod of the head when special offerings were taken at Christmas, Easter,

Thanksgiving. And sometimes it was difficult to get congregations to participate in some of these special giving opportunities.

I had to be almost 70 years old, retired and doing Interim ministry to find a church that actually rejoiced in growing its mission budget. And now I can share with you that God has blessed me with two Interim experiences, where the joy of expanding the witness of Christ through outreach ministry far outshines any concerns about the pastor's salary or the upkeep of the building.

Paul spent some time in Corinth. He visited Corinth the first time after a lengthy stay in Athens. He leaves Corinth and travels to Ephesus. It is in Ephesus that Paul hears from Timothy about the opposition that had developed in Corinth to him and to the Gospel that he preached. Although it is not mentioned in the Book of Acts, Paul evidently made a quick trip back to Corinth to counteract the influence of those who would undermine the Gospel which he preached. It is after this second visit that Paul pens his first letter to the Corinthian church. Later on he hears through Titus, who carried this first letter directly to the Corinthian congregation that things have improved in the church at Corinth. By this time Paul has moved to Macedonia. Upon hearing from Titus, Paul writes his second letter to the Corinthians.

There was still some rebellion among the believers in Corinth and so Paul has to reinforce his call for the faithful to fulfill their promise to make a liberal contribution for the poor among the Christians in Judea.

Listen to these words from the 8th chapter. (Read II Cor. 8:1-15)

There are, I believe, two salient factors which this passage brings to our hearts. The first has to do with the condition of those who are doing the giving.

Things were tough in Corinth. They were tough throughout ancient Greece and Macedonia. Those who confessed faith in Jesus Christ, who joined that band of believers in Jesus as the Son of God, were under much pressure. The Jewish community in Corinth, which was substantial, resented these "Jesus people". They did everything possible to discredit them. They refused to patronize their businesses. They reported them to the Roman authorities as being subversive toward the state. They called into question their theological beliefs. As a result, things were not good for "believers" in Corinth. I believe that if you were to go back to the time of Christ and made a time line that spanned the 2010 years since Christ's resurrection and the establishment of The Church you would discover that there have been more historical times of pressure and oppression than times of peace and acceptance. In many ways, I believe we are living during a time when believers are facing more, not less, pressure. The heyday of Christianity which we experienced in the first ¼ of the 20th century is gone. In many ways, we may be moving back to a time much like the times that the believers in Corinth faced. Economic success will no longer be the mark of a believer. On the contrary, the mark of a believer may be the social and economic struggles that we are facing.

In the midst of their struggles, the Corinthian Christians were asked to financially support the work that was being done among the Christians in Jerusalem. First Paul holds up for them the example of the churches of Macedonia: “we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given to the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. “

Paul goes on to remind his readers that the believers in Macedonia begged to be allowed to contribute to the relief of those under persecution in Jerusalem. Paul notes that this is not what he expected.

But take note of how this all came about: The believers in Macedonia first “gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.”

There is an ingredient to giving that must not be overlooked. Before the Macedonian Church made any pledges and collected any gifts for the relief of believers in Jerusalem, they first asked God what to do. How often do we consider every other factor in our lives before we commit ourselves to the work of Christ. We look at our financial statements. We consider our debt to income ratio. We look at our expected leisure time plans, and we anticipate expenses which may or may not occur. Then, if there is anything left, we make a commitment. But the Macedonian Church begged to be included in the gathering of gifts for the Christians in Jerusalem, and to top it off they asked the simple question: “What is God calling on us to do in this matter.” The end result was that they set an example which Paul now holds up to the church in Corinth.

Last Sunday evening I spoke to your New Consecration Sunday Leadership Team. I shared with them some thoughts about setting an example. We are all going to be an example. The question is what kind of example we are going to be. Evidently, the Christians in Macedonia set an example which Paul wanted the Corinthian Church to emulate. They begged... they were eager to be included in the ministry to the oppressed in Jerusalem and they consulted God in the whole matter.

Yes, the economy is depressed. Perhaps more so here in the Southside of Virginia. Jobs are tough to find. Business is struggling to survive. Even long standing executives are tightening their belts. And if this is true here at First Church, can you imagine what it is like in one of the smaller, “blue collar” congregations that dot the landscape? Perhaps one of the most notable indicators of how tight some believers have had to pull in the belt is the drop in support of the mission budget of the Presbytery of the Peaks. The last figure I heard was that receipts from the congregations in the Presbytery are 45% less than this time last year. Hard economic times are opportunities for believers to stop and ask God what level of commitment they should make. The Macedonians did, and Paul wants the Corinthians to ask what God wants. No one should sign a pledge card unless they have first asked God to be a part of that commitment.

The second factor in the giving equation which this passage lays before us is the condition of the ones toward whom our giving is directed. There are people out there in the world who need to experience the Grace of God in their lives. From the folks who line up at the door of Grace Network an hour, sometimes two hours before it is open for business to the women in Ghana who are attempting to establish cottage industries to support themselves and their families. In Paul’s time the focus was on

the condition of Christians in Jerusalem who were being systematically eliminated by the Jewish leadership from the administration of assistance during one of the worse droughts to hit the Middle East. God's Grace has been and always will be the end result of our giving. Grace offered is Grace received, and the end result of our consecration of financial support to the work of Christ is that somewhere out there in the four corners of the universe that grace will find its target and lives will be changed.

Down in Salem Presbytery, just South of Statesville, NC, there is a little congregation of believers who seemed at times to be hanging on by a thread. They often had a difficult time maintaining a budget that would include a full time pastor. Little Thyatira Presbyterian Church seemed destined to become like so many little congregations in our own presbytery. Just hanging on, eking out an existence and making do with less than full time pastoral leadership. Then a member of their church died and left the church with an extremely large sum with the expressed direction that the income from the Trust be used for "Missions only". Now Thyatira was a small, but rich congregation that could not afford the leadership that it needed to reach out in ministry to the world. Finally, the Session hit upon a plan. They asked the civilian court to make a ruling. If they could demonstrate that a good portion of the pastoral leadership was directed toward missions, could they use part of the income from the bequest to hire a full time pastor. The civilian court found in favor of the Session's plan and Thyatira Presbyterian Church called a full time pastor with a mandate to be involved in missions. Today, this congregation operates a clearing house for medical equipment and supplies. They have a warehouse and things like wheelchairs and iron lungs and vital medicines are shipped out to medical missionaries around the world. Much of the equipment is donated and the income from the trust fund pays for the shipping and every now and then members of the congregation and the pastor go along with the supplies to interact with those who receive these fruits of God's Grace.

The last thing that you and I should do is sign a pledge card as a means of funding a "budget". What you are being asked to do today is to consecrate your earthly wealth to touching the lives of others with the Grace of God. And it might not be a bad idea if some of you planned to follow your gifts and experience where and how your gifts are doing just that.... How are your funds helping missionaries in Mexico make a statement to a people who are being overcome by drug wars. How are your funds being used in Uganda and Zaire to provide clean water to villages so that women do not have to walk five miles a day to bring home a jug of water. Are you aware that we have missionaries in Europe who are working directly with refugees from war torn countries who have come to Germany and Holland and Sweden and now live in refugee camps waiting for an opportunity to build a new life.

Don't sign a pledge card as a way of absolving yourself from involvement in the lives of these people. Sign that card because at the end of the line there are people who need an outpouring of God's Grace in their lives. And sign that card as the first step in becoming more involved in their lives. Paul sets forth a wonderful theory. In verse 14 of the 8th chapter he writes: At this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality."

I know this may sound crazy to you, sitting here in this beautiful building, getting ready to enjoy a wonderful feast, but when we give with a focus on those who will receive God's grace through our gifts, we will in turn receive a supply of grace that will fill our need. You and I give, so that through our gifts God's grace will be poured out on the folks at the end of the line, then we follow the money, and we get to know the folks whose lives have been transformed, and all of a sudden, our lives become transformed as well. The equality that Paul speaks about in this passage is not some kind of hidden socialism, it is a true sharing of God's Grace, so that THOSE WHO GATHERED MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH OF GOD'S GRACE AND THOSE WHO GATHERED LITTLE OF GOD'S GRACE HAD NO LACK.

So there you have it. In my mind, the only true rationale for signing a pledge card. What would God have me give of my earthly riches to serve as a conduit of His Grace to those around the world who need that Grace. And how many of us would be willing to follow our money? Tutor disadvantaged youth, volunteer at Grace Network, help challenged people learn to ride a horse, be a reader on children's night at the library, help organize a storefront mission down near the Henry Hotel, spend a week in Appalachia rebuilding substandard homes and teaching VBS, volunteer at Habitat, work with a quick response team with Presbyterian Disaster Relief, take a month off and go work in Haiti, go to Guatemala with our Presbyterian Mission to work and share with the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala.

When you put your name on a pledge card you are pledging more than your financial support, you are consecrating your whole self to become instruments of God's Grace.

I am going to ask you now to bow with me in prayer.