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“Generosity Changes Lives”

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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

October 6, 2013

2 Corinthians 8:1-7, Matthew 6:25-33

I wish I had known the Apostle Paul. What an interesting character he was! He persecuted the church of Jesus and then he became its biggest advocate. He consulted with the original disciples of Jesus and then later called Peter on the carpet for not upholding the principles of Jesus’ life and teachings. He devoted himself to the tradition of Judaism while extending the Gospel to Gentiles, to those outside of Jewish faith. He constantly talked about God’s remarkable giving, “grace” he called it, but rarely accepted gifts from the churches he served. He maintained the customs of his day, which separated the status of women from men, yet he proclaimed that in Jesus there was no longer male or female, that all were one because of Jesus. Paul seemed to be a lone ranger, darting about here and there in the Mediterranean region, yet the Gospel he proclaimed put him in deep relationships with people and communities.

Paul could be difficult to get along with. He sent one of his partners home from a missionary trip. Because of his inclusion of non-Jews in the church, Paul’s relationship with the leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem was strained. The Corinthian church thought Paul was overbearing in his letters to them, while in person he seemed weak and ineffectual.

People either loved him or hated him, and readers of Paul’s writings today seem to have the same response.

I wish I had known the Apostle Paul.

We get a sense of the man in our scripture reading today. The subject is about the offering. Now that should be simple enough. What could be complicated about taking up the offering? You get a plate or a bucket, maybe depending on how much you are expecting to receive; you tell folks why it is needed, and then you pass it around for folks to give.

But it is not that simple. Giving is complicated.

The preacher says to give 10%, but preachers are supposed to say that, aren't they? I'll give what I gave last year.

What are the cost-benefit ratios of my church experience? Maybe that should determine the offering.

If we don't like the preacher, we may not give much no matter how good the cause. If we disagree with how the funds are used, we might be stingy in our giving. If our pet projects aren't involved, we may have little interest. If we have overspent in our personal budgets, we have to cut back somewhere. If misfortune or hardships have intruded into our lives, we may feel unable to give.

Do you know that giving and receiving is one of the most complicated transactions we deal with in life? We calculate out the gifts given to children at Christmas so that a sense of favoritism isn't conveyed, or jealousy encouraged.

Our social invitations are determined by who was the last one to host.

If someone gives a significant sum of money, does that allow them more influence? That certainly is the reality in politics, and it's just good business practice, isn't it?

A mission group travels to a destitute part of the world, bringing food and clothing and supplies. One of the joys of the trip for the mission volunteers is taking candy

and trinkets for the children, handing them out and enjoying their excited faces and smiles. It's like Christmas in July!

Later on, the mission volunteers learn that the free-for-all giveaway to the children is not appreciated. Parents and leaders of the indigenous people tell them, "You are teaching our children to be beggars and to expect things from strangers. That is something we do not value and we do not need from those who come to work with us."

Giving and receiving is a complicated thing. Who knew that passing the hat was like walking through a minefield?

Paul knew it.

He had been organizing a collection, an offering, for over a year. The Christian church in Jerusalem was suffering because of famine and persecution. Often at odds with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, Paul nevertheless wanted to help in their time of need. So in visiting the mostly Gentile churches in the Mediterranean, he asked them to pledge to this cause.

The Corinthian church had responded enthusiastically. They promised significant sums, and in Paul's letter, he was reminding them of their pledge before he came to collect it.

Paul knew collecting this pledge was a delicate matter. His own conflicts with the Corinthian church could impact the success of the collection. At the same time, he didn't want the Corinthian church to be shamed. You see, when he went to collect the funds, other representatives from other communities would be present. They had already heard about the Corinthian church's promise of generosity. Corinth was rich – wouldn't it be a shame if impoverished communities gave more?

Paul knew their pride, their inflated ego and self-importance. These were primary reasons for conflict in the Corinthian community, and with Paul. He wanted to use their pride to positively motivate them while at the same time avoiding

embarrassment for them in the presence of others by their failure to do as they had promised.

Paul knew how complicated it is to receive the offering.

The Macedonian churches included Christians at Philippi and Thessalonica, churches that Paul wrote and that correspondence is included in our New Testament. Like the Christians in Jerusalem, the Macedonian church was caught in the midst of extreme poverty and persecution.

So great was that region's poverty that the secular Roman government exempted Macedonia from taxation.

Because of their poverty, Paul evidently did not ask them to contribute to this collection. However, they insisted. They wanted the opportunity to give even out of their poverty, and they begged Paul to receive their gifts.

Representatives from the Macedonian churches would be present when the Corinthian church made its offering to the cause. These poor Christians who gave out of their poverty would see how the rich in Corinth gave.

Giving is a complicated thing. And yet generosity changes lives.

One church I served had an annual mission trip to Jamaica. We went to build and repair houses in the mountains of that beautiful land, and to encourage the church for their mission.

The poverty was intense. Shacks made from tin and dirt; bedrooms with two mattresses for 10 people – they would sleep in shifts because there was not room for them all. An outdoor kitchen consisted of a rock-lined campfire.

I remember going in to the church of these folks. They could sing, and they could worship. Wooden benches served as pews. After worship, I looked around at the walls. On one wall was a blackboard. It had a sign that said, "Our Mission Dollars

at Work,” and it listed where their offerings went. These folks, as poor as they were, gave.

It was a modern day picture of the story Paul told about the Macedonians.

Paul articulated the complicated nature of giving. Jesus was the focus and the model. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:9 our theological understanding when he said, “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

Paul provided a much simpler understanding of the faith of the Macedonians: “they gave themselves first to the Lord.”

In the midst of their own challenges to live and survive, they trusted that God had provided and would continue to provide. If God held them in God’s hands, then an act of generosity came easily to them. They gave themselves first to the Lord; everything else fell into place. Generosity changes lives.

It was the same message that Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount: “Don’t be anxious about your life, about the essentials that each and every one of you must have to live. Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap, yet your heavenly father feeds them. Look at the lilies of the field: they do not toil or spin, but even the richest king cannot match the elegance with which they are arrayed. The love of your heavenly Father will not abandon you to the depravations of this life.

“Trust him in all these needs. Seek the things of God’s kingdom first, and find value in his gifts of grace and his call for justice; and all that is necessary for your life will surely follow.” (Matthew 6)

It is so complicated and so simple.

Paul was balancing his relationships with three different communities: the Jerusalem church, the Corinthian church and the Macedonian church. Even though

disagreements and conflicts marked his relationships with some of the groups, Paul did not allow such things to interfere with the task of worship and mission. God's generosity had changed his life.

He called people to give, to give joyfully and generously, to give on the basis of opportunity and abundance, to give in the same way that God gives to us.

The Macedonians demonstrate that it doesn't matter how little we may have – there is always something we can give to the Lord. And it begins with giving ourselves.

We can give our skills, our time, our prayers and commitment, our welcome and greeting, our smiles and concern. Even the smallest of contributions Paul sees as the greatest of gifts.

Our stewardship theme this year is based on this text from 2 Corinthians 8: *Generosity Changes Lives*. The Apostle Paul suggests that the first life that generosity touches is our own.

If we have anything to give at all, no matter how much or how little, it is because we have received, grace upon grace.

May God continue to enrich this congregation with all spiritual blessings as you faithfully worship and give, so that lives may be changed.