

A WORD ABOUT AN OFFERING

II Corinthians 8:7-15

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 28, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

FOCUS TEXT

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 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. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

As it is written,

*‘The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.’*

I want to thank you for responding so well to the Minute for Mission I gave last week seeking funds to support our mission trip to the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota. We needed about \$12,000 to make sure everyone could attend the trip; about \$4000 to fund some of the work projects. We have \$12,000 in gifts and pledges so far; and the books are still open to fund the work projects. As usual you have come through with great grace. And I thank you.

I probably would not have volunteered to do the Minute for Mission last Sunday if I had remembered that this Sunday I would be preaching an early stewardship sermon. Last Sunday you received “A Word about an Offering” from me; you are getting “A Word about an Offering” from me this Sunday as well. Hopefully, the two words will be sufficiently different so as to enhance, rather than burden, your sense of both receiving and responding to that which God has offered to us.

Let us pray: *“May the words of my mouth; and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer.”*

Chapters 8 and 9 of Paul’s Second Letter to the church at Corinth contain several one-liners that are often used in stewardship campaigns, those times, normally in the fall, when churches ask their members to make financial pledges to support their ministries for the upcoming year.

You may have some of heard these one-liners; ministers may have served them up to you like little plastic cups filled with grape juice; some of you may have even chosen a few of these to appear on a stewardship brochure or a T-shirt if you were working on a stewardship campaign.

- “They gave according to their means...”¹
- “They gave...beyond their means...”²
- “...though [Christ] was rich...for your sake he became poor...”³

¹ II Corinthians 8:3.

² II Corinthians 8:3.

³ II Corinthians 8:9.

- “...by [Christ’s] poverty you [have] become rich.”⁴
- “...the gift is acceptable according to what one has...”⁵
- “The one who sows sparingly will...reap sparingly.”⁶
- “The one who sows bountifully...will reap bountifully.”⁷
- And the most famous one-liner: “God loves a cheerful giver.”⁸

If a church’s stewardship committee used one of these per year, it would be eight years before they would need to comb the Bible for more.

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What I did not know until preparing this sermon this week are the circumstances in which Paul writes these one-liners:

- Paul writes to Gentile Christians at Corinth, a church he has founded several years earlier but from which he has moved on to found other churches.
- He is asking the Corinthians to join Gentile Christians from Macedonia (Philippians and Thessalonians), even though the relationship between the Corinthians and Macedonians shows signs of strain.⁹
- He is asking Corinthians and Macedonians to join together and support an offering for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who have only recently decided that Gentile Christians are at all legitimate.¹⁰

It is as if Paul is asking Presbyterian Christians to join Pentecostal Christians in an offering for Roman Catholic Christians a few years after the Reformation. It is going to take a lot of slogans on a lot of T-shirts to make this campaign a success!

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One way Paul succeeds is to appeal to the heart of each Corinthian Christian. “...it is appropriate for you,” Paul writes, “not only to *do* something [in this offering] but...to *desire* to do something.”

- Paul is not simply concerned with raising money.
- His primary concern is not even to demonstrate the tremendous theological breakthrough the Jerusalem and Gentile Christians have just forged: “that in Christ there is neither...Greek nor Jew.”¹¹

Beyond even financial responsibility and theological pioneering, Paul’s main concern is the human heart: how people *feel about* and *perceive* their life in their world under God. “It is appropriate for you...not only to *do something* but...to *desire* to do something.”

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In recent months in our country, it has been challenging to *perceive* that our lives in the world are in the hands of God as much as we thought they were a few months earlier, particularly to the extent that we tie that *feeling* to our material security.

- Even though many of us have settled in and gotten used to times less prosperous and glamorous
- Even though unemployment in our region is half what it is nationwide and a third what it is in some places
- Even though we have learned from this recession that the “go-go” years we have known for several decades were in many ways casinos of greed and irresponsibility built on sinking sand
- our desire to *do something* may feel constricted, because we don’t *feel* have the resources we once did, and in many, if not most cases, that feeling is accurate. The truth is: when we don’t *feel* we have sufficient resources, we hold back, and sometimes, we lash out.

Think for a minute:

⁴ II Corinthians 8:9.

⁵ II Corinthians 8:12..

⁶ II Corinthians 9:6.

⁷ II Corinthians 9:6.

⁸ II Corinthians 9:7.

⁹ II Corinthians 1:12-2:4.

¹⁰ See Acts 15.

¹¹ Galatians 3:28.

You drive around town, on your way to a dinner party, at the home of people you look forward to seeing. You drive through a neighborhood whose trees are beautiful, lawns manicured, and homes of exquisite architecture. You drive slowly, taking all this in, because you know you are early for the dinner party.

A white car pulls out in front of you. A teenager is behind the wheel; and adult in the passenger seat. The car does not pick up speed. You notice lettering across its trunk: DRIVER'S EDUCATION.

Because you are not in a hurry, because you are not late for the party, you peer inside to see if you recognize the driver. When you realize it is the teenager who lives down the street, you wave.

Now repeat the same scene:

It is 6:30 p.m. Friday evening. You are supposed to be at the dinner party at 6:45. It's raining. Your spouse is late. The sitter hasn't shown up. You jump in your car, back out the driveway, pull onto the main street and traffic is backed up. You pull around one line of cars; try a side street; race through a yellow light ("Did I make it?") A white car with lettering pulls in front of you: DRIVER'S EDUCATION. You want to raise the driving age to 40!

What is the difference between these two scenarios?

It is this: In the first, you have the resource of time; in the second, you don't. When we lack or perceive we lack resources, we tend to hold back, not share, lash out. It is human nature.

When in high school I studied McCarthyism, when in college I studied populism, when as an adult I studied Nazism, a common theme I found among scholars is the belief that these fearful, intolerant, lashing out, and in the instance of Nazism, genocidal movements arise, among other causes, out of the perception – or reality – of diminishing resources, diminishing status, diminishing sense of place in the world.

When we lack or perceive we lack resources, we are less inclined to respond to the needs of others. We may still *do something*, but in our hearts, we do not *desire it*.

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So why does Paul dare to ask newly-minted Gentile Christians in Corinth to join newly-minted Gentile Christians in Macedonia to *excel* in an offering for slightly more seasoned Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, especially given that the Jerusalem Christians have only recently and reluctantly come to accept Gentile Christians at all? What, precisely, is Paul thinking?

Paul is trying to get Gentile Christians to see that as recipients of the grace of God, they are richer than they realize, and some of their wealth may not even be material.

Ten times in Chapters 8 and 9 Paul uses some derivation of the Greek word *charis*. This wonderful word is variously translated as

- Blessing
- Generous act
- Thanks
- Privilege
- Generous undertaking
- Grace.

Charis refers to the beneficence of God in Christ and to the human response to God's beneficence through both gratitude and giving. According to Paul, God's *charis* is deeper than our immediate circumstances, deeper than our perception or feelings.¹²

¹² See Jon Walton's paper on the passage, The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2009.

I do not want to underplay the sadness and burden that many of us feel in terms of losses we have suffered and the gap between our resources and our responsibilities in these times. The losses are real. They have been sudden. They may take a longer time to recover than some of us have for recovery.

But beneath our losses I believe, with Paul, lies a God who more often than not provides. Provides what we need. Provides enough. Provides more than enough.

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Paul concludes his appeal by reaching back to his own youth in Judaism and quoting from the Passover liturgy. After they had been freed from slavery, while they were wandering in the wilderness, the Jews “manna from heaven,” “manna” from God. The writer of Exodus says:

The one who had much [manna]
did not have too much,
and the one who had little
did not have too little.¹³

In the beneficence of God, everyone has just about what he or she needs. From this beneficence, the Jews go on to recite at Passover:

If God had divided the sea for us, and had not made us pass through on dry land, it would have been sufficient.
If God had made us pass through its midst on dry land, and not drowned our oppressors in the sea, it would have been sufficient.
If God had drowned our oppressors in the sea, and had not supplied our necessities in the wilderness during forty years, it would have been sufficient.
If God had supplied our necessities in the wilderness during forty years and had not fed us with manna, it would have been sufficient.
If God had fed us with manna, and had not given us the Sabbath, it would have been sufficient.
If God had given us the Sabbath, and had not brought us near to Mount Sinai, it would have been sufficient.
If God had brought us near to Mount Sinai, and had not given us the Law, it would have been sufficient.
If God had given us the Law, and had not led us into the land of Israel, it would have been sufficient.
If God had led us into the land of Israel and had not built the Temple, it would have been sufficient.¹⁴

Adapting their form, we as Christians can recite:

- If God had created us and not sent us his Son that we might see God’s face, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had sent us his Son that we might see his face, and had not left us with his Spirit as Advocate, Counselor, Witness, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had left us his Spirit as Advocate, Counselor, and Witness, and not brought us to this time in history, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had brought us to this time in history and not brought us to this land, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had brought us to this land and not to this city, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had brought us to this city and not to this family, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had brought us to this family and not to this congregation, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had brought us to this congregation and not brought us to this pew, it would have been sufficient.
- If God had brought us to this pew and not to the person seated next to us, it would have been sufficient.

With Jews, with Jerusalem Christians, with Macedonian Christians, with Corinthians Christians, and with Paul, we can say:

How much more are we indebted
for the manifold bounties
which the Omnipresent hath bestowed
upon us!

Amen.

¹³ Exodus 16:18.

¹⁴ Thanks to Walton for pointing out this connection between the II Corinthians 8:17 and Passover.