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THE GENEROSITY OF JAZZ

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

I love music. I love a variety of music. I am one of those people who sings along with the radio in the car – I often sing with the Rolling Stones or I may try and muddle through an aria from an opera. One can never tell. One of the forms of music that I have learned to enjoy is jazz. Now, I must be honest, I find jazz is very complicated. I do not really understand how the individual components of jazz all come together, but I appreciate the art form and for me, it seems a great metaphor for Christianity.

Three weeks ago, our journey together started in a new direction. During the month of July, we are exploring the realities of being ambassadors for Christ. You will remember that Rev. Danny Walker spoke concerning our connectedness as the Body of Christ two weeks ago and last Sunday we looked to our legacy of Christians in mission. Today, we consider the relationship between our spirituality and our stewardship. In that light, I turn to jazz. The traditional model of jazz gives each player a time to shine. The performers may not all have a solo for the same length of time, but each one gets an opportunity to take the lead and then they come back together and unite as one. I love that reality. I brought a little jazz with me this morning. This is a bit of Lionel Hampton--a legend in jazz. This is a portion of a recording he made in 1939 from a piece entitled, “Twelfth Street Rag.” Let’s hope our technology works and we can take a listen to this brief excerpt.

[“Twelfth Street Rag” is played.]

We heard the vibraphone give way to a muted trombone, followed by a baritone saxophone, followed by a muted trumpet and then to the piano. Each one takes a turn and when they all come together again they create something far greater than they could accomplish alone. Underneath it all is the drum that offers that sustaining beat.

For me, it is the perfect metaphor for Stewardship. I will confess, stewardship has not come easily to me. Even as a child, I knew about the tithe – offering 10 percent of your income to God. You can find that invitation and expectation for giving in scripture, but I have found tithing a challenge over time. I sat at the Food Emporium on Friday with two leaders who grew up at Meridian Street and we were all reminiscing about the good ole days when the food Emporium was the Huddle. Some of you may remember the Huddle. Well, my first experiences with tithing came when I was a child. I would be given money for the offering at Sunday School. However, by middle school, it occurred to me as it had to many others who had gone before me, that you could “act” like you were going to Sunday School and then go over to the Huddle instead. I could get a cherry coke for the same amount of money as my offering. Now didn’t that work out perfectly? After enjoying the cherry coke, I would head back to Meridian Street so that it appeared I had been to Sunday School. I thought my class was the first to figure this out, but as I found out on Friday, that very behavior had been going on for years.

By the time I learned to drive in High School, I drove down to Tabernacle Presbyterian Church to meet a young man that I was dating. My offering went into the gas tank during that time. I figured my offering was sort of directed toward God as it was spent buying gas to get to church.

Finally, in college, Randy and I attended a worship service in a United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana. It happened to be “Pledge Sunday.” The pastor asked the congregation to come forward with their pledge cards during the singing of “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Well, we were first-time visitors and we did not have a pledge card and had no intention of filling out a pledge card, so we were not sure what to do. As the people in front of us began to go forward, Randy leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Follow my lead.” When it was time for the people in our pew to move forward, Randy turned and walked out the back door. We felt great relief when we got outside, but to our surprise we were the first to leave, but not the last. Several people behind us followed us instead of going forward. I knew this was not good. It was certainly not our plan and I felt sure the pastor did not appreciate it.

Ah, I have had some struggles with my tithes and offerings over the years. You may know some of the same struggles. Stewardship is not an easy concept and yet, ambassadors for Christ not only give for the benefit of others, but they give graciously. We give not only our money, but our time, our talent and our lives to our God.

Peter Block, writes in his book entitled *Stewardship*, “Stewardship springs from a set of beliefs about reforming organizations that affirms our choice of service over the pursuit of self interest.” For me, in that statement Peter Block sums up jazz and stewardship. As we step out of self interest, we step into a mentality of engaging others and prayerfully serving others. That is definitely the truth of jazz. One performer shines and then steps back to let another performer shine and in the process there is joy in both as they appreciate the gifts of the other. Underneath it all is the rhythm of grace; the presence of God.

Ambassadors for Christ understand the joy of sharing their gifts to benefit a greater whole. It is at the heart of the passage concerning the churches of Macedonia that I just read. Life is tough for the people in Macedonia. The apostle Paul speaks to their poverty. They know various forms of oppression and struggle, yet it is their joy to share their gifts with others, with strangers. They find within them a generosity of spirit even in their own poverty. They send a gift to the church in Jerusalem. They send to people that they will never see, never know. How can that be? When we are down and out, how do we lift our eyes from our own circumstances and look beyond ourselves to others? We do that through the grace of God. Faith is not a journey of self centeredness, faith is a journey with the Divine. Our eyes, our hearts, our hopes become focused beyond ourselves. Confident in God’s love for us, we celebrate who we are as the children of God and engage our faith as we live out our ideals.

The church in Macedonia lived out the love of God even in the midst of their trials and tribulations and found the opportunity to share of their abundance with others. Now my guess is that we would not find abundance in Macedonia, but they did. They lived out of a mentality of blessing and abundance and were able to give graciously. Theirs is a generosity of spirit, as well as generosity of giving.

The words of Margaret Mead come to mind as we explore this passage. “Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For indeed, that’s all who ever have.”

My understanding of stewardship has developed slowly over the years. Considering where I started, I doubt that it could have gotten much worse. As ambassadors for Christ we are called to be stewards, not only of our goods, but of our life and God’s many gifts. We are called to offer our best as individuals as we solo and then to connect with others so that we are even stronger as a community.

Stewardship, for me, is an opportunity to invest in my faith journey. It means offering time, talent and financial support to my faith community. In so doing, my offering allows me to bring my best to a congregation, but also knowing that together we will accomplish much more than I can on my own. My gifts, your gifts may not be the same size, but what matters is that in the giving we find joy in our offering and in the ministry and mission we can provide as we contribute together.

Pastor and author, Robert Fulghum writes, “The grass is not, in fact, always greener on the other side of the fence. Fences have nothing to do with it. The grass is greenest where it is watered. When crossing over the fences, carry the water with you and tend the grass wherever you may be.”

Meridian Street is our grass, our field. Our stewardship nurtures this sacred space as a place of hope, of peace and of blessing. This very day, our youth are on a mission trip because of your generosity. This past week, we had a wonderful time during Vacation Bible School. It was an opportunity to tell the children who came every day that they are loved by God, cherished by God. Your generosity makes that happen. Your generosity fuels the ministry of this congregation as well as paying the heating and air conditioning bills. All of this is part of the whole of the ministry. We each play our part and then we offer our best as we pool our contributions. Not only are we able to stand strong together, we connect with the other churches in the denomination and share in ministry that no one of us could do alone, what no single church could do alone.

Our motivation is clear and simple – loving Jesus. The people of Macedonia loved Jesus. Generation after generation of ambassadors for Christ from Meridian Street have loved Jesus. The joy within that reality is the very motivation to give our lives, our love, our gifts with a generosity of spirit and unbridled joy! Generosity comes first from God, who has already given us all. We are the recipients of God’s good gifts. We are asked to be good stewards of those gifts and in the process allow the love of God to infuse our living and our giving.

In the book, *Growing Giving Hearts*, Mennonite Mark Vincent is quoted as saying, “Our use of wealth is a creative act, for it gives life to our values....”

I am not where I want to be in my stewardship yet. It is a growing process and I certainly have some growing to do, but the church is my most important investment. We have invested in our educations, in our daughter’s education. We have invested in several houses over the years. We are blessed with a few actual financial investments, but the church is the investment with the most possibility, the greatest hope for profound return, for it gives me an opportunity to share my part and then to become so much more as we live out our faith together. We are so much more together than I can ever be on my own. I was shaped by this congregation of faith, and with you, I have the privilege to help shape others. Some we will know by name and many we will never see, we will never know. Yet, as ambassadors for Christ the legacy, the generosity of spirit, lives.

In his book, *Soul Salsa*, Leonard Sweet tells of a couple that he met who lived in Columbus, Indiana. They are people who understood being ambassadors for Christ in ways that I have yet to even imagine. It would appear they based their understanding of stewardship on the John Wesley concept of stewardship – “make all you can, save all you can, give away all you can.” Here is the story that Leonard Sweet tells. “When I was president of United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, one of my favorite treks was to Columbus, Indiana. There lived Fran and Chuck, both in their eighties, who were major donors to the seminary. A couple times a year my job was to give Fran and Chuck a “great opportunity for usefulness.” I would take them out to lunch and dinner, spend a pleasant afternoon telling stories about what was happening in the world of theological education, and work into the

conversation my case for increased levels of support. Before I left in the evening to drive back to Dayton, I usually received a check for the annual fund. The first ones started out at \$5,000. By the time I left United to go to Drew, their checks were in the amounts of \$15,000 and \$20,000. United was one of their smaller charities. Fran and Chuck spent their last years having the time of their life. They sat on a back porch in Indiana and waited for the world to come to their door. And the world did. Heads of universities, ministries, and charities from around the world traveled to Columbus, Indiana. Some of the biggest names in education, the arts, and the church drove into an unassuming retirement community, spent the day with two enchanting individuals and paid for all their meals. Fran and Chuck were besieged with gifts. Their walls were crowded with pictures of world leaders. Their calendar was crowded. They never cooked. Every day was different. Fran and Chuck decided that they were in a time of life where they could live off a reverse tithe, no more than 10% of their income. Their goal was to spend as little as possible on themselves and to give away as much as they could on causes they believed in. Some of my peers were receiving checks of \$50,000 or more when they came to call. Some only got \$1,000. But here were an elderly couple whose last years were their best years because they got a theology of receiving right.”

Sweet goes on to say, “...disciples don’t ‘live by the numbers.’ Disciples live by the Spirit. Bottom-line living goes over the line.”

Fran and Chuck had a generosity of spirit that I have not yet even imagined. Yet this I know, we shine as we make our offering and together we become beautiful music as we live out our dreams, our values, and our love.

We continue to build on a legacy of the past and who knows, there may be a youth headed down the street toward a cherry coke. When they come back, they will return to a congregation that loves them and a community that plays together on their behalf. It was true decades ago and it is so this day. Together, we offer our praise to our God and give our gifts and our lives with joy. It is the Meridian Street way. It is the tradition of the ambassadors of Christ. Thanks be to God!