

“GIFT OF FINEST WHEAT”

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Thanksgiving Eve – November 25, 2009

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7; 9:11-15

The year was 1982. I was just beginning my ministry with a congregation in central New Jersey that would continue for 26 more years. It was a hard time economically in the land, as it is these days, and many of the “safety net” programs of the government were being slashed, including programs to put food on the tables of unemployed or low income families. In nearby Trenton, New Jersey, as in many cities and towns at that time, soup kitchens were being established. They are very common now and provide essential services for many, but I remember back then being shocked; we hadn’t really heard about soup kitchens since reading about them in the 1930’s – and now we needed them again? Were we moving backwards?

Our congregation, along with many in the area, began publicizing the need for donations of nonperishable food items to stock the new soup kitchen, and the need must have touched many hearts because there was an outpouring of generosity beyond our highest expectations. One end of our fellowship hall was chock-a-block with boxes and bags of foodstuff to be taken to Trenton later in the week. But as I walked among the bags and boxes, my eyes were drawn to one particular box that stood out. In it were maybe 10 or twelve canned items, but the cans looked very old, touches of rust around the rim, and a few even had tops that slightly bulged. There were also other inappropriate items, some of which I recall as: a withering head of cabbage, a box of fancy chocolates, long past expiration date, a box of instant cocoa packets which had been opened and missing a few of the packets...and a few other sad, aged items I can’t recall right now. But it was obvious what someone had done: in response to the plea for food to feed the hungry, this person had cleaned out his or her pantry and refrigerator of whatever items had been sitting on the shelves unwanted and unused for many months and maybe even years. I immediately took the box out to the dumpster, embarrassed at the possibility of anyone seeing this aberration sitting there in the midst of an ocean of generosity. I yearned to know who would respond in such a Scrooge-like, self-convenient manner to desperate human need...and then I realized I would be better off *not* knowing who it was who gave much less than the finest in the service of caring for God’s needy children. And I never knew if this was a sad, sick, cynical message – or an ill-nurtured innocent who somehow just never “got it” when it came to generosity.

Paul writes to the Corinthians of the grace and generosity shown by Christians of the new churches in Macedonia, who themselves were going through some season of affliction, quite possibly a stretch of economic hardship, but who nonetheless gave of themselves with “abundant joy” and “a wealth of generosity” in Paul’s words. They gave of the best of themselves, even when their best was constrained by the hard times they were living through. Notice the words that appear in these verses: grace, abundant, overflowed, generosity, beyond their means, privilege, sharing, generous (again), excel, eagerness, love, and generous (yet again). These are obviously hearts which have been grasped by the love of God in Jesus Christ – and that is the basis for the thanksgiving that is the responsive heart of the Christian faith.

Now the sheer grace here comes in the fact that God could have gotten by with sending much less than his best... could have given us, so to speak, the withered cabbage or last decade’s bulging cans or some divine scraps and leftovers. Or, God could have given something better, but not his very best – a reprised burning bush, another shower of manna, a new inscribed tablet

of stone, another strong prophet. Something that wouldn't have cost God very much... like some of the old wheat that gets rejected by the millers and starts to get just a bit moldy in the barn. But God chose the finest wheat, the very best gift – and it cost God plenty, as anyone who has ever lost a child will tell you. Because God has given us of God's very best – the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ – so we are impelled to give God in return our very best, not the leftovers or the least we can get away with. We give back to God in thanksgiving by giving of ourselves to God's kingdom values, by letting generous hearts overflow into generous actions on behalf of God's people; in other words, in fact, in the words of an old hymn, we “give of our best to the Master.”

Robert Dykstra, a friend and professor at Princeton Seminary, tells in one of his sermons of a time he traveled with a group to what was then the Soviet Union. The group was told to bring for their Russian hosts little gifts of toiletries or cosmetics or other articles difficult to come by over there, one suggestion being disposable razors. Bob happened to mention this to the woman who was giving him a haircut, and she replied that she had hundreds of BIC razors in the back room that she couldn't get rid of because none of her customers liked them and she'd happily donate them all. “I told her that I'd never liked BICS either – they make the head too big or something, and I always cut myself with them,” he said, and turned down the offer, went out and bought some of the kind he used that cost a bit more.

Then, once in the Soviet Union, he asked one of the Soviet guides whether he needed any razors. Guess what he said: “Are they BICS? I don't want them if they're BICs, because they cut my face.” Bob was happy to be able to tell him, “No, I don't like BICS either, so I brought these Gillettes, the kind I use.”ⁱ

Even in the seemingly small engagements of life, giving of our best is a sign that our lives are shaped by the thanksgiving that stems from the benevolence of a God who gave us God's very best, the finest wheat, when he could have gotten by with far less.

As we think about the bounty with which we are blessed this Thanksgiving, even a Thanksgiving that falls amid continuing economic hard times for many of God's children, may we take a spiritual inventory of the many incalculable gifts God has bestowed upon us, beginning with Jesus Christ and proceeding from there. And may we then draw up our gift list of the gifts, spiritual, relational, and material, the finest gifts we can give to those we know and love, and to those we cannot know by name but are called to love as our sisters and brothers in Christ. There are many opportunities right here at Woods in this upcoming Advent season to give some of our finest gifts to God's children in need and in some cases in desperation. And we give not out of obligation and certainly not because such giving is the key that opens God's heart of love. That heart has been open from the beginning and most invitingly and universally by the gift of Jesus Christ. It is rather because our hearts have been flooded with that finest gift of God and so there is plenty to go around. It will not run out.

“You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints, but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God....Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”ⁱⁱ
Amen.

ⁱ Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon* (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001), p.119.

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 9:11-12, 15.