

THE JOY OF GENEROSITY

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 8, verses 1 through 15. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From 2 Corinthians 8, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. ¹⁰ And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹ So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. ¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Christians,

We have the opportunity to give. Christians, especially, have a unique opportunity to be generous, because we can trust our God to provide our daily bread, as well as all of our needs. And giving is one of the ways that we participate in the joyous work of God.

In this Scripture passage, the apostle Paul encourages the Christians in Corinth to complete a good work that they had already started: sending relief to other Christians who were in need.

As we consider this passage, we are going to talk about money. We're going to talk about generosity. And we're going to talk about how money becomes an idol to us. So I should make a few disclaimers. First, no one on the church council put me up to this. It's not a “get out the

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offering” campaign. Second, I don’t want to talk about money. I had to talk myself into this. The last two cycles in the lectionary I preached on the gospel lesson, because it’s a really great passage, and there’s a lot that you can preach there about Jesus’ love and his power over death. So I had never preached on this passage before, and I figured it was probably time. There are a few pastors who often preach about money. And some of them leverage it to get rich. It’s really a small minority of pastors. The rest of us are uncomfortable with it, because we really don’t want to be associated with the blatant greed of those few. We also know that money is probably the biggest idol in our society, and people don’t like it when their biggest idol is threatened. So, like most pastors, I don’t want to talk about money. So this isn’t coming from the church council. It’s not really coming from me. It’s coming from the Word of God. So if you’re new here, or if you’re stumbling across this on the internet or the radio, I want you to know that we’re not one of those churches that often talks about money. And my third disclaimer is that this passage isn’t so much about individuals giving to the congregation. It’s about the congregation giving to those outside of it. Some of the principles will also apply to individuals giving to the congregation, and there’s an obvious correlation between individual giving and congregational giving—a congregation can’t give unless its members give. But the point of this passage is not so much about giving to the congregation, but about the congregation giving to others.

So let’s take a look at this passage. Paul was collecting an offering for the Church in Jerusalem. This was around the mid-50s. He mentions this in a few other letters written around the same time, including 1 Corinthians. So he’s reminding the Corinthian Christians about something they’ve already talked about.

We don’t know exactly how, but the Christians in Jerusalem fell into great poverty. Some have suggested that it was because some of the members of that church sold their property and gave it to the congregation, which distributed it to the needy (Acts 2:44-45). That was in the mid-30s, about twenty years prior to Paul collecting this offering. The idea is that it helped at the time, but it limited their long-term financial health. I find that to be the least likely cause. Another possibility is that there was a famine in the mid-40s (Acts 11:28), and they had not yet recovered. The most likely cause was probably severe persecution from the Jews. Persecution can hinder your ability to find work or to sell your goods. At this time, Jews were the strongest persecutor of Christians. Over the next couple of decades, things would shift, and the Roman Empire increased its persecution against both Christians and Jews. But in the mid-50s, Jews were the biggest persecutors of Christians, and Jerusalem was the epicenter of it. So that was probably the biggest cause of the Christians’ poverty there. And, of course, it can be a combination of factors, and there may be other things we don’t even know about. Whatever the cause, the congregation there was in great poverty.

So Paul was collecting an offering from other churches on his missionary journey. And the churches were happy to give. The spread of the Gospel had started in Jerusalem. So all of these Christians heard about their need, and they would have thought, *That’s the church that sent missionaries to us*. Naturally, they wanted to help.

Paul especially commends the churches in Macedonia. Macedonia was a region that included what is now the northern part of Greece, the country of North Macedonia, and most of Albania. Christians in this region also experienced some persecution. Paul experienced it firsthand in Acts 16 and 17. Despite their persecution, Paul says, “In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (8:2). It sounds backward, but in their poverty, they learned to be generous. They learned that their God

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would still provide their daily bread. They learned that they can have great joy, despite having very little by way of material possessions. And this gave them the freedom to be generous with what little they had. They begged for the opportunity to contribute (8:4). It kind of sounds like Paul and his companions tried to excuse them from the offering. I can imagine Paul saying, “No, no. You don’t have much, so you don’t need to give anything. I know the Corinthians have money, so I’ll hit them up instead.” But the Macedonians wanted to give. And maybe their gift was smaller than everyone else’s, but it was more generous. So Paul holds them up as an example of generosity, and not just generosity, but also joy. They were truly “happy to help.”

So then Paul encourages the Corinthians to finish what they had started. He had already told them about the need in Jerusalem. And they had already begun collecting. So he reminds them to complete their gift so that it will be ready for when he returns to Jerusalem.

But he doesn’t make it a command. And he never commands Christians to tithe to their congregations. Everything in Christianity is free. God’s love is free. The forgiveness of sins is free. Attending worship and hearing the Word of God is free. Being baptized is free. The Lord’s Supper is free. Funerals are free, at least as far as the church is concerned. I can’t speak for the funeral homes. Even weddings are free. We don’t sell anything. So no one is required to give. But giving is for those who value something and want to make sure it continues. So Paul, also, does not command the Corinthians to give to the Christians in Jerusalem. He simply reminds them of what they had previously decided to do, and he encourages them by teaching them why it is good.

He reminds them that our Lord Jesus Christ, “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (8:9). This is especially profound when we consider the degrees between heaven and earth. When Paul says that our Lord Jesus Christ was rich, he doesn’t mean some lowly billionaire like Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk. Their treasures will wither and disappear. No, he means heaven kind of rich. And though the Son of God was rich in heaven, he became poor on earth. And I mean dirt poor. He was baby-in-a-food-trough poor. He was the kind of poor that few people on earth have ever experienced. And he went all the way down to dying-on-a-cross-naked poor. Why? So that you will become rich. And I don’t mean some measly billions, but the new creation. All the treasures of this world fade. But God has promised you glory in his new creation. You will have no lack of anything, and all of God’s kingdom will belong to you. You will be so rich that you will have zero dollars. You won’t need them, because there will be nothing that isn’t yours. Do you realize that the only reason we have money on earth is because we’re all poor? The whole point of money is to be able to acquire things that aren’t already ours. It’s just a massive reminder of everything we don’t have. But in the new creation you won’t need it, because there will be nothing that isn’t already yours.

But we chase these dollars on earth. It’s a terrible idol, because it cannot save us. God commands us to have no other gods before him, because no other gods are able to save us. But we chase our idols, and the biggest of them is probably money. But money isn’t even real. It’s just a number that represents our power to acquire things. But that power can disappear immediately. And it doesn’t matter how much money you have; you can’t buy something that’s not for sale. You can’t buy wisdom. You can’t buy health. You can’t buy happiness. You can’t buy love. You can’t buy forgiveness. You can’t buy a family. You can’t buy a good name. I mean, just a couple years ago, you couldn’t even buy toilet paper. It didn’t matter if you had ten dollars or a million. It wasn’t for sale. So be wise with your money while you have it. Do

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something good with it while you can, because, someday, it will be gone, and you will be gone. You can save money for retirement. That's probably a good idea. But, even then, there's no guarantee it will be there. The richest people in the world save millions and billions of dollars. But they still die. And then their fortunes often corrupt their children. It didn't save them, and it didn't save the ones they loved. If we think this life is all there is, then we might as well get the most out of it. But if we know that there is a world beyond this one, then we should do whatever good we can while we can and wait for our reward in the world to come.

So our faith in God frees us to be generous in this world. We can delay gratification. We can sacrifice now. Because we will be rich later.

Furthermore, we know that we have a God who will provide our daily bread. Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread, so we know that it is also the will of the Father to give us our daily bread. And God typically works through means. What I mean is, he doesn't just zap things into existence. He doesn't just zap forgiveness and grace into our hearts, but he purchased it through the blood of Jesus, and he delivers it through the Word and the Sacraments. And he doesn't just zap food into your cupboards, but he uses people to grow it, bake it, and deliver it. Sometimes he uses people to give it to us. He uses the church to give daily bread to those in need.

No one who is an active member of a Christian church should ever be cold, homeless, or hungry. I mean, look around. If one of us became completely destitute, would the rest of us be able to take care of them? Of course we could. And would we? Yeah, I'm pretty sure we would. I would be really disappointed in all of you if we didn't. In Galatians, Paul says, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). We are called to love all people, and especially to take care of our own. In the ancient world, there were many people who were in need. And it would have been good to take care of any of them. But the Christian churches especially sent aid to their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. We, also, are to take care of one another. Unfortunately, we've largely passed this responsibility on to the government. This is unfortunate, first of all, because they're not very good at it. But more importantly, it deprives us of the opportunity to love people in the name of Jesus.

There are restrictions, and we need to use our wisdom. Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat." Relief is for those who are not able to support themselves. So we should know something about people we help, and we should know their situation. This is really hard to do with random strangers who call, asking for help. Occasionally I have helped those people, and I often realized that it did no good, or even made their situation worse. The government is very bad at this, because they're just not able to distinguish between those who need help and those who are taking advantage. Their programs incentivize participants to not work, even if they are able to. So it traps them in both idleness and poverty. There are certainly people who need help, but the government should do less of it, and the Church should do more of it. We should especially be taking care of fellow Christians.

Our congregation should be more willing to give as a congregation. We do some things, and we can take joy in those things, but we should also consider more. I say this, not as a command, because Scripture does not compel it, but as an opportunity to demonstrate and strengthen our love. Our thinking—or maybe it's just an excuse—has been that individual members can give on their own to what they want. And I hope you do. But there is a great benefit in doing something together. Obviously, we can do more together than we can individually. And doing it together can motivate each of us to do more. We can experience the joy of doing it together. It can bind a

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congregation together in a common mission. When you give to something, it draws your heart to that work. And if we give to something together, it will draw all of our hearts together in loving that work.

I won't name any names, but I'll tell you what some other churches do. One congregation that I'm aware of tithes from their Sunday offerings. Ten percent goes to World Missions, and another five percent goes to Home Missions. It doesn't matter if the Sunday offering is big or small. They send that fifteen percent. Another congregation is very small, but their members give generously. They pay their pastor a part-time salary, and they have a few other expenses. That makes up about half of their budget. Every year, at their annual meeting, they discuss where to send the remaining half. Another congregation refuses to save any money. It's actually in their constitution that they cannot carry a balance from year to year. So whatever money they have left, they have to give it away. And they've always been able to pay for repairs to their building when it comes up. For each of these churches, their generosity is part of their spiritual vitality. It has made them stronger. Healthy congregations—and by that I do not mean large congregations; I also do not mean large budgets or lots of programs—healthy congregations are always giving congregations. And it works both ways. Healthy congregations are more likely to be generous, but also, generosity strengthens the health of those congregations.

As Christians, we have the opportunity to participate in the work of God. God was going to take care of his saints in Jerusalem, one way or another, whether the Macedonians or Corinthians sent relief or not. But by sending relief, those congregations had the joy of participating in the work of God. God used them to do his work. And it was good for them. It was good for everyone.

As children of God, we have freedom to be generous. We can have confidence that our God will supply all of our needs. We may not always feel confident in that, but we should, because it's true. Our God did not even spare his own Son from us, but he gave his Son for us. So he guarantees that we possess treasure in heaven. And he assures us that he will provide our daily bread until then. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.