

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 28, 2009
St. Timothy Lutheran Church
Grand Island, NY
II Corinthians 8:1-15

“Christian Giving”
by
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Famine had struck the Holy Land. Jerusalem was hurting. The Christian community there was suffering. Relief was needed...now...from wherever it could come.

The Jerusalem Christian community had been the “mother church.” Now the “mother church” needed help. Around the Mediterranean basin the word went out.

Among those who got the appeal from the Apostle Paul were the churches in southern Greece (Achaia), where Corinth was located, and northern Greece (Macedonia) where Philippi and Thessalonica were located.

Both regions responded. But they responded differently.

Those in Corinth and the southern region started but stopped (8:10-11).

Those in the northern region gave generously (8:2-3).

Those in the northern region, who themselves were experiencing a “severe ordeal of affliction” along with “extreme poverty” (8:2), gave generously. In fact, when it was suggested that they were too poor to give, they begged (8:4) to be given the opportunity to assist their brothers and sisters in Christ living in Jerusalem.

A “tale of two cities”!

Today’s text brings us the Apostle Paul’s approach to the group that had started and stopped. “Finish what you began last year,” Paul said. “Do it within your means, but do it now!” (8:11)

It is worth noting that this appeal was for what we might call “charity” dollars. In Jewish circles today, financial giving falls into three categories. First category is called “dues.” Dues cover expenses required to have a synagogue (a church). These expenses include the mortgage, utility bills, office staff, the rabbi (pastor) salary, etc. Second category is called “offerings.” Offerings are donations for things that enhance the synagogue’s functioning. These may include a new organ, adding staff to carry out some ministry objective, etc. Third category is called “charity.” Charity gifts are intended solely for the relief of the poor or to address a disaster. Charity gifts bring no benefits to those back home, to those at home base. They represent pure grace—giving without receiving anything in return, giving with no strings attached, giving freely and unconditionally.

The appeal for Jerusalem was for “charity” dollars...”grace” dollars.

Paul’s approach to the appeal is instructive. This is where we can possibly learn something...and grow spiritually.

First, he set forth the example of the churches in Macedonia. The example is humbling. One would expect that acts of generosity would come from those in favorable circumstances and with “means.” Neither was the case. The Macedonians, when they collected the offering were under extreme adversity. Life was not good for them. They could have turned inward and become very conservative, could have gone into “survival mode.” They could have withheld charity, not offered charity. Things were that bad. Furthermore, the Macedonian Christians were extremely poor. They did not have extra money to give away. The “discretionary” had gone out of discretion. Money was tight.

Yet, they insisted on giving.

They insisted on giving even when it was hard to give!

There was an explanation for what they did.

Paul’s second point.

The Macedonian Christians “had first given themselves to the Lord.” (8:5) They had given themselves to the Lord whom they had come to know as “the generous one.” He who was “rich” in God became “poor” in life...suffering death upon a cross...so that others who were “poor” in life may become “rich” in God through the power of the resurrection. His poverty had made them rich. It was to be out of their “richness” that they were to find it possible to be generous in their charity for the Christians in Jerusalem.

In fact, they did it with “abundant joy.” (8:2) The outcome of their giving was joy...joy, not grim, tight fisted release of their possessions. The Macedonians had found that joy and generosity go together. They had found that joy flows from gracious generosity.

All of this was possible because they had become “rich” in Christ who had transformed their thinking about their own circumstances.

Finally, Paul’s third point,

The charity gift was to be “according to their means.” (8:11) They were not expected to give what they did not have. But they were to give a portion of what they did have.

Therein lays the rub. It is simply not true that one has nothing. Everyone has something. The only question is: “What portion (i.e. pro-portion) am I willing to give away?”

The size of the charity gift was to be in “proportion” to what constituted the “whole” of their means. For example, 10% of \$100 is \$10. 10% of \$100,000 is \$10,000. Both are 10%. By this example, the individual gift could range from \$10 to \$10,000. They were to give a percentage.

“Give,” Paul says, “according to your ‘means’ (8:11)... and out of your ‘abundance’ (8:14).”

Paul’s use of the word “abundance” has more to do with an attitude toward one’s self than to the amount of one’s possessions. A person who views himself as having an abundance of something is a rich person, a person of “means” no matter the measure. “Abundance” has to do with the attitude of “having enough.” When persons view themselves as having “enough,” there is enough to share with others. The question back then and the question today is: “How much is enough?” “How much” has more to do with an attitude than with an amount. One is rich if one feels rich...regardless of how many dollars one does, or does not have!

A Christian is rich and gives out of the abundance of his riches in Christ.

This leads me to conclude, first, that Christian giving must flow out of the place called “enough.” In that place, there is an interior confidence that God provides “enough.” (To think otherwise might even be considered an act of distrust.) In the confidence that we have “enough,” we feel free to give...proportionally and generously.

Secondly, it seems to me that Christian giving must flow out of the example which Christ sets of self-giving love. That love is called grace. Christian giving has a “grace” quality about it. It is not self-serving, does not seek to get its own way. It freely gives so that others may thrive.

Thirdly, I conclude that Christian giving flows out of a generous heart made more generous because of the needs of others and the work of God that needs to get done. Sometimes we need others to show us that need and give us the example to follow.

[PRAYER]