

June 28, 2009 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Genesis 14:17-24; Psalm 130; 2 Cor. 8:7-15;
Sermon Title: "The Art/Joy of Giving"

Call to Worship

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord

**O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.**

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?

**But with you there is forgiveness;
Therefore you are feared.**

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
And in God's Word I put my hope.

**My soul waits for the Lord,
More than watchmen wait for the morning;
More than watchmen wait for the morning.**

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
For with the Lord is unfailing love;
And with God is full redemption.

God will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Prayer of Confession: O Lord God, there is one thing we know about you that has never changed. You are a giving God. You gave us Creation. You gave us the responsibility of stewardship of that creation. You gave us opportunity after opportunity to come back to you when we strayed. And at long last you gave us Your Son to redeem our miserable souls. But we, O Lord, take giving as such a burden. We squirm and fuss when we are called upon to give even a 10th of our worth. We tip our waitresses better than we tip you. Forgive our ungracious thanklessness and teach us how to give sacrificially. Help us to understand that true giving begins when it hurts. And in this downturn in the economy, teach us the real joy of giving that others may come to know of your Grace through our giving. We pray in the name of He who made the greatest gift. Amen.

Hymns: #8 Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates
#2179 Live in Charity (six times through)
#2126 All Who Hunger

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Giving has always been an essential element of The Christian Faith. The roots of Christian generosity are found in the Hebrew imperative to care for those who are less fortunate than you. In Leviticus 19:9-10 we find the laws which prescribe that the fields and the vineyards are to be harvested, leaving the extra grain and fruits for the strangers and the poor to reap. The bounty of the field was not to be completely harvested. In Deuteronomy 24:19-22, the imperative is that the harvester should not go back over the field a second time and the olive gatherer should not shake the branches a second time, leaving the extra grain and fruit for those who are less fortunate, the widows, orphans, poor and aliens. This method of assisting the poor, the helpless, the widows and alien surfaces in the story of Ruth. Naomi returns from Moab a widow, accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Ruth, an alien. Naomi instructs Ruth to go out to the fields and glean the uncut grain in order to have food to eat. She ends up in the field of Boaz and thus begins a wonderful love story.

As a matter of fact Deuteronomy 10:18 specifically states that God loves the orphans and widows and the alien and strangers among us giving them food and clothing, therefore verse 19 says "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt."

The giving of alms is not specifically mentioned until we reach the New Testament. In the sermon on the mount in Matthew, Jesus addressed the subject in the following manner:

"Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before man, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in Heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth. They have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

I believe it is interesting that the emphasis in this passage is not on the one receiving the alms, but on the one giving the alms. Truly, Christ understood that sharing our worldly goods with those less fortunate has a greater impact on us than it does on the receiver of the gifts. We can use our gift giving as an occasion to brag and flaunt our "righteousness". We can give for the wrong motives. We can attempt to use our giving as a means of manipulating favor from God.

Jesus had harsh words for the Pharisees who made a mockery of alms giving. He gives them a rather snide reprimand when he tells them that they make a mockery out of the laws of cleanliness when they complain that Jesus did not wash his hands before a meal.

You complain about me not washing my hands, but you Pharisees clean the outside of the bowl and forget about the inside. It would be best if you gave what is inside the bowl to the poor, that might be a better indication of your religious faith. Luke 11:41

And in the very next chapter, Jesus calls upon his disciples to sell all they have and give it to the poor. (Luke 12:32-34) And I know we have a difficult time with this. We have to live. We have children to raise. We have bills to pay. It doesn't seem possible for us to sell everything and give it all to the poor. What would happen with us? Where would we live? We'd end up just like the poor, depending on others to support us. But the real point of this passage lies in the last verse: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." That's where Jesus is leading us. To an understanding that our hearts, our emotions, our allegiances, will be invested in those things we invest our worldly riches in. If you pledge to the budget of the Church, if you make gifts to the work of God through this church over and above your pledge.... If you tithe as a matter of Christian conviction and then continue to give above the tithe. Your heart will be invested in this congregation and the missions of this congregation. You will want to be here as often as possible, you will participate in the Christian Education program, go on mission trips, help to feed a meal when it is our turn to do Second Helping, work on a Habitat Project. Where your heart is.... That is where you will be. Your heart follows your money and your body follows your heart. It is a simple progression.

I was talking with a member of First Baptist this past week. She is very interested in Habitat for Humanity. Members of Altavista Presbyterian have helped with Habitat Houses in previous years. But another house is going up in September. A blitz build. And she was wondering how she could entice more Presbyterians to become involved. Then I read Luke 12:32-34. That's how! Get the Church to make a larger donation to the construction of Habitat houses and more of our people will show up to work and watch the results of their gifts. It follows, where your treasurer is there will your heart be also.

We know that the early Church was involved in caring for the widows, orphans and helpless. In Acts 6:1 we begin to read about the complaint from some early believers that they were being left out of the daily distribution of food. The Elders gathered and decided that they needed help to oversee the food distribution so that everyone got a fair share. And thus Deacons were appointed

In Acts we also discover that giving was not unique to Jews and Christians. A Centurion named Cornelius, a Roman officer was a devout believer and he made it a habit of giving of his own wealth to help the poor. In this story, it is clear that giving is not the totality of Cornelius' Faith. He prayed to the One God. Because of his faith, not because of his giving, God led him to Peter. Peter comes to his home and the end result is that the whole of Cornelius' household – family, fellow officers and slaves – become believers and are baptized. It is Cornelius's prayers and the example of his giving that leads Peter to a fuller understanding that God's Grace is for all of mankind.

Now we arrive at our passage for this morning. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians we are given a picture of the Churches in Macedonia. Most specifically a picture of their giving to the needs of The Saints who are perishing in Jerusalem. The folks in the churches of Macedonia have taken up an offering. In the midst of their own poor economic situation, they have dug deep into their own pockets and produced an offering that simply astounds Paul. And he wants the Corinthian Church to know about it. Paul says of the Macedonian Church: ***“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.”***

It is one thing to take up a good offering when times are good, when everyone has a job and the stock market is not threatening to deplete your retirement account. But how do you do it when times are bad.... Or like the Macedonian Church when you are faced with persecution? How do you step out on faith and commit yourself or your church to meet a pledge when you are not sure what the future holds?

Well, the truth is... You don't! It is the spirit of Christ that resides in you that makes that commitment. It is the Spirit of Christ that leads you to see a need and respond, even when you are struggling to meet your own needs.

Paul says that there is an age old principle at work here.

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too much.”

The art and joy of giving is not found in bragging about how much we gave to Habitat or to Franny's House or DAWN last year. The art and joy of giving is found in the deepest levels of our hearts when we realize that those in need are discovering something about the Grace of God because of our gifts.

Oh yes, we have to keep this building up. And we need to pay the light bill and the water bill and pay the secretary and the pastor's salary. But that is not the real motivation for giving to the budget of this church. The real motivation is the heartfelt sense of knowing that after the necessities are met, we will have much to give to the greater good of God's Kingdom. Missionary work, sheltered home for batter women, food pantry for hungry families, new houses for homeless people, scholarships for students going beyond high school, feeding families in far off lands, building a church in Central America, translating the Bible into hundreds of languages, taking care of children at Lynchburg home, supporting a ministerial student at the seminary, planting and harvesting crops at a farm in Woodstock, developing a child care center here at Altavista Presbyterian, serving lunches to town folk every Wednesday, building a ramp for one of our own,

These are the things that capture our hearts. Where our funds are, there our hearts will be. And Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that they have a strong model to follow in the Churches of Macedonia.

Let our giving be from the heart. Let it surpass our capacity to give. Let it be a model for other congregations to follow. And finally we have these closing words from Paul.

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 2 Corinthians 9:6

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