

The Gift in Giving
Rev. John Allen

Ok so Paul is laying on a little thick here.

Writing to the church in Corinth, a relatively well-off community compared to some of the other Early Christian Groups, Paul gets to the point in his letter where he is making is appeal for funds.

Paul collected money from all the local Christian communities that he founded to help support the poor in Jerusalem, which was kind of the capital of the new movement at that time.

This offering that Paul is collecting is actually a lot like the funds that our church offers to the wider United Church of Christ in support of our church's wider mission in the world.

A recognition that on top of our local expenses, we also own a part of the responsibility for our denominations wider activities to help alleviate suffering and bring about justice in the world.

But Paul is really giving it to the Corinthians here.

“Let me tell you about the Macedonians.” Paul says.

“They don’t have nearly as much money as you all, and in fact we all know what a great ordeal they have been through recently. But their giving has overflowed. In fact, some of them were even begging us for the *privilege* of giving.”

And then after the guilt trip, a little flattery.

“I mean, you Corinthians are so good at everything else, faith, speaking, you are plenty smart, and deeply devoted. I want you to excel in generosity too.”

I am not sure how well a letter like that from our Stewardship Committee would go over here...

Reading Paul’s letter I was actually reminded of the story that Heather shared last week in her testimony.

Heather told us about a time she overheard a conversation in which her friend Denise was asking, pressing even, another young woman about her financial habits. Telling her she ought to give money away.

Heather told us that in the moment, she was taken aback, and angry even. But the message stuck with her, and planted a seed of the habit of giving that has now become part of her life.

So I think we need to go through a similar process with Paul. We need to dig beneath what feels like an aggressive, pushy and maybe even manipulative style to get at the heart of the message he is sharing. Because it is actually quite beautiful.

Paul is telling the Corinthians, and telling us, a moving story about people who have been through something awful, who had very little to begin with, and yet whose lives are filled with joy and whose generosity is overflowing.

We don't really know what ordeal Paul is talking about here, but it seems like he safely assumed that his audience did. Something so awful it was known about far and wide. Perhaps a plague, or a fire, or some form of persecution.

Whatever it was, Paul says, the Macedonians severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy, and their extreme poverty have overflowed as a wealth of generosity.

That's an interesting formula.

affliction + joy + poverty = generosity.

It's unexpected.

If you ask most people what the ingredients of generosity are, you would get some more sensible answers.

Perhaps wealth and duty, or abundance and gratitude.

But Paul has a different formula.

Affliction, and joy, and poverty.

On Wednesday evening this week, Maria Karagianis gave a presentation to our church about her experience visiting a refugee camp on the Island of Lesbos in Greece, where over a million Syrian refugees had arrived on flimsy boats from Turkey fleeing violence and war.

She showed us photos of these refugee camps that had been set up on the island, essentially large open air prisons, where people lived in tent cities, unable to leave.

I know that her presentation broke a lot of our hearts. Because she was able to witness clearly to this pain and brokenness that most of us could scarcely imagine.

But one phrase she kept using stuck with me. Every so often she would flip to a slide, showing children jumping rope and laughing, or a group of men sitting around playing a game of backgammon, and she would say “but, life goes on.”

What I heard her saying is that, even in the midst of unspeakable suffering, joy was resilient. And in little moments, glimpses of humanity shone through the plight, laughter, joy, and play were still possible, even in the midst of suffering.

I read recently about a large refugee camp in Jordan called Zaatari, a tent city home to about 120,000. There is a large central avenue that serves as the main roadway in and out of the camp, a road which aid-workers have taken to calling the Champs-Élysée

Overtime, the residents of the camp have begun setting up little makeshift shops in tents along the Champs-Élysée, siphoning power by attaching jumper-cables to the street lights.

There is a bakery. A barber. A pizza place that delivers. And a wedding dress shop.

Life goes on.

The author, a wealthy American who was visiting the camp, was most stunned by a simple fact. When he visited the bakery, they wouldn't take his money. Instead insisting on hosting him as their guest of honor. Rolling out the red carpet, such as they could, and filling him with pastries.

Affliction, Joy, Poverty. Leads to generosity.

One time, when I was working at a church in Washington DC, we used to go out pretty regularly to bring food, sanitary supplies, and clean socks to the homeless men who lived in Rock Creek Park. One day I went down there and walked up to two men, sitting on trash bags full of everything they owned, playing chess, pieces, but no board.

They knew right away what I was up to. Some other church came by earlier. One of them said, holding up a clean package of socks. But I know there are some folks who would love to see you over by Dupont.

Generosity.

I know of another church where there is only one member who tithes, that is gives he gives a full 10% of his income to the church. He drops it off at the church office every afternoon, when he finishes a day of panhandling and heads to the shelter.

Generosity.

I am not sure I can account for it. I can only witness to it.

Again and again, some of the most generous people I have ever met, are those whom life has dealt a bad hand, and those who have very little of their own to give.

I wonder if maybe Paul couldn't quite describe it either. So he just had to tell them the story...

"Let me tell you about the Macedonians..."

What I learn from these stories is that generosity is not about wealth. It is not about abundance. It is not a disposition reserved for the rich.

Rather, generosity is a way of seeing the world that asks, "what good thing could I have the privilege of doing today."

It is a way of living that sees giving as an opportunity, not an obligation.

And the best news is that anyone of us can be generous. No matter what we have or don't have, whether we are as wealthy as the Corinthians or as poor as the Macedonians, or somewhere in between, we can be generous by asking, "what do I have the opportunity to do."

Anyone of us can live generously, giving, as Paul says, out of what we have, what our means are.

And different amounts can be equally generous.

So next week in worship we will invite each of our members to come forward and place your pledge card for the coming year in a box at the front of the church. To make a commitment to one another of what you can contribute to the mission of this church.

I am asking you to be generous.

And remember, generosity is not an amount, it's an attitude.

It is looking at life as opportunities to do something for others.

It is seeing opportunities to give to something good as a great joy.

So when you hear the word generous this week, don't hear me asking for more zeros on your check.

And when you fill out your pledge card, do it with a generous heart.

That is a heart filled with such enthusiasm that you just might find yourself earnestly and deeply desiring to give all you can.

And maybe, feeling just what a privilege it is to join this community, in doing something quite extraordinary.