**“The Joyful Spirit of Generosity”**

II Corinthians 8:1-15

In the Book of Acts, there is a great meeting of the leaders in the early Christian Church, and this meeting is called the Council of Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas had been having tremendous missionary success in converting Gentiles (non-Jews) to the Christian faith. But this raised a question: Do Gentiles need to become Jews before becoming Christians? Specifically, do they need to be circumcised? And for Paul, this is a critical question, because it raises another question: Are we saved—are we brought back into relationship with God—by our adherence to religious laws, or are we saved only by our faith—our trust in Jesus as our savior? Ultimately, the great Council of Jerusalem agreed with Paul. We are saved by grace alone. And the Council sent a letter back with Paul explaining their decision.

But, as this same story is retold by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, the leaders in Jerusalem did make one request of Paul, and that was that Paul and his Gentile churches would remember the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. And in many of Paul’s letters to the various churches he started, Paul mentions a pastoral offering that he hopes to deliver to the church in Jerusalem—an offering to bring financial relief to many of Jerusalem’s financially impoverished members.

You see, Paul believed this offering from Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians would witness the oneness of the church—one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. And even though these two branches of the early Christian church (Gentile and Jew) were often at odds with each other theologically, Paul still maintained one church’s concern was the concern of the whole church; one church’s financial need was the responsibility of the whole church. For Paul, it was a “question of balance.” (v.13) The Corinthian Church’s present abundance could address the current financial need of the church in Jerusalem. Now somewhere down the road, the roles might be reversed, and when that day comes the church in Jerusalem out of their new abundance could address the financial need of the Corinthian church.

But for Paul, there is much more going on in these verses than just simply solving financial problems. I think Paul’s major concern is the soul of the church in Corinth. The Corinthian congregation had made a pledge to support this offering for the Jerusalem poor well over a year ago. But the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians had recently gone through some rough spots, and, during these strained relational times, the financial commitment of many of the members of the church in Corinth had kind of weakened. So, to inspire the Church of Corinth to see their commitment through, Paul presents two major examples of generosity in today’s reading.

First, Paul says, look at the example of the churches in Macedonia. The churches of Philippi and Thessalonica had already sent their offering to the poor in Jerusalem. And, unlike the church in Corinth, Paul reminds them the Macedonian churches were not wealthy congregations. But still they gave according to their means. And some of them even reached deep and gave a little beyond their means. And here’s the really important thing to hear. They gave joyfully. Paul calls their giving a “wealth of generosity.” (vs. 2)

But please note Paul never guilted the Macedonians into giving. They gave voluntarily. They wanted to give. They begged Paul to let them give. And note also they weren’t trying to buy their way into heaven; there were no strings attached to their gift. They were simply excited about supporting the needs of other Christians, being a part of something bigger than themselves. Paul says they even considered it a “privilege” to give. (vs. 4) They saw their financial gift to the larger church as a giving of themselves to the Lord. (vs. 5)

Now Paul goes out of his way to insist financial giving is not a commandment we are required to keep. (vs. 8) Once again, no one buys their way into heaven. But according to Paul (and folks this is really important), the level of your giving is a sort of benchmark of the “genuineness of your Christian love.” (vs.8) You see, when Paul lifts-up the example of the giving of the churches in Macedonia, he says their giving witnesses the very grace of God, alive and thriving in their churches. (vs. 1)

And Paul brings this first example of giving to a crescendo in verse 7. Paul complements the church in Corinth by recognizing their many wonderful qualities and virtues. Paul recognizes their strong faith and their ability and willingness to articulate their faith with others. Paul notes their knowledge of God and the stories of Jesus are strong. And it’s good that they’re excited about their faith. But there is one more quality, one more virtue that the Corinthians desperately need – generosity. “Could you not add generosity to your virtues?” That’s one possible translation of verse 7. “So, we want you to excel in this generous undertaking.” That’s another.

But either way we translate this verse, the point is this. The Greek word translated as “generosity” or “generous” is the same Greek word that can also be translated as “grace.” “It’s great,” says Paul, “that you have such a strong faith, and it’s just super that you know your Bible backwards and forwards, and it’s truly a wonderful thing that you are so excited about your life in Christ. But there’s still one thing you lack, and it’s a vitally important thing—generosity, grace.”

And to drive his point home, Paul offers a second example of generosity—the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, Jesus had all the riches of heaven—life lived in the full presence of God. Jesus lived in heaven as God’s only begotten Son, God’s right-hand man. But Jesus generously gave all that up. And he took on our human poverty. He entered into our broken world, and he took on our human limitations. The Bible clearly says there were times when Jesus was hungry and thirsty. There were times when he was anxious. And on the cross, there was even a time when Jesus experienced for the very first time the absence of God in his life.

And Jesus did this willingly. He did it voluntarily. He did it as an act of grace, an act of generosity. And do you understand why Jesus did this? So that out of his poverty, we could be rich! Now what Paul means by rich is: so that we could experience the joy of life lived in relationship with our creator; so that we could experience the peace and shalom of the forgiveness of our failures; and so that we could live our lives on earth in the promise of the resurrected life to come. The riches offered to us is a life lived eternally with our God, a time when we will never again feel the absence of God in our lives! Jesus generously took on our human poverty, so we might have the abundant riches of life with our creator.

I know a man who made a whole lot of money in his life, a man who had a reputation for his generosity. And he told me one time, “I just can’t wait to go out and make more money, because I have so much fun giving it away.”

My friends, that is the joyful spirit of generosity God offers you. God doesn’t command you to give, and your giving won’t buy your way into heaven. God wants you to choose to give of your own free will. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, God want you to choose to give, so that others will receive, just as others have given so that you would receive.

But know this: your giving is a benchmark of the genuineness of your Christian love, and the generosity of our congregation’s giving gives us a glimpse into the soul of our church. Do we give or withhold our money because strings are attached? Or do we give freely and joyfully in support of our church, in support of God’s church?

In this Season of Stewardship, I hope and I pray that we will all continue growing in the joyful spirit of generosity.

Let us pray:

“Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise.

Thou mine inheritance, now and always.

Thou and thou only, first in my heart.

Great God of heaven, my treasure thou art.”

Amen.

David A. Cagle

Stewardship Season

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