



BEYOND GIVING

GENEROSITY SUNDAY | 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-8

BEYOND GIVING

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-8

Today is Generosity Sunday, and the first Sunday of our stewardship week. There are many ways to be generous, and many resources of which we may be good stewards. Being a good steward means to make good, God-honouring use of what God's entrusted to us, so we can take care of what God loves.

In the Bible, stewardship is one of the first things God asks his people to do – that's what ruling over creation meant, in the Genesis story. Over the course of Scripture, that role of steward expands to include the fruits of creation and of our work, as well as our time, and our personal and shared material and financial resources, too. Many churches hold stewardship campaigns or dedicate a few Sundays each year to talking about stewarding our money. But the point is not really fundraising. When we participate in a fundraiser, it's usually about being moved to give once, however generously, to a cause that speaks to us in some way. The point of talking about stewardship is to remind us that giving is necessary to our faith, and that financial generosity is deeply embedded in our relationship with God, and in the practice of our faith.

When God calls upon us to be good and generous stewards, he's not asking us to donate to a good cause; he is asking us to become something new, to experience a change in our thinking and acting because of our stewardship, and to recognize that giving is a fundamental part of who God is and who God created us to be. Perhaps we might not all know this, but from a purely Biblical learning standpoint, there's a stewardship campaign woven through many of Paul's New Testament letters; it's subtle in some letters, but the references are there.

The Giving Guide we included in your bulletin today, if you take a look at the side with all the brightly coloured text boxes – nearly all of them make reference to Paul's letters to the Corinthians. And it's in the second letter to the churches in Corinth that Paul expresses a theology of financial giving.

Theology, of course, simply means "faith seeking understanding;" so that's what we're going to engage in today, with Paul as our guide: faithfully seeking to understand why financial giving matters to Christians.

Paul's stewardship campaign is referred to in four of Paul's letters. Depending on how many of the New Testament letters you believe Paul wrote - the number ranges from seven to ten, depending on who you ask - four out of the seven definitely written by Paul letters make mention of this financial campaign. Among his churches scattered across Asia Minor, Paul was engaged in stirring up financial support for the work of the church, with full backing from Jesus' disciples who led the Jerusalem church.

But the movement to give started at the grassroots. A church with a generous, compassionate heart heard about a famine, a thousand kilometers away on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. They were worried about their Christian brothers and sisters in the midst of such a difficult situation, so they took up a collection and sent Paul and his travelling companion Barnabas on a journey to deliver it.

That's how Paul's stewardship campaign began, transforming a singular, fundraised gift into a faith-practice of giving.

That first church, moved to give, is described in the book of Acts, if you're interested in looking it up. The on-going campaign that Paul and his team undertook appears briefly in letters to Rome and Galatia, and the first letter we have that Paul wrote to Corinth. But he wrote more about it in what we have as his second letter to Corinth, which we read a little of together today. And he had to write more, because some resistance to the idea had appeared among the Corinthians.

In that initial letter to the churches in Corinth, Paul encourages them to take up a collection, before he arrives. He advises them to encourage their members to set aside a little from what they earn over a longer period of time; to make this setting aside of a proportion of their wages or earnings for the work of the church a habit or on-going spiritual discipline. He's very clear that participation is voluntary and proportional - there's no dollar amount, or Roman coin amount, I guess, that people must contribute; just a voluntarily self-determined amount of some magnitude. Paul wraps up this initial request by saying that he and his ministry team will provide a safe escort for whatever they collect to the people that are in need of it, usually the urban poor.

Conflict arises; the Christians at Corinth are not too sure about this. They're concerned that if they give financially now to the work of the church, that they'll regret it later, when they don't have enough money for themselves.

Paul takes the time to share stories of the generosity of other churches – not to make them feel badly, but to encourage them. In particular, he writes of a church that struggled with extreme financial poverty, but who were so full of “a wealth of generosity” in Paul’s words, that they gave themselves first to the Lord and continued to give, according to their means. He recognizes the same faith and commitment to God among the Corinthians, but Paul knew that they were struggling to connect their faith with their pocketbooks. And that is where today’s reading comes in.

Paul promises them that God will prosper those who are generous, and give them the means to continue helping others; that how and why they might give is important to think about, but that ultimately, giving is part of being Christian, part of following Jesus.

Giving is more than a financial transaction; it’s more than our civic duty as good and moral citizens; it’s more than being moved by tragedy to act with kindness and compassion. For God’s people, the practice of giving has deep roots, nearly at the very beginning of Scripture. And even then, what and how much to give caused conflict.

Cain and Abel - the sons of Adam and Eve – were called to give to God. Abel gave the first and best of what he had; Cain gave some of his abundant harvest. And God rejected what Cain gave. The difference, of course, is that Abel’s giving was an act of faith; when you give the first-fruits of your labour, well, there’s no absolute guarantee that you’re going to have more, down the road. To give the way Abel did proclaimed his trust and faith in God’s care and abundance. Over time, that pattern of giving to God – evolving into giving as part of worship, to support the ministry and upkeep of the Temple – became embedded in Jewish religion, developing into a system of tithing.

Tithing is giving to God a tenth of one’s harvest or money or whatever gain one’s labour or business provided, in a first-fruits kind of way. More broadly though, tithing means what giving meant to Abel: that we’ve placed our trust in God first and are committing to God’s vision of abundance.

For the Old Testament people of God, giving by way of the Temple, as part of their worship of God, and from where, ideally, those in need would be supported in turn, all of this speaks of the necessity of giving as an expression of relationship with God. Paul and the early Christian Church through the centuries that followed picked up that necessity and made it uniquely their own, part of what it means to be part of the Christian community.

But...why?

Why is Christian giving more than fundraising for a good cause, more than a financial decision, more than a dutiful, moral thing to do? Why is giving essential to a person of Christian faith, a necessary part of our relationship with God?

Paul presents his theology of giving in the verses we read today, but he does it in a potentially misleading way. "...the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." That sounds kind of like an appeal to self-interest, like an investment pitch, rather than a relationship-building activity. Does Paul intend to encourage us to give more to get more, to expect a mysterious topping-up of our bank balance or a windfall of some sort, to compensate for our donated income? Unusually for Paul, who lived and worked in urban cities and towns, he chose to use an agricultural image to make his point. And it is simply a statement of fact: if a farmer sows only a few seeds, the harvest will be light, whereas sowing the right amount of seed will yield an abundant harvest.

The question is, what exactly are we sowing when we give? It isn't coins and dollars; it's love and generosity. But there's an interesting paradox here, or perhaps simply a reminder: we sow seeds and get a new plant from it, not a bigger seed. A loving person may well reap a harvest of love, but no genuine act of love can ever be done for the sake of a return in kind; we don't - or we shouldn't - give love to get love. Love's true harvest is not the love of others, it's our increased capacity to love.

In the same way, the bountiful harvest of a habit of generous giving is a heart that generously gives and rejoices in that giving. So we do, in our lives, reap the harvest of what we sow. And God does love a cheerful giver, not in a "we give love to get God's love" sense, but because in giving, we are more like God, more like the God in whose image we are created. And that makes God really happy.

Giving is an act of faith in God's abundance, and we know, of course, that faith is necessary to our relationship with God. God responds to our act of faith by giving us a deeper capacity to give. But let's take this theology of giving that Paul developed and go a little further; let's bring it into the present and consider how it might impact us, in 21st century Sarnia, directly. Paul's concern at this point in his letter was to reflect on how financial generosity impacts us, as individual Christians. So let's start there.

Giving away a tithe of our income - of whatever amount or proportion - to the mission and ministry of Christ's church is a powerful antidote to consumerism, to that urge to buy and own, newer and more and better than our neighbours. God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the Gospels - both are very clear that wanting things too much is dangerous for us, for our souls and our faithfulness to him. Every time we give, we must deal with the desire for what we might have bought or had for ourselves. To give is not to buy; to give is to trust. And that weekly or monthly crisis of deciding to give instead of spend is important to maintain. Like choosing to put on the clothes of our new Christian life, which we reflected on last Sunday: we can choose to put on generosity every week, and this - this practice of giving - helps us make that choice. As Jesus says, "You know where your heart is by where your treasure is." Giving is one of God's great antidotes to uncontrolled, unthinking spending, to an unhappy, joyless relationship with money and possessions, and a fragile relationship with him.

A habit of financial generosity is also God's way of providing us with sufficient resources for our own needs. The New York Times has long had a column called "Metropolitan Diary" that features letters sent in by readers who relate real-life experiences in the city. Many of these anecdotes are examples of kindness and warmth in the midst of a city reputed to be cold and uncaring. Some are funny stories about how quirky and unique human beings can be.

But many other stories centre on the outrageous wealth that many people in New York City possess, as well as the sometimes-startling things people do with that wealth. Here is an example. A couple from the Midwest was visiting New York during a cold snap. As they walked up Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, a bitterly cold wind came up, causing the woman's ears to get painfully cold. They decided to duck into a boutique to purchase a hat for her. The woman rather quickly found a lovely cashmere knit hat and was about to buy it when her husband noticed the price tag dangling from the cap: \$350. They put it back and quickly fled the store. As they came back out onto the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue, however, they saw a woman passing by carrying her small, hand-bag sized dog - and the dog was wearing that very cashmere knit hat!

That might seem silly and wasteful to the woman with the cold ears, and I expect, to many of us, too. But it didn't to the woman with the little dog. And that woman may well have been a person of extraordinary generosity with just that much income to spare at the end of the month. But giving is a way of having what we need, not because we'll suddenly be able to afford expensive cashmere hats for our pets, but because our sense of need will change.

And that's why Paul describes the outcome of giving as reaping a bountiful harvest and having every blessing in abundance, all while not referring to wealth and financial prosperity. Instead, we'll know that we have enough, and we'll define enough as everything we need, including something to give.

There is a second consideration, though, beyond the personal, beyond how giving can change our hearts and our sense of need. Paul wrote that our generosity also provides us with enough from God that we can then share in every good work. The goal is good works. God gives through his people, does some of his good work through us; we are blessed abundantly so we can abundantly bless others. Like a continuous feedback loop: God gives to us and we give to God and through that unending cycle, good works are able to be done in God's name. If we "lay up treasures on earth," people will have no reason to think that following Christ makes any difference, no reason to recognize God's good works when they happen. We'll look like we love what everyone else loves. We are given abundantly enough so we can show where our treasure is by giving it away. We are good stewards of what God's entrusted to us, so we can take care of what God loves.

So I invite you this week to think about giving: not how much or how little you're able to give, not how challenging or uncomfortable or difficult it is to think and talk about this, or to decide what and how to give. Think about why you give, or why you chose not to. Paul's theology of giving, his faithful seeking to understand why giving matters, encourages us to think of giving as vastly more than a financial transaction or a donation to a loved or worthy cause. We give because we do reap what we sow in the harvest of a heart that grows great, and more like Jesus', in its capacity for generosity. We give because it changes our whole perspective on needs and wants, on enough and abundance, into Christ's perspective on those things. And we give because we want to, because we want God to do his work through us, for God's work to be done, and because we love and trust God, first and most of all. Thanks be to God. Amen.