

## LOOK AT THEM

SHERARD EDINGTON

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

On March 15, 2020, we were forced to close our church because the COVID-19 virus was raging across the U.S. At the time, the virus was new and we had little understanding of its workings. That week, the church staff cobbled together the necessary AV equipment and we were able to resume worship the following Sunday for our new online congregation. For the next year, very few of you attended worship in person. Most of you watched from home.

As a church, for that year, we hung in there. We had online worship and online bible studies. The Session and its committees met over Zoom. Michael even managed online youth group. We made the best of it. I was surprised at how resilient we could be.

During the lockdown, there was one question that was posed to me more than any other. And that had to do with the church's finances. How were we holding up financially during COVID? This was a question the Session addressed as well. Surprisingly (or not so surprisingly, really), we were doing okay. Yes, contributions dipped. But not catastrophically. We trimmed expenses as necessary. Our financial reserves were more than sufficient to get us through this 'rainy day.' We were nowhere close to declaring bankruptcy or anything extreme like that. We were blessed. It could have been much worse.

However, I will say, if perhaps you have fallen out of the habit of making your regular contribution to the church, well now would be a good time to resume. Today we are at the end of June and the last Sunday of the first half of the church's fiscal year. Your timely contributions will help the Finance Committee plan for the rest of 2021.

But why do we need to give to the church? Well, for one thing, we do it as an expression of our faith. The entirety of scripture compels us to be generous. Christ calls on us to help the needy—the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the sick, the forgotten. We give as a reflection of God's love for us.

We also give to maintain this institution that we call church. This church in Lebanon is not free. We must pay utilities, insurance, and salaries. The building needs to be maintained. I wish it were free, but it's not. If we wish to enjoy the benefits of this institution, then we must support it.

This church is more than just a pretty place to hold worship. This church also provides us with the structure we need to carry out Christ's commands. Could we serve Christ alone, individually? Yes. And some people manage to do that. But as

we have learned, we can do so much more when we band together as disciples with a common purpose.

As a church, we—FPC—have amassed an impressive inventory of expertise in helping the homeless and the hungry. We don't have to reinvent the wheel every time a need arises. We know what to do and we can jump into action. We should be proud of ourselves. We can do this because we are church and we work together in the name of Christ. It is who we are.

The Apostle Paul has some excellent words on giving in the name of Christ. When we think of Paul, the image that first comes to mind is that of a missionary. He traveled the Mediterranean world teaching the gospel of Jesus. He founded worshiping communities and forged them into churches. We know all this from the surviving letters that were collected into our Christian scripture. We have the letters he wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica, Galatia, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome. These are beautiful and passionate epistles that form the basis of who we are today.

In these letters, Paul offers encouragement for the new and often struggling churches. He settled disputes. He offered guidance. But there is another activity of Paul's that we don't talk about as much (although we should). It is a theme that connects all of his letters. It is giving.

As Paul traveled from place to place sharing the gospel, he also took up a collection of money. This money was not for him. Paul was proud of the fact that he was beholden to no one because he could support his work as a missionary through his skills as a tentmaker. (This is why today we refer to preachers who hold a second job as tentmakers. They are like Paul.) The money that Paul collected was sent back to Jerusalem to be used as directed by the apostles and church leaders.

For example, in the letter known as First Corinthians, Paul encourages the people to start setting aside their offerings now and not wait for his arrival in the future. He writes: *Now concerning the collection for the saints... On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem* (1 Cor 16:1-3).

In the letter to the Romans, he reports that he is headed back to Jerusalem with funds collected from churches in Greece. He writes: *I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.*

Throughout his letters, Paul asks the people to dig deep. He's not requesting a one-time love offering. He doesn't want the loose change that's accumulated in the

cup holder of their minivans. He wants their contribution to be part of their everyday lives of faith. He wants them to give of themselves.

Our reading for today is from Second Corinthians. Here, Paul addresses the fact that the people in that church have not made a contribution in over a year. Paul knows they are committed to the collection, and he is urging them to give. First, he reminds them that they excel at so much—*in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in upmost eagerness*. And he desires that they excel in their generosity.

He makes it clear that he is not *commanding* them to give but encouraging them to give out of love. Paul points out that there are others who merely talk about their faith with an empty *earnestness*, but Paul wants the people in Corinth to do more than just talk. He wants them to give.

But how are they to give? How are they to decide how much to give? In answer to these questions, Paul does not use fear or guilt as motivators. He does not imply that God will judge them over their giving. Instead, he takes a different approach. He asks that their giving be an expression of justice, of balance. He writes: *I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.*

As I look at it, what Paul is saying to the Christians in Corinth (and to all of us), is that first you should examine yourself. Take stock of all that you have. Itemize your abundance. Once you have done that, then look at those less fortunate and inventory what they have (or don't have). Then look at yourself again and then look at them. Can you see the discrepancies? Is that just? What can you do to balance the scales between you and them?

But you have to do this with integrity. You can't just glance over and pretend to look. You can't look beyond and pretend you can't see any need. You have to look critically and honestly. What do you have? What do they have? Is there justice here? Is there balance?

Finally, I want to talk about the money you give to the church. As I mentioned, the bulk of your offerings remain with us for our immediate expenses. However, some does go up the ladder of our denomination and is used to fund missions at the presbytery, synod, and national levels. I would like to take a moment and share with you two examples of where your money goes and how it is used to balance the scales of need.

At the presbytery level, your money is used to fund our on-going twenty-year mission in Guatemala. Over the years, several of us in the congregation have traveled to Guatemala as part of presbytery-wide mission teams. In Guatemala, we partner with the people in what is the poorest part of that country—the region

known as the Petan. We don't simply send money to these people, but we work with them to help them find ways to improve their lives. These folk are the poorest of the poor. They receive little to no education and their opportunities are severely limited. Most are day laborers on coffee plantations. The work we are doing in Guatemala will require generations to take effect. But I dream that one day, years from now, a young Guatemalan will come to Tennessee to study at one of our universities, and she or he will go to our churches and say, "I am here because of you." Out of our abundance, we are helping those who have so little.

At the national level, an example of our money at work was brought home this week. I was attending a meeting at First Presbyterian in Cookeville—up on the plateau. You will recall the tornadoes that ravaged Middle Tennessee last March. They touched down in Nashville and then followed I-40 east through Wilson County and on over into Putnam County where 19 people were killed. One tornado wiped out an entire neighborhood in the Baxter community.

At this meeting last week, the conversation came around to talking about the help of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) immediately after the tornado hit. The PDA sent funds to Putnam County to be distributed by the churches to assist those affected by the storm. These pastors marveled at how helpful the money was. It filled in the gaps as people waited for their insurance claims to be settled.

This PDA money was our money—our church contributions that joined with the giving of other Presbyterians around the U.S.—that made a huge difference in Putnam County.

That is why we give—as an expression of our faith—to bring balance to our world. May we always give with joy, with eagerness, with love, and in the name of our Savior who gave his life for us as the ultimate expression of balancing the scales.