

COLLECTING FOR THE SAINTS: GIVING BECOMES CONTAGIOUS

SHERARD EDINGTON

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

This sermon is the second in a series on giving and stewardship. And today I want to raise the question “why,” why do we give to the church? Why are you asked to make an annual pledge? Why do we pass the offering plates? Primarily, we give as an expression of our faith. The entirety of scripture compels us to be generous. Our bible opens with the account of creation, which is nothing less than God’s gift of life. God is love and love is generous. In the New Testament, 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 expansive 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 hope to enjoy the benefits of this institution, then we must support it. We all have ownership in this church building.

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.

Our building itself is generous even when we are not present. Two separate groups from Alcoholics Anonymous meet on our campus each week. This week, one of these groups asked if they could use our Fellowship Hall on Thanksgiving. They have a number of members who, for whatever reasons, do not have a place to go on Thanksgiving. The group is extremely excited and grateful to have a safe, hospitable location for their feast.

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 worshipping 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 is not talked about as much. 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 we call First Corinthians, Paul encourages the people to start setting aside their offerings now and not wait for his arrival in the future. We looked at this last week. 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 heading 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.

Today, we are looking at a passage from the letter we call Second Corinthians. Here, Paul addresses the fact that the people in that church have not made a contribution to his collection 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 utmost 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 consider 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.

At the presbytery level, for example, your money is used to partially fund our on-going twenty-year mission in Guatemala. Over the years, several of us in the congregation have traveled to that country 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.

As followers of Christ, our giving should be infectious, our generosity should be infectious. We should strive to develop lives that lift up generosity as the highest goal. We should practice giving until it becomes a habit. This time of year, that we make our pledges should not be dreaded, it should be celebrated, for here is the time we have to emulate God's gifts to us.

I would like to finish with a story. As I have mentioned a few times before, my wife and I have a young woman living in our home with us. She is a refugee from Afghanistan. She escaped the Taliban in August a year ago. She's been living with us since March. She now works full time and is a full-time student at Cumberland studying to be a nurse. For the safety of her family in Afghanistan, I will call her Susan.

A couple of weeks ago, as we were eating dinner, Susan announced that she had a story to tell. And she told it. Susan has an older sister who lives in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. The sister is married and has a child. And one day, last month, she was going shopping. Because the Taliban forbids women from leaving the house alone, her husband and child were also with her. Together they walked to the market to shop. And at the market, the sister noticed a young woman alone crying. The sister asked the young woman why she was crying, and the woman told a heartbreaking story.

This young woman was from a village out in a province, several hundred miles from Kabul. Kabul is a relatively progressive city by Afghan standards, but life is different out in the villages.

The parents of this young woman had arranged for her to marry a man—a common practice in that culture. This young woman did not want to marry this particular man because she had a boyfriend with whom she was in love, and she wanted to marry him. So, she and the boyfriend ran away. They ran to Kabul, but for some reason the boyfriend abandoned her in the big city. This left her in an untenable position. She could not return to her home because she had shamed her family and they would kill her. I mean this literally. They would take her life because of the shame she had brought on her family. On the other hand, she could not remain in Kabul as an unaccompanied female because the Taliban would arrest her and likely force her to marry one of their soldiers.

Hearing all this, Susan's sister invited the young woman to come home with them. Her motivation for this action, as she reported to Susan, was that the Americans had shown kindness to her own sister, taking her in when she had nowhere to live.

Yes, because we had taken Susan into our home her sister was doing the same thing for another young woman. Several days later, one of Susan's brothers drove out to the village and convinced the parents to come and get their daughter and not to kill her.

I am not bragging when I tell you this story because, frankly, I am still astounded by it. I am dumbfounded that our act of generosity reverberated around the world literally saving the life of a young woman, a young woman that we will never meet. Our giving became contagious.

When they say that God works in mysterious ways, I think this is what they are talking about. And it makes me wonder how many acts of giving changes lives in ways that we will never be aware of?

That is why we give—as an expression of our faith, as instrument of compassion and generosity—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.