

“The Privilege of Sharing”

Stewardship '17, part 1

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Welcome this morning. I am so glad that you are here. Turn to the person next to you and tell them, they are not here by accident. We need each other to worship God together and to walk with Christ. Let them know how much you appreciate them.

Would you please pray with me? Lord, we are here to listen to you, to listen to your voice, to listen to your word. Please help us to do that. Speak to us now, God, and bring your wisdom to your church. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Many of you know some college students. We have several college-age members in our church who attend schools, a lot of them out of state. Karen Steiner often sends them cards to remind them of our prayers and their church home.

There is a secret I will share with you, if you are trying to get a college student, or a niece, nephew or grandchild, to write you back. Try this: Write them a nice card. Mention how proud you are of them. Then write this at the bottom: “I have enclosed \$20 so you can go out and buy yourself a good meal.” Seal up the envelope and intentionally don't put any money in it. Nine times out of ten, they will write you back a thank you note and ask, “Did you forget to include the \$20?”

For the next three weeks, we are going to look at an ancient church letter in which the Apostle Paul did a similar thing to the Corinthian church. It is as if Paul said, “Hey, Corinth, did you forget to enclose the \$20?” As we talk about gifts, promises, generosity, and giving, we will learn about our own attitudes towards

giving, as we see how this conversation between Paul and the Corinthians played out.

Paul wrote this letter to help the church in Corinth as they were facing several problems, including divisions in the church, resisting outside forces that worked against them, and submitting to the authority of leaders God placed among them, including Paul himself. In chapter 8, where we are focusing, we read about a promise that the Corinthians had made to help other churches by sending them a gift.

Paul starts this section by saying that the grace of God is active in the Macedonian churches, just north of Corinth. Here’s a map to give you an idea where these churches are in relation to each other. [PICTURE.] Paul is lifting up the churches in Berea, Thessalonica, and Philippi as examples of churches who, in spite of their “extreme poverty” were “overflowing...in rich generosity.” (2 Cor. 8:2) Paul is telling the Corinthians, “Look what these folks up here are doing. Isn’t it amazing?”

It sure is. And if we stopped at verse 5, we would think, “Great, Paul. I’m so glad they are doing well up there.” It would be like learning at our Annual Church Conference Hub that Alden or Mancelona United Methodist Church is really doing great mission work. (By the way, we will get to do just that at on October 28th at Traverse City Mosaic Church). Good news for them. So, why is Paul writing this to the church in Corinth?

If we look at verse 6 and beyond, we sense there is a problem in Corinth. Look at verse 10 and 11, specifically. Paul says, “Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work...” What’s going on here? Apparently, the year before this letter was written, the

Corinthians made a promise to help the Christian church in Jerusalem. If you go back to First Corinthians 16, at the very end of the letter, Paul explains that all the churches took up collections and sent gifts to Jerusalem presumably for some need that the saints had. Now Paul is reminding the Corinthians, “You made this promise. You said there was \$20 in the gift card.” In fact, Paul reminds them that they were the first to pledge support and start sending their gifts.

But some time later, they stopped sending gifts. Maybe they had an argument. Maybe they were not sure they could trust Paul. For multiple reasons, even though they had promised to support the other churches, they stopped.

How do you feel when someone breaks their promise to you? When someone offers you help and support, and does not come through for you, it makes you frustrated, doesn't it? As you read Paul's letter, you can sense that he is frustrated. But the amazing thing is, he is hopeful and patient with the Corinthians.

Paul sends Titus, a trusted pastor, to Corinth to remind them and help them finish what they started. Paul says he is not commanding them to do anything. (verse 8) Paul apparently had the authority as a teacher and apostle to tell the Corinthians, “Look, this is what you have to do. You have no choice in this matter.” But he doesn't. Ironically, he tells them that he could be forceful, but instead he appeals to their sense of pride and honor. How sincere is their love? (verse 8) How eager are they to be true to their word? (verse 11) Paul sends the right amount of encouragement at the right time, and he praises God because he believes in the generosity of the people of Corinth.

As a church, we also have to make a decision whether or not we are going to keep our promises, especially when it comes to giving. If you don't know,

when you become a member of any United Methodist Church, you promise to support the ministries of the church by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness. These are the vows in the baptismal covenant. (Hymnal page 38.) When we make those vows, we are giving the other members the right to hold us accountable, as we do the same for them. At every baptism, the baptized person makes these promises, and the rest of the church renews their promises.

Unfortunately, we don't always keep our promises. It is part of our human nature, but it also is a conscious decision by some. Like the Corinthians, when something happens that we disagree with, especially in the church, we feel like pulling away our support. We stop showing up for worship. We withhold our giving. I get it. It is a natural response when you are upset. But consider for a moment whom you are really hurting when you decide to withhold your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness.

Paul says that the Macedonian churches pleaded for the opportunity for the “privilege of sharing.” Not the burden of sharing. Not the membership dues. They saw giving as a privilege, something they longed to do, even in their poverty, because they knew their giving helped others. If we decide to withhold our support, we hurt ourselves, because we lose the opportunity to share in that privilege.

Something else is critical in our choice on how we give. By what reputation do we want to be known? Are we going to respond to God in such a way that others notice our generosity? The decision to give not only impacts our faith and our congregation, it impacts what the world thinks of the church overall. If one church is seen as generous, all churches are. If one church is seen as money-

loving, all churches are. That might not be fair, but that is how the world thinks. So our choice to give affects the Wesleyans, the Presbyterians, the Catholics...really all the churches in our community and in our world. There is a lot riding on our generosity.

Remember what Paul said. He did not command people to give. Neither do I, as your pastor. Instead, I look to Paul's example to encourage you. I want you to give because I know what God can do to you and through you when you open up your heart and turn over your finances to God.

Paul made a clear point that the size of the gift was not the main issue. He says in verse 12, “If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has.” God is asking us to give according to our means. If we have only a little to give, but give it with a grateful heart, trusting in God, he blesses it. Think of the story in Mark 12:41-44, the widow's offering. Jesus watched all these rich people put loads of money in the temple offering. Then they mocked a poor widow for putting in two pennies. What did Jesus say? “They gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything that she had to live on.” (Mark 12:44)

We give in order to honor and worship God. We believe that God uses our church to do great things in this world: to work for justice, to rescue souls. Those are incredible things, and it is amazing that God uses us to do them. So, as we sang earlier, are you giving it all to him?

Paul says that the generous givers first gave themselves to the Lord, then to the apostles. (verse 5) I like how my NIV study bible sums that verse up. Giving ourselves first to Jesus is “the true basis of all Christian giving. God's grace makes a difference in the lives and attitudes of his people.” (1811)

Paul also reminds us that giving is about equality. (2 Cor. 8:13-15) One church gave out of their abundance, so that a church in need could receive. In God's kingdom, what goes around comes around. This principle should hold true in our church. There are times when we are going to be blessed and give out of that abundance. I cannot tell you how many times in three years, someone has come up to me anonymously and said, "Pastor, I want to make a one-time gift, because God has blessed me. Don't say anything to the church about it. Just take it and use it for God's work, wherever it is most needed." Those people have been blessings for all of us who worship Jesus in this church.

And I know that there will be times when the givers become receivers, and the receivers become givers. In a hard time, you might receive help gladly. And what happens when God rescues you? When you get your feet on the ground, when you are secure again, you desire to give back. This is the idea of "paying it forward." This is what the early church did. Read Acts 2:42: "They sold their possessions and gave to anyone who had need."

We can enjoy the privilege of sharing. We can become known for our generosity, with God's help. We can remember our promise to support the church, with our time, our prayers, and especially our gifts. What is the church really doing with those gifts? We are making and nurturing disciples of Jesus Christ. That is a mission you can invest in. That is a privilege, not a burden. It is an opportunity God gives all of us, like Paul gave to the Corinthians, to prove that our love for the world is genuine, by our giving.

Please join me in the prayer of confession.

"Generous God, you have given us so much. Give us one more thing. Give us thankful hearts because we know our hearts can be hard and cold. We often

hold on when we should let go. We are hoarding when we could be generous and doubting when we should lean on faith. We are fearful instead of trusting in your everlasting care. Give us again the assurance of your love and care, and fill us with grateful hearts and open hands.”

(Petitions, Lord’s prayer, etc.) Amen.

Memory verse

2 Corinthians 8:4: “They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”

Reflection questions

1. When have you received a gift from others? When have you given a gift to others?
2. When has someone promised you help and failed to give it?
3. Why do you give what you give?
4. Do you see giving as a privilege, or a burden?
5. How can you give “all that you have”? (Mark 12:44) What would that look like?