

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 11, 2021

I am really excited for us to explore this fruit of generosity. I got to tell you though with the way things have started today I'm remembering a phrase that my dad used to tell me when I was being a particular pill on Sunday mornings. He said "the devil works hard on Sunday mornings" and I don't know if you all have ever heard that but it is as a way of keeping us from coming together or even reflecting on really important topics.

This morning we have the fruit of generosity that we are going to learn about through scripture and nothing's going to stop us from learning about that fruit and bearing it in the world before we dive into the text. Though there is some context, there are some terms that I think it's important for us to understand before we read about them. So for context, Paul goes about his traveling ministry he is collecting an offering you all might not know about but spoken about in 1 Corinthians. Paul is collecting an offering that is going to be sent to followers of the way (that was a way that Christians were referred to early on "followers of the way") in Jerusalem. So back in 1 Corinthians we are introduced to this idea of this special offering.

Paul calls this offering a ministry to the saints. So the Corinthians have known about this special offering for quite a while now. We're not quite sure what's going on in this particular chapter but it seems that they've either been skeptical about making this offering for a while or they have promised to make a gift but they're not following through on it. So, Paul is letting them know that he's sending Titus ahead of him so that they might be ready when the time is right to make their offering. Paul says I am talking to you now a few months ahead of time so that when I get there you are ready. Paul hangs his hat on his ministry to the church in court on his ministry to the church in Corinth so he does not want them to be embarrassing to him or be embarrassed themselves. He does not want them to show up as lesser than in the eyes of the Macedonians when they come for that offering. But more so than that Paul knows a couple important things.

First, Paul knows that the Corinthians are people of means. He knows that their capacity for generosity could change the ministry to the saints, it could change the way that the people who walk in the way move through the world. This group of followers they have the capacity to transform the ministry in another place.

The second thing Paul knows is that they've committed their lives to following in the ways of Jesus Christ. Well, at least most of their lives. There is a substantial part of themselves

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that they've compartmentalized, their finances which just so happens to be one of the most influential dimensions of their reality. Paul knows that not only is God the giver of all good things but that God also desires a holistic relationship with her people. So what the Corinthians get from Paul is both the good-natured ribbing and a healthy bit of sarcasm to encourage them along the way. Let's hear from the ninth chapter of Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth.

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Friends, this is the word of the lord thanks be to God.

So there's a lot going on in this part of second Corinthians, there's a lot happening in this text that we are going to try to unpack purposefully this day. You know Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that generosity is first and foremost a spiritual act. In order for it to be

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a spiritual act like so many other spiritual acts there is a great bit of intention behind this act which is why Paul is giving everyone a heads up.

“I’m going to be with you in a couple months I’m going to need this gift from you if I wait, if you wait, to collect it until I get there you’re going to feel like I’m pushing you to do it. I don’t want to push you to do it. I want you to be prayerful and reflective. Discerning God’s blessings to you and preparing the offering. Here’s the thing, your offering needs to be intentional so I’m giving you time.” Paul knows that the people in Corinth need a little bit of runway to get ready to give. Paul knows that in order for this act to be truly a spiritual fruit born within them they need to reflect on it, pray about it, and be prepared.

Paul also understands and tries to impart here to the followers of the way in court that generosity, their generosity particularly, is an act of faith. Paul wants them to know and understand that the God that they know in Jesus Christ is a God of provision, a God that provides. Financially for their offering yes, but also in countless other ways.

In order for the people in court to understand that generosity is indeed for them an act of faith they’re going to have to push back against some other voices. Paul’s voice is not the only voice in their lives. In fact, he’s been away for a while. He’s only writing them a letter. The voices that they hear in the streets day in and day out have a different message for them. It’s a message of scarcity and Paul knows that in order for them to give they have to be able to put away that message. Paul’s message has to be more compelling to them than the message that they are hearing.

Cole Arthur Riley puts it this way, our society really tries to convince us of a scarcity that does not exist there is enough people are just greedy scarcity is an illusion. This thought is encapsulated by a simple but beautiful prayer by Justin McRoberts, “May I never confuse my own limited capacity for love or generosity with the depth of the well from which I draw.” Paul wants them to know you can choose to give an offering or not but understand this is the love and the depth from which your offering is given is inexhaustible.

We draw as followers of Jesus Christ from a well that has no bottom and so then our gifts if we limit them are not actually communicating the limitations of God, only ours.

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Paul also wants them to know that when they are generous this is not for them a question of the amount of their offering, rather it is a question of their attitude in their giving. That's why we get to this controversial passage in verse six, the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. The one who sows bountifully, will also reap bountifully. Now it's easy for us to hear that as a sort of prosperity gospel but I don't think Paul's just talking about the monetary gift.

I was reflecting on this passage this week and I remembered a conversation that I had with a pastor friend of mine about 20 years ago. Now I told him about how I didn't feel like my faith journey was going anywhere. I felt like I had kind of plateaued in that journey and then I told him about some other things that were going on in my life and particularly a relationship that I had in my life and I felt like it had also plateaued.

He listened intently and then he asked me, how much time are you devoting to your spiritual life? How much energy are you putting into it are you sowing sparingly are you sowing bountifully? And why would you, if you are sowing sparingly, expect a bountiful harvest?

Any of us who move through the world in relationship we know that often the fruit of relationship is born from hard work, from intentionality, from preparation, and time. It's the same with our faith. It's the same with our generosity. It is not about necessarily the amount that we give it is about the intention that goes into that giving.

Paul ends this passage with a prayer, a prayer blessing, even a benediction for the people in Corinth. He wants them to know that as they understand and deepen their understanding of generosity they are actually glimpsing the very heart of God.

“Thanks be to God he says for God's indescribable gift.”

I wonder this week what it would look like if Paul wrote a letter to Idlewild Presbyterian Church. What would it look like if Paul was saying there's some incredible things that that are in store and I'm letting you know ahead of time that you need to be prepared. You need to be prepared and prayerful not only over the ways in which you will commit your treasure but also you need to be prepared in the ways in which you're going to commit your prayer and your spirit and your energy and your time to what lies ahead.

Now, what I know the context of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is rather unknown. The context if he was writing to Idlewild Presbyterian Church would be a little different last

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spring. We put out a call as the pandemic began for those who could be generous in their yearly giving to be generous immediately. That call was received, it was responded to in beautiful and transformative ways. It helped to ensure that our church was in a place to continue to do ministry in vital and vibrant ways throughout the pandemic.

So if Paul was writing to us he knew he is writing to an exceedingly generous congregation. Yet, he would also know that indeed we have ways in which we can bear the fruit of generosity in a vibrant and new ways.

Perhaps it is with our treasure, perhaps it is with our engagement in the life of this church in a more meaningful way, perhaps if he was writing to us as Idlewild Presbyterian Church he would say “I need you to spend a little more time with our youth. I need you to volunteer to make a commitment to be someone who will walk alongside a middle schooler or a high schooler.” He might be saying, “I need you to get up at six o'clock in the morning on a Wednesday. I need you to help set up tables and receive food, I need you to then put that food into the cars of people driving by. And not just that, I need you to pray for them. You can pray for them as they're leaving the parking lot, as they're going out into the world.” Paul might say that that those who sow bountifully will reap bountifully. Those who sow sparingly will reap sparingly. He wouldn't say that to guilt us but to speak plainly and truthfully to us, that the energy and the attitude and the intention with which we bear generosity in the world matters.

One last thing, this offering this ministry to the saints that Paul talks about to the church in Corinth. The church in Corinth isn't going to benefit from it. It's not for them, it's for another community another group of people that God loves and cares about.

Their fruit of generosity is not going to just feed them it's going to feed others who are hungry and thirsty for justice and righteousness and love. So when we claim, as the writer of Galatians does, that generosity is a fruit of the spirit of God we claim that it is not only at work within us to transform us and our relationship to our riches to our time to our energy. But we also claim that it is to be born into the world to transform the world.

Voices in the world might say that there's not enough. There's plenty. And if we can live in a place of abundance not just of treasure but of love and of kindness and of patience and of joy and we will be bearing the fruit of generosity in the world.

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