

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

## June 28, 2009 Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

### **Generosity as a Way of Life**

I love it when passages such as this come along NOT during the fall Stewardship season when we are intentionally looking at the church budget and inviting people to pledge for the next fiscal year.

It's good for our spiritual health to consider our generosity all year round, and not just when we are particularly in need.

It's also helpful, I think, to be reminded that these questions and issues are as old as can be – that the early church, even though it had people in it who had known Jesus personally and who were on fire with the spirit, still struggled with who they ought to be giving to, and how much and in what manner.

Our passage this morning is a snippet from 2 full chapters where Paul is writing to the church in Corinth about collections and offerings – it is the longest passage in the Bible about giving.

The particular project Paul is raising funds for is a collection for the church in Jerusalem. He has been traveling around Greece and Asia Minor visiting churches, many of which he founded, inviting them to give to this project. In this letter to the church in Corinth he describes to them the generosity of the Macedonians so as to both shame and inspire them. Apparently Paul's sometime traveling companion Titus has already been there and begun the collection among them, but perhaps with less than satisfactory results, given the need for this letter.

Paul had to teach the Christians in Corinth not only how to be a local church ("what's a church?" they had asked him, when he first showed up), but also how to be a church that cares about Christians and churches in far off lands ("where's Jerusalem?" these Gentile Christians asked him, like we ask today when something bad happens in a place we've never heard of).

Given how many things Paul had to teach the Christians in Corinth, it's amazing that he also taught them the basics of mission giving. One would have thought he and they had enough on their hands learning how to be a local church – operating out of houses and having lots of fights. But we cannot simply be local churches, even when we are struggling locally. We still need to care about other Christians and other churches.

We learn by reading other books in the Bible that because Paul took this offering to Jerusalem he was later taken into custody, and, ultimately, years later, put to death. Which makes me wonder why he was doing this. Was it just to teach the churches about the broader body of Christ? Or to teach them about generosity as a way of life perhaps? Was it worth it?

From what he says to them here, we can infer what was going on with the Christians in Corinth – having good intentions and eagerness a year ago, which they'd not followed through on; comparing their offering with other church's offerings and worrying about issues such as fairness and equity.

And we have these same issues today – as a church and as individuals. We worry about what we don't have rather than see the abundance that we do have. We want to determine someone or something's worthiness before we measure our gift.

How does our own financial uncertainty impact our ability to be generous?  
What inspires you to be generous?

Recently, a survey of 26 million people from 15 denominations was done in which they sought to discover the seven greatest motivations for giving money to a church:

7. Giving adds meaning to life.
6. I want to help my church.
5. I like to help other people.
4. God asks for an appropriate percentage of my income.
3. I feel privileged to serve.
2. Giving is part of my spiritual relationship to God.
1. I am grateful to God.

Items 1 – 4 motivate far more people to give than do items 5 - 7. (Douglas W. Johnson and George W. Cornell, *Punctured Preconceptions* [New York: Friendship Press])

I think that Paul knew that. Because he doesn't only shame the Christians in Corinth into giving. He also encourages them: “Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.” (2 Corinthians 8: 7) Paul knows what every wise parent or teacher knows, that encouragement often gets better results than shaming.

But neither shame nor encouragement provides Paul's best motivation for the Corinthians to be generous. He goes on to say that the Christian life by its very nature is a generous life and that generosity is rooted and grounded in gratitude for the gracious generosity of God in Jesus Christ. He says: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8 9)

Jesus was rich? Wasn't he a humble carpenter? Here Paul is speaking metaphorically; Jesus was not a rich man economically. When he says that Jesus was rich but became poor for us, he is referring to the fact that Jesus gave everything up on the cross.

Elsewhere in Scripture (Philippians 2: 5-11) Jesus is depicted as emptying himself and taking the form of a servant, humbling himself even to the point of death. That is “the generous act” Paul refers to. The word in Greek means “grace,” and earlier translations said, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In some theological corners, there is a move to de-emphasize Jesus death on the cross – to see him as a passive victim of political circumstance, rather than the son of God given to die for us. God's grace poured out in a way that we cannot even fathom! I doubt that such a cross-less Gospel would make people feel generous.

On the contrary, I'd suggest that a robust cross-centered Gospel may be the most efficient stewardship tool. Generosity doesn't grow on its own, because it is a fruit, and not a root. The root is gratitude.

Isaac Watts' hymn "When I survey the wondrous cross" captures this sense of gratitude and its fruits in the last verse:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were a present far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.

The most generous people I've known in the church – the one's who give not just 20, 30 or 50K a year; but the ones who give 10% of whatever they make – do so because they truly believe that everything they have is a gift.

You don't have to have great financial wealth to be generous. You are generous because you are generous with what you have.

The good news in this passage is that we are to give according to what we have. Today we call this proportional giving – or percentage giving. If we give proportionally – then when our income increases or decreases, our giving will adjust accordingly as well.

A friend of mine recalls that early in her working life, she and her husband met with a financial planner. It seemed absurd to them at the time as they were deeply in debt. They had nothing to save, let alone invest. But a wise friend had said this was just the time for such advice, so they met with the financial guy.

He reviewed their budget. They had been making progress with the credit card debt but there was still more to shovel out from under. They had also recently become tithers, giving ten percent of their income to their church. These two issues felt connected for them. They had made progress on the debt while growing in generosity. But still, my friend was embarrassed to tell that to a financial planner, imagining that he was going to tell them to give less away, and to pay off the debt as soon as possible.

So when they got to the subject of charitable giving, she told him they were tithers. "Tithers, huh?" he said. "Is that ten percent of after-tax income or pre-tax income?"

"After tax, of course," she said. After all, we were tithers, not fanatics. After a long awkward pause, she asked, "So what do you think of that?" "It's fine," he said, "if all you want is an after-tax blessing!"

Then he laughed heartily and joyfully. Turns out, he was a faithful member of a UCC church himself. His philosophy of financial planning had extreme generosity at its core.

What inspires you to generosity?

The human body has 2 kidneys, but can survive with just one. I heard a story about a woman in a congregation who was suffering kidney failure. As they prayed for her in worship that Sunday, something strange happened. During the passing of the peace, people approached her and said, "I'd be willing to see if my kidney could be a match for you."

Often, scarcity closes our eyes, ears, and hearts from living the radical generosity of Jesus. Paul says, “you are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us – in one stroke he became poor and we became rich.”

Generosity as a way of life – I took the title from the UCC’s theme for the upcoming fall meeting for the Mass. Conference. We, as a congregation, give to the “larger church” in two ways. We give proportionally based on our number of members and we give through our mission budget to the denominations mission efforts.

Then the Mass. Conf. also gives to its “mother church” at the national level. Both the state and the national levels of our church have ministries which in turn support local churches and programs. Our giving to and through the larger church is an important act of generosity.

Generosity as a way of life – it’s more than a good slogan – it is a solid biblical principal that we would do well to make a core value of our lives as individuals and as a congregation.

At the end of our worship service today, a bunch of kids and a couple adults will come forward to be commissioned as missionaries from our church who have chosen to spend a week of their summer serving others. This is not vacation – they won’t be sleeping in, they won’t be eating gourmet meals, they won’t be lying on the beach.

They will be building and repairing, scraping and painting. They will be reading their Bibles and praying and talking together about what it means to serve Christ. They will ponder the abundance in their lives and their priorities will shift from the material to the spiritual as they move through the week.

These young people know what generosity as a way of life means.

What inspires you to generosity?

Young missionaries from our own congregation?

Stories of people who offer their kidneys and tithing financial planners?

How about the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ?

The grace of God?

All of these inspire me. May they inspire us all to generosity as a way of life.

Amen.

[Much of the material for this sermon came from an internet discussion with UCC pastors, Rick Floyd and Jane Ellingwood.]

Amen.