

2 Corinthians 8 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Encouragement to Be Generous

¹ We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵ and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶ so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷ 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.

⁸ I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹ now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹² For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³ 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 ¹⁴ your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵ As it is written,

“The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.”

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁶ The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ 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. ⁹ As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ 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,¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Proclamation of the Word

Perhaps you remember the famous words of Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* or in our case, the Fort Hill Preschool. Some of us adults need these reminders:

1. *Share everything.*
 2. *Play fair.*
 3. *Don't hit people...*
- my favorite ...9. *Flush.*

Sounds so simple, right?

I am struck that number one on his list is "share everything." Sometimes children can be resistant to sharing; yet children can be just as extravagantly generous. Perhaps when a child knows how loved and cared for he or she is, the child can trust to open his hands and share.

Our faith practice to consider today is "Give Generously- in order to grow we need to share." And some of the most extravagantly generous folks in Scripture are the Macedonians, who give not out of their wealth, but their poverty. Paul praises them. The Bible consistently tells us that everything belongs to God, for God made the world and everything in it. Paul spurs on these Corinthians by telling them of the amazing example of the Macedonians. Generosity is contagious isn't it?

I like to read the good news section of the news, and I came across this story of a little girl this week. Five year old Sunshine Oelfke was found by her grandmother emptying her piggy bank one day. Grandmother asked her what she planned to do with the money. The answer brought tears to her grandmother's eyes.

"She said she was taking it to school for milk," Oelfke said. "I explained that I had already paid for her milk for the month, then she looked at me and said, 'My friend's mom doesn't have milk money, and I do.'"ⁱⁱ

Sunshine lives in Michigan and had been saving her coins and dollars for a snowmobile.

Sunshine's generous gift sparked a campaign to raise milk money for all students in Sunshine's class when needed. The original goal of \$800 has been exceeded. To date they have collected \$11,000.

Generosity is contagious! Sunshine believes in the power of milk. She drinks it to grow strong for snowmobiling. That's a girl who knows what she believes!

She was a lot like the Macedonians. They knew what they believed.

Paul tells us this, "And I want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty well up in rich generosity." God is the source of their generosity- how else could they give joyfully out of their poverty and affliction? Perhaps you have witnessed this, those who may be poor by our standards can be the most generous. I have been in homes in Jamaica, Mexico, and Guatemala some with dirt floors and no electricity. Yet, they have received me as guests and generously shared. They were Macedonians.

But here is another clue to understand those Macedonians. Paul writes, "They gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us..." Before giving anything to Paul or the poor widows and orphans of the Jerusalem church, they first gave themselves to the Lord and placed God first in their lives. Is that not amazing????

Paul, too, had experienced a conversion. He was knocked flat on his back, blinded, and encountered Jesus. It changed his life. From fire-breathing Pharisee who persecuted Christians, he dedicated his life to God's will, risking everything to spread Christ's love.

I think that is critical here. Generosity to God's purposes must be matched by a converted heart who believes that every good gift is from God. Generosity grows from the seed of gratitude. Otherwise, why would anyone give to the church? I've heard it all. I'm not giving my money because I don't agree with the Session. I don't trust "them." "They" won't spend it wisely. You've heard of the anonymous "they?"

But generosity flows out of a heart that is surrendered to Jesus. We sing "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold..." That's the first reason Paul praises giving of these poor Christians—before they gave their money to the church, they gave themselves to Jesus. Jesus for our sakes became poor, meaning leaving to glories of heaven to be born in a barn, to live, love and teach us. He surrendered in merciful love on the cross suffering the cruelty of the people, yet still forgave them. ...and was raised to new life, conquering death and the grave for our sakes. Jesus did not give a tenth. He gave it all!

I have heard ministry members moan at times in churches over the years, that we have a giving problem or a money problem, but I disagree. If we don't have enough to cover expenses and share generously for God's mission in the world, we do not have a money problem, we have a spiritual problem. Hearts have not been converted. So rather than pray for money, I pray for people whose hearts are hard and who have not yet fully heard the good news of God's abundant grace and love!

Stewardship season rolls around each October. Some have asked why they don't see a proposed 2018 budget. The answer is simple; we are not raising money for the budget. You are being invited to reflect on what God has done for us, counting gifts and blessings, and respond in love and devotion through a commitment, a pledge. We are not raising a church budget. We are participating in God's purposes. When we pray "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we match prayer with action. We are fulfilling our vows we made, allowing God to continually remake us into disciples who trust God. We are putting our money where our mouth is when we first answered these questions at Baptism,

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? Do you?

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? Will you?

And this question when we join a faith fellowship:

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Giving is about discipleship, and the Christian's need to give.

I wonder what might happen if we all gave generously? I looked up the SC Median Household income. It was about \$48,000 last year.ⁱⁱⁱ That is probably a conservative number for us. If we took a tenth of that and multiplied it by the number of households who belong to Fort Hill, how much would that be?

Then answer: almost \$1.9 million!!!! (Actually, \$1,862,400 = 388 households X \$4800)

Imagine that! We could meet our given expenses and give the other almost 2/3 of ministries beyond ourselves. (\$795,000 covers the operating budget, Benevolences= \$139,000)

So that should be our Stewardship goal- \$1.9 million. What do you think?

Paul praises the Macedonians. I know lots of Macedonians, too. I bet you do, too.

A couple of years ago, I received an email that brought me tears of joy. I know it made God happy. A young man who grew up at Fort Hill had taken his first job. He wrote that since it may take him a few months to find a church home in his new state, he wanted to send his tithe to Fort Hill in thanksgiving to God. You see, you raised this young man. You surrounded him with love and even disciplined him when he was crawling over the pews or running too fast down the halls. You taught him on Sunday mornings and helped him belong at Youth group. You led him in Boy Scouts. He attended Clemson and was active in the Presbyterian Student Association. You fed him on Sunday nights, provided Bible Studies and community, retreats to shape his soul and kindle his love of God's beautiful creation which

led him to his vocation using his Natural Resources degree. He has found a church home, Oconee Presbyterian. You may have guessed I am talking about Nathan Weaver.

Well-done, Fort Hill Macedonians.

When I asked Nathan if I could share this, he responded, "I did not contribute much, but I disagree. Paul writes, **"For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have." (2 Corinthians 8:12)**

I asked Lori Houck to tell me the amounts (not names) of the largest pledge and the smallest pledge. The smallest pledge she said was made by a youth recently confirmed as a member. The amount is \$24. The largest pledge was \$20,000. Both gifts, while different amounts equally bring joy to God, I think. "For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have." (2 Corinthians 8:12) I am certain they are both given out of thanksgiving and love for God. That is what makes God's heart sing!

Disciples try to follow Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit. They love God, love their church, and love their neighbors. Most importantly, giving is a tangible sign of what we profess to believe. Our giving and actions, more than what we say reveals what we believe. Macedonians give themselves first to the Lord and then to others....through the church of Jesus Christ. A fruit of that faith was their generous gifts. Well-done, Fort Hill Macedonians.

So Fort Hill what is your faith story when it comes to giving?

Chuck and I have intentionally grown into tithing a tenth of our income through the church. That is a practice one grows into. When we were first married I think we gave only about 2% of our income which felt like a huge sacrifice 22 years ago. Paul says give proportionately to what you have and considering the blessings God has given you. For some that is 2% or 10% or 20% depending on what you have been given. We have found that we always have enough of what we need, and feel joyful about thanking God through giving.

We learned faithful giving from our families, both regular giving and special giving. I remember my mother writing that check each month right after the School District paid her. She was a forty-something year old widow with two kids still at home. We lived on her book keeper's salary and my father's Social Security. We were often broke, but never poor. Yet, she made her gift to the God a first priority. We went without some things we wanted, but never without what we needed. My mother was a Macedonian who probably mostly gave cheerfully. It was a sacrifice. Her name was Joyce. She was joyful in her giving, her serving, her love for God and others. Her name fit her.

Chuck learned it, too. In fact, today he is with his mother at Grace Covenant Presbyterian in Greenville. Chuck's mom, Linda, is at an age where she has to take a required amount out of her retirement. She

told me she had enough to live on and wondered what she might with that extra money. I was thinking she should go on a big trip! But she wanted to give it to the church in memory of her late husband. She asked the session what was needed. Had she been able, she would have loved to buy the church a new organ, but settled for repairing the current organ and providing seasonal stoles for the choir robes in memory of Charles who was in the choir and led the Worship Ministry as an elder. Today they are presenting that gift to the church in memory of Papa and dedicating the choir robes to the glory of God. There will be tears, I know, but also so much joy to be able to give. Linda Conrad is a Macedonian.

When Chuck and I talked about how we would live out our Fort Hill Faith Practice of Giving Generously, we decided our area of growth would be to leave a tenth of our estate the church in our will. Our children are almost grown, plus we want to witness to the love and mercy of God in death as in life. We are so thankful for you, and all the churches of which we have been a part. Now we need to figure out the how, but by telling you, I now must follow-through on that commitment!

So the question to ponder in the week ahead, "What does your giving to God say about what you believe and better yet, in whom you place your trust, your life?"

Thanks be to God for you, all you Macedonians, who feely give out of love for God.

ⁱ Fulghum, Robert, *Everything I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, (New York: Random House, 1986).

ⁱⁱ Peters, Terry "When her friend had no milk money, this girl raised \$11,000" October 21, 2017 msn.com www.msn.com/en-us/news/good-news/when-her-friend-had-no-milk-money-this-girl-raised-dollar11000 accessed Oct. 21, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ City-data.com accessed on October 21, 2017. www.city-data.com/city/Clemson-South-Carolina.html