

Prayer: Your abundant grace is shown to us in Jesus, the living Word. So speak to us now through your written word- a word of hope, of peace, and of love that we may follow in His steps until your Kingdom comes in Clemson as it is in heaven. Amen.

Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is a reminder of God's abundant grace.

When God's grace is planted in our hearts, we bear the fruits of thanksgiving, joy, and generosity.

Paul is challenging the Corinthians to be as generous as those Macedonians have been in their special offerings for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

It reminds me of the challenge between rivals, like Clemson and Carolina - whether it be to beat the other in number of flu shots or pints of blood, it can be an effective motivator.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 Encouragement to Be Generous

8 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.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

9:6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

9:7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

9:8 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.

9:9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

9:10 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.

9:11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;

9:12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

9:13 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,

9:14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.

9:15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Proclamation of the Word

Have you ever noticed that whenever someone asks the children a question at our Story for all Children, more often than not, the answer is "Jesus."

"We should be kind and loving, why?" Jesus.

"Who loves us more than anyone?" Jesus.

And usually you can make some connection.

It all goes back to Jesus.

Paul basically reminds us today of that same truth.

It all goes back to Jesus.

When someone asks why we give or have an offering, the answer is Jesus.

The Macedonians are remembered through history as the most generous of people.

And the real reason they are Paul writes, "they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us." (2 Cor. 8:5b)

The only formula for faithful generosity that Paul gives can be summed up in one word, "Jesus."

Your financial planner or Forbes will give you different formulas when doing things like saving for retirement.

You should have an 80/20 stocks and bonds strategy.

But for Paul, the strategy is always 100%.

Jesus gave 100% of himself for us.

And that's what got him killed.

Talking money in church can do the same thing.

In fact, Paul's purpose of taking up a collection from the Gentile Christians to give to the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem, is to build peace.

And that gets Paul killed, too.

Well, eventually.

When he goes back to Jerusalem with the gift, they arrest Paul.

He is sent to Rome, imprisoned, and then is executed.

It reminds me of the poignant poem by Ann Weems:

To solve his problem, Cain killed Abel.

so easy.....to solve a problem, kill

and the audience will clap.

clap, clap, clap for killing.

There was a man who said, No killing.

He was killed, of course,

and the audience clapped loudly!
He was killed,
but not before he said,
Love one another.
In fact, he told the crowd a story
about The Good Samaritan,
an example of how to love.
And he healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman,
whom he called a woman of great faith.
He talked to Greeks and Romans,
men and women, wealthy and poor,
and he called the children to him.
In fact, he called the world
to follow the example
of the woman at the well
who gave him a cup of cold water
and called her town to come and hear.

And yet, he was killed.
Another day, another war,.....

Is there no one to clap for Peace?

Paul was trying to make peace between the Jewish Christians and Gentiles, Jew and Greek. They were arguing that to be a real Christian, you had to follow all of the ritual purity laws, especially keeping a kosher kitchen and circumcising all males. And when Paul took the offering to Jerusalem, he even followed their purity practices out of respect for them. They still had him arrested.

Generosity and grace are still at odds with people.
Groups divide against each other.

We divide into us-them, Republican-Democrat, Clemson-Carolina
And this week, the heated divide- Boomers-Millennials when a young woman sneered,
"Ok, Boomer" to an older person of the Baby Boomer variety.

I suppose we have not changed much.

But that does not deter Jesus, nor Paul.

And it should not deter us from practicing grace and generosity towards one another.

Paul tells us that making peace, sharing generously, living lovingly is about commitment. Otherwise why would these Macedonians who have a "severe ordeal of affliction" be able to give?

It just does not make sense.

Out of extreme poverty, they give with abundant joy.

That is a paradox.

And so is the overused phrase "God loves a cheerful giver."

We have used that phrase so much, it seems trite.

Until you read it in context this passage.

Paul is not putting us on a guilt trip here.

He is not requiring a certain percentage of our income.

If the Macedonians gave out of their poverty,
they may have given 50% not just a measly 10%.

Paul says disciples of Jesus give out of opportunity not obligation. (repeat)

Listen again,

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. (2 Cor. 9:6-8)

To sum it up, you get what you give.

Another paradox.

We usually think in terms of taking to get what we want or need.

Paul says, you get what you give away.

For a short time, I served the Peachtree Presbyterian church in Atlanta.

Dr. Frank Harrington was the pastor.

He was from Kingstree, SC, and with his low-country brogue at the offering, he would say every Sunday, "Don't give 'til it hurts. Give 'til it feels good."

That annoyed me at first.

I was taught to give unselfishly with no regard for any reward for myself.

I was raised by a dutiful and faithful mother.

Taught by faithful Sunday School teachers for whom giving was regular and steady,
just like their commitment to be present and serving.

But Dr. Harrington was right, I now understand.

It is in giving that we experience abundant joy.

When we make up our minds, in response to God's love and grace shown to us,
we give cheerfully, joyfully, abundantly even.

In the words of that hymn, "All I have needed thy hand hath provided, great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me."

When we all have enough, there is joy and peace.

It feels good to give.

I have the joy of being surrounded by joyful givers all my life, including you all.

Look at what we are doing as a church- to support a ministry and witness to today's college students through our Crucial Calling campaign.

To date, Fort Hill Church has committed over 1 million dollars to college ministry at Clemson.

Because of your faithfulness, the Presbytery is entertaining a motion this Tuesday to commit a proposed \$250,000.

So please pray for us as we meet on Tuesday as a body of the area churches of the upstate.

You are like the Macedonians who give out of love of students, commitment to Jesus Christ, and the joy of being a part of this mission.

This week, I read of the death of my Kindergarten teacher, Elizabeth Anne Inman at age 90. She was a Macedonian.

She gave love, encouragement, kindness, generously and steadily.

God's Spirit radiated from her sweet face.

The reason I know, is that she was also a member of First Presbyterian, our home church. She was in Circle #1 and other clubs with my mother.

She kept up with me over the years.

I saw her every Sunday at worship.

She wrote notes at my confirmation, graduations, and always seem interested in me.

Mrs. Inman was a Macedonian.

In my hometown, when a family member dies, the family keeps vigil at the home for the first few days.

And you must be prepared for a stream of visitors, cold cuts and casseroles.

We gather for strength and comfort.

We tell stories and even laugh until we cry.

It is how we give thanks, and even in the affliction, by God's grace, there is some joy.

The person that made me melt into a puddle of tears when my mother died,

was the appearance of an now elderly Mrs. Inman- ever faithful, showing up with a warm chicken casserole and a hug.

That consistent, steady gift of presence, of love which showed me what God's love looks like.

She always allowed God's grace and love to pour out of her- giving always, not to get,

but because God had provided grace, love, and always enough for her.

She could not help to share it- and share it abundantly, just like a Macedonian.

When I found her obituary this week, the final paragraph read:

Mrs. Inman ended each school day with the following song, "Our time together is over, and we are going home. Goodbye, goodbye be always kind and true."

Mrs. Inman was a Macedonian.

And she makes me want to be one, too.

She gave herself first to the Lord, and then to us-

all of us, hundreds of us over her years of teaching, cooking fellowship meals at church, and making a point to encourage the best in us.

She sowed bountifully and reaped the same.

She was the most cheerful of givers.

And she made real the abundant grace of God.

Friends, do you know why we give?

We give in response to the greatest gift God gave us- Jesus.

And some of you are already celebrating that gift- with Christmas music and decorations.

But the best response to that gift, is to return the favor.

Bring joy to the world, hope to the hopeless, healing to the hurting, love to the unloved.

Be Christ's church, the Body of Christ.

Give like a Macedonian, thankful for the good news of God's saving love shown to us in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Giving and forgiving God, you created the good earth and blessed it.

Give us glad and generous hearts, that we may rejoice and give thanks for the abundance of your creation, the depths of your mercy, and your care for all, until we all have enough. Amen