10-14/15-17 Rev. Amy Haines

2 Corinthians 8:1-12 Overflowing Generosity Stewardship Series

Can you recall a time when you were the recipient of generosity?

I am always caught off guard when someone unexpectedly picks up the check for me or my family at a restaurant. Several times in this past year I have opened my office door to find a bag of clothes for one of my children that someone else has outgrown. Once Ken and I were on a pre-kids vacation in Chicago and the couple sitting in front of us in worship found out we were visitors to the city and promptly gave us their tickets to the Chicago Pops concert to be held that night.

As I continue to watch coverage of one natural disaster after another, from flood to wind to fire, I am heartened by the stories of overflowing generosity even in the face of such tragedy.

Strangers helping strangers, neighbors assisting neighbors, churches opening their doors as shelters even as their members and pastors face their own destruction yet concerned for those around them. I am thankful for your generosity as individuals as well as groups in this congregation responding to such need by giving to the work of UMCOR.

A little over three years ago, on August 1, 2014, the McComb United Methodist Church in Northwest Ohio caught fire. Before the flames were even extinguished that evening then-Pastor Tom Bolton had offers of generous assistance from over 15 churches in town and around the UMC connection. The Lutheran Church across the street offered their building for worship.

Another church offered to reprint the Sunday bulletin. A church from Wood County offered the use of the hymnal on CD. A church in Cincinnati offered to take up a collection. Another church in the district that had experienced a fire a few years before showed up with a check in hand.

Less than three hours after the fire had started, before the DS and I could arrive on scene after driving home from MTSO, the conference office in Worthington had already sent out a prayer request and Bishop Palmer had sent his prayers via text. McComb UMC tangibly felt blessed and supported by the generous prayers, presence and gifts of the greater body of Christ.

I invite you to recall your own stories of generosity this week and next as we reflect on the Apostle Paul’s words to the first century church in Corinth. Paul encouraged them to be generous and joyful to others in response to God’s grace in their lives.

Paul’s call to Corinth is also a call to us today. Is our giving a response of faith? Are we reluctant or cheerful givers? Do we see ourselves as stewards of God’s good gifts or owners of our hard earned treasures?

Yes, I know. I mention the word money in worship and some of you have immediately tuned me out. I have always had a few in every church who won’t even attend worship if they know that stewardship is the focus.

Yet look around us, on any given day, and how many ways are we being asked to give? Non-profits ask us to support them to help others. Children and grandchildren yearn for another purchase. Businesses entice us to spend in their stores or restaurants. Then there are the bills.

Where do we fit God into our giving? Does God get our first fruits as a reminder of all of God’s blessings in our lives, or does God get our leftovers, if we have a dollar or two in our wallet on the days we show up for worship?

I preach on giving because Paul spoke about money. And Paul spoke about money because Jesus spoke about money.

..In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke alone 1 out of every 6 verses deals with money.

Of the 29 parables Christ told, 16 deal with a person and his money.

--Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com:giving

Jesus did not shy away from discussing what attitudes inform our giving, and neither should we.

So today, as we ponder the words of Paul, I invite you to consider three questions:

1-Do we approach our giving with a mentality of scarcity or abundance?

2-Do we approach our giving as an obligation or an opportunity?

3-Do we approach our giving as a calculated risk or a generous response?

**First, do we approach our giving with a mentality of scarcity or abundance?**

Bishop Palmer has chosen for this annual conference quadrennium a theme of “Be Not Afraid.”

2017’s subtheme was “God is With Us.” 2018’s subtheme is “It is Enough.” Bishop Palmer will be reflecting on how 5 loaves and 2 fish fed a multitude, with 12 baskets of leftovers, as a way to remind all of us to change our perspective on what we have and what we give. If we live with a mindset of scarcity, we will continue to turn inward, guarding our precious resources to only meet our needs. Yet if we live with a mindset of abundance, we can begin to see ways to partner with others to assist others, with however much or however little we have.

So many times in our lives and in our churches we lament what we don’t have and downplay what we do have. We yearn for more while not appreciating what is happening in the here and now. We marvel at what other churches are doing while not offering our own time and talents to what we can do to love our neighbor.

Paul began this passage to the church in Corinth by celebrating the faithful in Macedonia.

He proclaimed: “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” (v1-2, NRSV)

Whether in Jerusalem, Macedonia or Corinth, being a Christian in the first century was not a life of ease. Many who became Christians lost their jobs, were disowned by their families, considered outcasts in society, and often persecuted for their faith.

A regular part of Paul’s missionary journeys was to take up an offering from the Gentile churches for the poor believers in Jerusalem. Yet the churches of Macedonia, places like Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, were also poor and persecuted at that time.

However, the Macedonian churches did not allow their circumstances to stop their mindset of abundance. Even amidst severe trials and extreme poverty, they were filled with joy at Jesus’ presence in their midst, so contributed generously to this offering as a response for all the grace they had received.

Paul does not bring up the example of the Macedonian churches to shame the church in Corinth. Instead, he celebrates the Macedonian churches for their part in spreading the good news of the Gospel and invites the church in Corinth to also do their part for the glory of God.

As Herb Miller once said, “Generosity is rooted in habits of the heart, not in the bank balance.”

--Herb Miller, Full Disclosure, p. 81

Paul invited the church then, and invites us today as the church, to live out of an abundant mindset, sharing what resources we have, however large or small, to do our part in proclaiming the love of Jesus.

Here in Springboro, our congregation is not called to compete with the new church starts in our area who do contemporary worship well or offer big events for the entire community. Rather, if our niche is traditional worship, may we sing the hymns of faith with gusto, be authentic to who we are, and offer honest praise in all we do. I enjoyed our old-fashioned block party. We continue to plant seeds of faith daily in preschoolers, children, youth and adults of all ages.

Instead of lamenting what we do not have, may we be open to the resources God has already entrusted to us, then share those resources in abundant ways with our community and our world.

When as individual households we live by a mentality of abundance rather than scarcity, we will find ourselves trusting God more and worrying about tomorrow less. Sure, the bills will still be there. Sure, finances may still be tight. Yet when we give first to God, we are living by faith not fear, trust not skepticism, hope not dismay. This abundant mindset will affect how we give.

**Second, do we approach our giving as an obligation or an opportunity?**

..Years ago, a pastor preached a sermon on giving and talked about his deceased brother who most people thought of as a generous contributor to the church he attended.  His gifts were counted in the tens of thousands.  But then the pastor spoke these rather astounding words: "My friends... my brother was a cheapskate!  He was a multimillionaire." He gave as little as possible simply out of a sense of obligation.

The pastor went on to say that there was a poor widow in the church who gave more than his wealthy brother, not in terms of dollar amounts yet in terms of seeing her giving as opportunity rather than obligation. This woman decided to give up her monthly appointment at the beauty parlor so she could make an extra gift for a building program. This pastor went to see her and say that she should keep her money for the beauty shop appointment and that they would have enough for the building.  After all, this monthly appointment to have her hair done was her one pleasure in life that she felt was a luxury. Plus, she enjoyed the contact with people at the shop.

When the pastor tried to have her keep her meager pledge for the building fund, she corrected him in no uncertain (but respectful) terms. She said, "Pastor, this is the only thing I have to give.  I have nothing else.  I have talked with God about this and God knows it is in my heart to want to be a part of this building program.  I want to do this and God will see that I have what I need!" The pastor took her pledge back to the church, with tears in his eyes and joy in his heart.

--John Jewell, lectionarysermons.com, 11-12-00, adapted

Celebrating the churches in Macedonia, Paul goes on to say: “For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” (v3-4 NRSV)

The Macedonian churches faced their own issues with poverty and persecution, yet they never lost the joy of sharing in something much greater than themselves.

Every time that you and I give to the work of the church in the world today, we, too, are invited to see our giving not as a duty, a tax, or an obligation, but as an opportunity, a privilege, and a joy to partner with God, and partner with other Christians, to be a light shining in the darkness, to be part of Christ’s ministry in this world today.

This is one reason I support our congregation in paying 100% of our connectional giving responsibilities. I do not see our connectional giving, our apportionment dollars as an obligation; rather, I see them as an opportunity to partner with other Christians around the world in reaching out in ways we cannot do personally or as an individual congregation.

Together, we support retired clergy and spouses. Together, we train new pastors and lay leaders in the Congo and in Vietnam. Together, we offer bed nets and training to stem the tide of malaria deaths. Together, we train UMCOC first responders ahead of natural disasters.

Do I agree with 100% of the decisions of our global church? No. And I imagine you may not agree with 100% of the decisions of our local congregation. So we step forward in trust once again, looking not for the areas that divide us, but looking instead for the opportunities to be in ministry together with brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world.

**Finally, do we approach our giving as a calculated risk or a generous response?**

Ken and I have an estate already set up to assist us and our children in our elder years. Yet much of our resources are tied up in the stock market, so every quarter those who know more than I do about stocks and bonds and such take a calculated risk with our financial investments.

There have been years when the risk has paid off, and years when we hope for a better tomorrow.

Do we approach our giving to the ministry of Christ through the church as a calculated risk or offer our giving as a generous response? If the main reason we give to the church is to get a tax write off, I would consider that a calculated risk. Yet if the main reason we give to the church is to respond to God’s grace in our lives, I would consider that a generous response.

Earlier this week on Facebook, I asked this question: “What comes to mind when you hear the word generosity?” I had many responses given, primarily from laity and not clergy, yet they can be summarized into three main responses. 1)Generosity is giving out of love. 2)Generosity is sharing kindness. 3)Generosity is giving without expecting not wanting anything in return.

The churches in Macedonia did not give to the offering for the Jerusalem poor because they expected to get something in return. No, they gave first and foremost in thanksgiving to God, which then was used in practical ways to help believers in need in Jerusalem. Paul continued:

“And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.” “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.” (v5-6, 9 NIV)

Giving is one way that we say thank you for God’s grace in our lives. Giving us one way we say thank you to Jesus for dying on the cross to save us from our sins and rising from the dead to offer us new life here and now and for all eternity.

2 weeks ago we heard the ancient hymn from Philippians 2 remind us that Jesus “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself" (Phil 2:6-7).

How many of us were taught as youngsters to recite John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life.”

God gave of God’s own self—to love us, forgive us, and offer us ongoing new and eternal life.

What can we do in response to such grace?

Paul reminds us that one way we respond is through the generous gifts of our own lives.

When we live by faith, when we give generously, when we share what we believe through what we do for our neighbors, then we are re-enacting the gospel story each and every day!

Have you ever thought about your offering as a way to tell the story of Jesus? The world around us wants to tell a story of greed and selfishness, yet the gospel invites us to tell a story of grace and generosity.

After crediting the Macedonian churches for their generosity, Paul then invites the church in Corinth to be generous, excelling in the grace of giving. Paul says, “But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” (v7 NIV)

Here Paul views our giving as a spiritual gift! We know that generosity is also one of the fruits of the spirit. So faith and giving go hand in hand. They are not mutually exclusive. Instead, our giving ought to reflect our faith. Our faith ought to influence our giving. Is this the case in your life?

Paul continues his invitation to the church in Corinth to give according to what they have,

completing what they promised to give at an earlier time, with an eagerness to share in response to God’s generosity in their lives.

Pastor John Jewell reinterprets Paul with this thought:

“Give as you have received. If you have not received anything from God – then you should not put even one red cent in the collection plate. My only question is this. Does your giving reflect the way God has blessed you?” --John Jewell, lectionarysermons.org

Brothers and sisters, consider the grace you have received in and through Christ, and prayerfully ponder this week the opportunity you have been given to live out of your abundance and generosity, with whatever you have, little or much, to share in Christ’s ministry through the church in this world.

May you see that each week when you place an envelope in the offering plate, each week that you intentionally give online to the church as you pay your bills, that you are responding to the grace of God in your life.

Prayerfully ponder this week how you can be intentionally generous in your ongoing commitment to Christ through this church in the coming year, and we will celebrate those commitments next Sunday.

May God find acceptable all of our gifts, in generous response to God’s presence in our lives.

May it be so. Let us pray.