

Spiritual Talk 10.15.23: Generosity: 2 Corinthians 9.6-15

Good morning!

Welcome to church.

I'm so glad you're here!

In our particular place in time and space and history,
far more people have left churches
than have continued to remain a part of one.

I am so glad you are a part of this one.

Many people that I know,
including myself if I'm being honest,
have left churches several times in their lives,
and for a host of reasons, some of them very good indeed.

One of the reasons I have often heard people mention
as to why they left a particular church
is because they were "constantly talking about money."

Does that resonate with any of you?

Money is a sensitive topic
and people's trust has very often been abused
by religious leaders looking to benefit from the generosity of the faithful.

We're going to talk about generosity as a spiritual practice today.
I am 100% committed to talking about this in a way that does not
manipulate you, guilt you, pressure you,
or otherwise abuse and misuse you, alright?

My hope is that we can engage this topic together in such a way
that we all go home today filled with joy.

My hope is that we'll renew our vision this morning
for how God created us to flourish as human beings
when we enter into a sacred dance between gratitude and generosity.
God is calling us into both giving and receiving with open-handed trust
in our God who saves us and loves us.

Our Scripture passage for today comes from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians.

The Apostle Paul lived as a missionary, going from one location to the next in order to build up and encourage the churches in many different cities.

In his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses a crisis of particular suffering and need that the church in Jerusalem is facing. He brags about the Macedonians, some other Gentile Christians, who had seen fit to send a generous gift to the suffering Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Paul then turns from his glowing report about the Macedonians in order to suggest that the Corinthian Gentile Christians also would do well to give generously to their persecuted Jewish siblings in Christ. Our passage for today commences with with Paul making a case for why these Greek Christians might want to consider giving generously in order to help Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Now that we have that background, Let's read:

2 Corinthians 9.6-15

⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;

their righteousness endures forever.” (*Psalm 112*)

¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Pray

Have you ever experienced generosity that took your breath away? I’m not talking necessarily about something lavish in and of itself, but something that left you speechless with the realization that all you could do was receive, in gratitude and humility and awe? Generosity can be tremendously powerful.

In Paul’s brief exhortation to the Corinthians, his teaching about generosity hits on four main points.

1. In 2 Corinthians, Paul urges the recipients of his letter to give to those in need not out of compulsion, but cheerfully.
2. He instructs them not to give according to a rigid, predetermined standard, but to give what they had decided in their hearts.

3. And he tells them that they will be richly blessed when they give like this;
that when they sow generously, they will reap generously as well.
4. Then he ends this section of the letter by painting a picture of generosity creating a sort of river of praise and gratitude flowing back and forth between giver and recipient, and all ultimately stemming from and returning to and glorifying God, the One who generously gave us all the indescribable, priceless gift of grace in Christ.

Let's take these four elements of Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians and look at what the Spirit might be saying to us through these words today.

One...

Paul writes, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." He goes on to say, "God loves a cheerful giver."

Many of us have heard these words used to manipulate and pressure people to give of their money or time or service well beyond their means. This is heartbreaking, and it couldn't be further from Paul's intention here.

Part of what Paul is getting at here is the reality that giving is an action anyone can engage in from a whole host of motivations, while generosity is about the heart.

Have you ever received a gift that had no generosity behind it? Even if it was a nice gift, how did that feel, knowing something was missing in the depth of love behind the gift?

And on the other hand, have you ever experienced profound generosity

that stuck with you and made a difference in your life even though perhaps the material thing given wasn't actually terribly significant?

Anyone who has beloved children in their life have likely experienced this.

I remember a time when my Iris was little, probably about 5, and she saved up a couple of dollars over an extended period of time. She begged and begged Joel to take her shopping before my birthday, and she spent all her money (with a contribution from dad, too) on this little plastic case with pineapples on it.

I'll never forget the hopping-up-and-down joy of my sweet kiddo when she gave me that gift.

She was delighted beyond words.

I still keep that pineapple case in my purse, and it makes me feel warm and happy every time I see it because of the delight and cheer of the giver!

Why is it that God loves a cheerful giver?

Because we are made in God's image, and generosity is central to God's loving heart.

God lavishes grace upon us unreservedly, and the more we become bold conduits of God's generosity, the more we experience human life as God intended it to be lived.

Now, when we read Paul's letters to the Corinthians we can see that these folks were pretty insistent on their freedom in Christ.

In his correspondence with them,

Paul was pushing back on some of the selfish aspects of their fixation on their freedom to do whatever they wanted, the way they wanted.

He is saying to them, "yes, you're free!"

"Free to be like Jesus! Free to love like Jesus, to serve like Jesus, to be joyful like Jesus,

to be generous like Jesus.

You're free to finally be human the way God intends for you to be!"

This isn't just some kind of religious bait and switch, friends.

Like, Oh - sure, you're free! Free to serve!

No. There is deep, ancient wisdom here;

The wisdom that is breathed from the mouth of the One
who spoke all that is into existence.

Through the Holy Spirit, Paul knew what Annie Dillard understood when she
wrote,

*Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find
ashes,"* Annie Dillard

We are free to be joyful and generous like Jesus

because we do not need to be afraid.

God has sealed us in Christ,

we are safe in God's hand,

and thus we are not ruled by the powers and dynamics of the world.

Money and possessions have the power to control us if we're not careful,

and often right behind that power of money is the power of fear.

Fear often drives the way we relate to money -

when we're in the grips of fear

we can so easily become stingy, grasping,

clinging to what we have

and doubting that it will ever be enough.

When God calls us into the practice of generosity with our money,

it is a call to true and joyful freedom.

Now, I'll insert a caveat here

because again I think many folks have received unhelpful teaching around this.

We can be prudent with money -

saving, planning for the inevitably rainy day,
being cautious in our investments.

That is not wrong or sinful.

We can be prudent and responsible without being ruled by fear.

Recognizing that God on the one hand has given us the capacity
to plan and evaluate risk and take responsibility for caring for our loved ones,
yet on the other hand God calls us to do all of that

in the context of knowing that our ultimate security rests in the work
Christ has finished and sealed on our behalf.

Two...

So God calls us to lives of generosity,

but Paul is not going to give the Corinthians a guideline for how much to give.
He tells them simply to give what they have decided in their own hearts.

How I wish Christian leaders and pastors through the ages
had more consistently taken a cue from Paul here.

There has been a tremendous amount of misguided teaching around this.

Tithing, that's giving 10% of income,

has often been held up as a guideline for giving to the church.

That 10% amount comes from the Old Testament law,

and thus many early Christians simply continued that practice.

Nowhere in the New Testament, however,

is it suggested that followers of Jesus must give exactly 10% of their income.

Through the years I've heard lots of various teaching on this.

Once I heard a pastor say from the pulpit that Jesus' pattern was always to take
the Old Testament command and make it more rigorous for his followers,

so if the Old Testament required tithing,

then Christians should give an even higher percentage of their income.

Here's why that teaching really misses the mark:

Generosity. Is. About. The. Heart.

In many traditional churches, the offering is gathered during worship, and at the end a deacon will come forward and say a prayer over the offering. The prayer often goes something like this:

“Please God, bless this money for the furthering of your Kingdom as we gave back to you *a portion* of what you have given to us.”

I *groan* inwardly every time I hear that sentiment expressed because living as generous people in God’s Kingdom is never a matter of “giving back to God some of what God has given us.”

Being generous, grateful, free, open-handed, open-hearted followers of Jesus means we recognize and live from the conviction that *everything* we are, everything we have, everything we earn, everything we receive, everything - everything!

- belongs to God.

May God form in us a heart that holds it all gratefully and delightedly and also lightly, ready to use any resource we have in responsive obedience to the Spirit of God.

This is radically countercultural, isn’t it?

We have to ask ourselves - are our attitudes about money and possessions formed more deeply by the risen Christ, or by capitalist consumerism?

Do I hold what I possess loosely, recognizing it all as a gift,

or have I bought into the narrative that I’ve earned it, I’ve worked for it, and I deserve to enjoy it, doggone it??

Money isn't bad, possessions aren't bad,
but clinging to them
shrivels our hearts,
and deprives other beloved children of God of help we could provide.
Jesus is inviting us to be free from that bondage.

So. Following Jesus' lead we embrace cheerful generosity,
and we give what we have decided, in hearts attuned to the Holy Spirit,
recognizing that all we have is God's to call us to be generous with.

After establishing these two realities,
Paul goes on to promise rich blessing for those who give generously.

Three

Once again,
let's look at the unhelpful beliefs
that have swirled around biblical passages about blessing.

Many recent Christian bestsellers
have promoted various versions of the message
that the more you give, the more God will give back to you.
Kind of a Christian get-rich-quick scheme
that oh-so-conveniently also tends to line the pockets of those with power.

Is Paul really saying that if we give generously,
then God will reward us with riches?

Lets read this section of the passage again and notice few things.

Take note of the places Paul says *so that*: (starting in vs. 8):

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times,
having all that you need, you will abound in *every good work*.⁹ As it is
written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their *righteousness* endures forever.” (*Psalm 112*)

¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of *your righteousness*. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way *so that you can be generous* on every occasion.

What is the purpose of God’s rich blessing?
Is it so that we can become ever more comfortable among
and proud of our earthly goods?

Does God bless us so that we can hoard what we have?

No! Paul explicitly tells us the result of God’s blessing.
God’s rich blessing equips us to continue to be generous!

Paul indicates that we followers of Jesus are called to
“freely scatter our gifts to the poor”
and what?

God will make sure we’ll never feel the pinch of the money
we could have spent on stuff we would like to have?

No, we’ll feel the pinch. If we’re being generous as Jesus was,
we’ll feel the pinch for sure.

Sometimes we’ll even have pangs of regret over our generosity.

And God does not promise to make the generous life easy or tidy or painless.
The promise here is that our *righteousness* will endure forever.

In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus says,

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy,

and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What is your treasure? Where is it?

Paul seems to be assuming that our treasure is in some way a *righteousness* that will endure forever.

But the righteousness that comes from God is not something we earn.

When Paul talks about righteousness, he's talking about something God gives us and that we cooperate with and participate in.

2 Cor. 5:21 says that

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So Paul is indicating in our passage today that being people who are marked by generosity of Spirit is a way in which we are abiding in Christ.

When we are generous, we are swept up in the righteousness of Christ. We are blessed with the incomparable privilege of being partners with God in the outflow of God's own righteousness.

God's invitation into generosity is an invitation into tremendous beauty and mystery and honor. It brings us so near to the very heart of God.

Four...

Paul closes this passage with a sort of rhapsody on the theme of gratitude. When we accept God's invitation into this flourishing way of life that embraces freedom in generosity,

we begin to recognize the inseparable link between generosity and gratitude.

Grateful people are those who have stood up in defiant resistance to the dominant narratives of the day that say
I am a self-made individual,
I have fairly earned all I possess.

Grateful people are those who have come to recognize that all they have and all they are is a gift, pure gift,
and thus it's not theirs to cling to in fear or in pride.
Grateful people are free. Grateful people are generous.

I've mentioned the poet Ross Gay a number of times here.
When I think of someone who exemplifies a life of gratitude,
Ross Gay comes to mind.

As I was preparing for this spiritual talk,
I came across a poem of his call the *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*.
It is, sadly, too long to read here entirely, plus it is definitely PG-13. At least.

I want to read some of it, though, just a few little bits,
because I think he paints a beautiful picture of the interplay between
gratitude and generosity.
Listen for the ways gratitude and generosity are interwoven here.

introduce little bird...

it was telling me
in no uncertain terms
to bellow forth the tubas and sousaphones,
the whole rusty brass band of gratitude
not quite dormant in my belly—
it said so in a human voice,
“Bellow forth” —

and who among us could ignore such odd
and precise counsel?

Hear ye! hear ye! I am here
to holler that I have hauled tons—by which I don't mean lots,
I mean *tons* — of cowshit
and stood ankle deep in swales of maggots
swirling the spent beer grains
the brewery man was good enough to dump off
holding his nose, for they smell very bad,
but make the compost writhe giddy and lick its lips,
twirling dung with my pitchfork
again and again
with hundreds and hundreds of other people,
we dreamt an orchard this way,
frowning our brows,
and hauling our wheelbarrows,
and sweating through our shirts,
and two years later there was a party
at which trees were sunk into the well-fed earth,
one of which, a liberty apple, after being watered in
was tamped by a baby barefoot
with a bow hanging in her hair
biting her lip in her joyous work
and friends this is the realest place I know,
it makes me squirm like a worm I am so grateful,
you could ride your bike there
or roller skate or catch the bus
there is a fence and a gate twisted by hand,
there is a fig tree taller than you in Indiana,
it will make you gasp.
It might make you want to stay alive even, thank you...

...

And to the quick and gentle flocking

of men to the old lady falling down
on the corner of Fairmount and 18th, holding patiently
with the softest parts of their hands
her cane and purple hat,
gathering for her the contents of her purse
and touching her shoulder and elbow;
thank you the cockeyed court
on which in a half-court 3 vs. 3 we oldheads
made of some runny-nosed kids
a shambles, and the 61-year-old
after flipping a reverse lay-up off a back door cut
from my no-look pass to seal the game
ripped off his shirt and threw punches at the gods
and hollered at the kids to admire the pacemaker's scar
grinning across his chest; thank you
the glad accordion's wheeze
in the chest; thank you the bagpipes.

thank you
the ancestor who loved you
before she knew you
by smuggling seeds into her braid for the long
journey, who loved you
before he knew you by putting
a walnut tree in the ground, who loved you
before she knew you by not slaughtering
the land; thank you
who did not bulldoze the ancient grove
of dates and olives,
who sailed his keys into the ocean
and walked softly home; who did not fire, who did not
plunge the head into the toilet, who said *stop*,
don't do that; who lifted some broken
someone up; who volunteered

the way a plant birthed of the reseeding plant
is called a *volunteer*, like the plum tree
that marched beside the raised bed
in my garden, like the arugula that marched
itself between the blueberries...

and you, again you, for hanging tight, dear friend.
I know I can be long-winded sometimes.
I want so badly to rub the sponge of gratitude
over every last thing, including you, which, yes, awkward,
the suds in your ear and armpit, the little sparkling gems
slipping into your eye. Soon it will be over,

which is precisely what the child in my dream said,
holding my hand, pointing at the roiling sea and the sky
hurtling our way like so many buffalo,
who said *it's much worse than we think,*
and sooner; to whom I said
no duh child in my dreams, what do you think
this singing and shuddering is,
what this screaming and reaching and dancing
and crying is, other than loving
what every second goes away?
Goodbye, I mean to say.
And thank you. Every day.

Maybe that seems like a dark ending,
but I think Gay is really onto the heart of the thing here.

The news headlines just this week remind us of the inescapable truth
that "*Its much worse than we think, and sooner...*"
There is so much suffering in the world.
And we can harden our hearts to it,
or we can live as people of gratitude,

offering what we have with joy;
loving and giving freely and generously
because we know that in Christ
our future is secure,
our hearts are safe,
and our treasure is hidden with Christ in God.

Gracious God, you shower us with so many blessings, yet we struggle to share them with others. You love a cheerful giver, but we sometimes give grudgingly. We forget that all we have is yours, and that you can use our gifts to bless the whole world. Give us generous hearts which long to share our bounty, giving extravagantly, loving at great risk, and working for justice in seemingly impossible situations. Forgive us for clutching too tightly what has always been yours in the first place. Pardon us for this and all of our sins, as we continue to confess in silence...

Silent Prayer

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Transition to Communion

Lk 22:14-20.

¹⁴ When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table.
¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

¹⁷ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸ For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

Henri Nouwen notes the four-part sequence of Jesus' action with the bread: he takes it, gives thanks for it, breaks it, and gives it. He gave his friends the bread knowing that he was also giving them his life, his very flesh and blood. And as Jesus generously gave himself, he invites us to give ourselves, as well.

Nouwen wrote:

"It is only as people who are given that we can fully understand our being chosen, blessed and broken. In the giving it becomes clear that we are chosen, blessed and broken not simply for our own sakes, but so all that we live finds its final significance in its being lived for others."

Let's pray.

chosen, blessed, broken, given...

Ending Blessing

Jesus thank you for your body, taken, blessed, broken and given for us.

Thank you for taking, blessing, breaking and giving us, your body, for the sake of the world.

We go from here in your power and for your glory. Amen.

¹⁴ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

[The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 2 Co 13:14.