

2018 10 28 - Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

So Paul has written a letter to the church in Corinth. In this letter he covers many topics related to the work and life of this fledgling congregation. But in the beginning of Chapter 8, in today's reading, Paul starts to talk about a mission project for which the church has been raising money for about a year. He writes, "A year ago you were not only the first to act, but you did so willingly. Finish that work, so that your eagerness to begin can be matched by your eagerness to finish." It isn't stated clearly in this particular reading, but, from other parts of scripture, scholars have determined that this project is raising funds to support Jewish followers of Jesus who live in poverty in Jerusalem. Paul is asking the church in Corinth to raise money to support their distant neighbours in Jerusalem.

He begins by referring to other churches, to a group of Jesus' followers who live in Macedonia. He says "Now sisters and brothers, we want to tell you how God's grace has been given to the churches in Macedonia. In the midst of severe trial, their joy and deep poverty have produced an abundant generosity." Paul is saying to the folks in Corinth that, despite their circumstances, the people in Macedonia were able to complete their mission giving and so can you. In fact he tells them the Macedonians gave with "abundant generosity."

Today we are exploring the meaning of the word "generosity." Generosity is one of the fruits of the spirit, one of the gifts that we receive from God. But what does it mean to be generous? The dictionary would tell us that someone is generous

if they are “willing to give money, help, kindness, etc., especially more than is usual or expected.” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/generous> But where does that willingness to give come from?

First of all, we know that it comes from God and that means it comes from love. Generosity comes from the experience of being loved by God, of feeling the presence of the Essence of Love in our lives through prayer and worship and through our family, our friends and the members of our congregation. When we are held in love then we want to share that love with others. Paul wrote, “It is not an order I am giving you, but the opportunity to test your generous love against the earnestness which others show.” I remember when I joined a United Church congregation in Toronto. I felt loved and supported and I just wanted to spread that love around and share what I had found with others. Generosity comes from love, Sacred Love.

Generosity also comes from a sense of abundance. In his letter, Paul told the Corinthians, “just as you are rich in every aspect, in faith and discourse, in knowledge, in total concern, and in the love we inspired in you, you may also abound in this work of grace.” Wait a minute, Paul tells them, “you are rich in every aspect” and then he lists the many ways that they are spiritually and intellectually and emotionally rich, but he doesn’t talk about money, does he? Paul is telling the Corinthians that they are rich in all the things that are important. He is telling them that they need to count their blessings and recognize that what they have is enough, that in fact they live in a state of abundance, that in many ways they are rich.

Most of us don't have to worry about where our next meal is coming from. Most of us have comfortable homes to live in and families who love us. But how many of us truly recognize all the good things that we have been given? How many of us count our blessings before we go to bed at night? How many of us live with a sense of abundance?

There is one more aspect of generosity that Paul talked about. He wrote, "This doesn't mean that by giving relief to others, you ought to make things difficult for yourselves! It's just a question of balancing what happens to be your surplus now against their present need; one day they may have something to spare that will supply your own need." Paul is saying that generosity is not about giving beyond our means and thus hurting ourselves it is about balance, it is about mutuality and it is about justice.

This week, as I was doing my usual search for quotes on the Internet I came across this quote from the French writer, Albert Camus. He wrote, and of course this is an English translation, "Too many people have decided to dispense with generosity in order to practice charity." <https://harpers.org/blog/2009/08/camus-the-fall> I believe what he means is too many people give out of a sense of superiority or out of a need to be seen or praised. That may be charity but it is not generosity. Generosity comes from the heart, generosity comes from a place of mutuality not superiority, generosity comes from a desire for justice not fame. When we give we are going to receive – mutuality does exist. Even if we never find ourselves needing to ask for financial assistance we will receive a sense of joy and well-being just from the act of giving. Giving is not a one-way street.

Today is Stewardship Sunday and we are handing out our annual stewardship letters. I ask you all to read the letters and then to give out of a generosity that comes from love, that comes from a sense of abundance and that comes from a desire for mutuality and justice.

Paul began his request for generosity with an example of another group of givers. I am going to end my reflection with a video that I found on the Internet. It's the story of a man named Alan Barnhart. In this video Alan talks of the kingdom. When he uses those words I invite you to insert the phrase "a world of peace and justice." This is a story of incredible generosity. I'm not suggesting that we can all do exactly what he did, but we can all try to live with a similar understanding of love, abundance and justice.

<https://vimeo.com/202632422> - Alan Barnhart story