

2023 09 24 – Striking a Balance

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:8-15
Acts 2:43-37 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

At our Bible Study Group this week, one of the members talked about the deluge of mail that she receives from charitable organizations looking for monetary support. Some charities will send five or six letters a year! It can be both overwhelming and annoying! How many of you deal with this similar issue? How do you handle it? Do you open every letter or does the unopened envelope often just go straight to recycling?

It's hard to know what to do isn't it? We know that everyone of these organizations supports a good cause, but we also know that our bank balance is only so big and we can't give to every group that is asking for money. How do we decide? How do we know how much to give and how do we know where to give? What are some of the factors that you consider when you are making your decisions? (wait for answers: the cause, personal connection, reputation of the organization, etc)

As Melanie discussed during the Community Learning Time, we are all called to share what we have with others. Both of today's scripture readings reveal to us the kind of sharing that took place in the early church, back when Jesus' followers were just figuring out who they were and how they were going to live together and be in the world.

Let's consider the passage from the second chapter of Acts. This describes a time right after Pentecost, the birthdate of the church. The people in Jerusalem saw the apostles doing amazing things: healing the sick, exorcising demons, preaching the gospel and they came to join this new movement. The scripture tells us that, when they joined this new group, this home-based church, people would sell their property and goods and then share the proceeds. We noted at Bible Study that if any organization had that expectation for their members today we would probably refer to them as a cult. So no, I'm not suggesting that we all need to sell our property and give away the proceeds, at least not all of it.

I think the key to this scripture reading is that those who believed lived and ate together and made sure that everyone had enough. They shared their wealth "as each had need." Even in its earliest moments the Christian church was a religious organization that took care of those who were suffering.

So let's move to the city of Corinth, probably thirty-five to forty years later. The apostle Paul is writing a letter to this fledgling church, a church that he helped to create, a church that is made up of both wealthy and not so wealthy individuals. And Paul is asking them for money. As it turns out, this money will be going to the followers of Jesus who reside in Jerusalem. The descendants of that same group that we just heard about in the Book of Acts. These followers of Jesus in Jerusalem are still committed to living together in a communal way, they are still committed to caring for the poor and they are in need of funds.

So Paul has taken it upon himself to gather those funds amongst the churches that he has started around the Aegean Sea. Earlier in his letter he has already told the church in Corinth that their fellow believers in Macedonia have been very generous despite having their own troubles. So now he writes, “It is not an order I am giving you, but the opportunity to test your generous love against the earnestness which others show.” First Paul makes it about honour—let’s them know that others have already given generously. Then he connects this request to their faith reminding them how Jesus himself, “became poor for your sake, so that you might become rich by Christ’s poverty.” And finally Paul reminds them that a year ago, they were the first ones to give to this cause and that now they are being given the opportunity to complete what they had started.

How would you respond to that letter? Which of those strings would pull you the hardest: your honour, your faith, or your need for completion? It’s easy to be cynical as we read this ancient letter and compare it to all the letters that we have read or all the sermons that we have heard asking us for money. It’s easy to be cynical, but the need is real and the call cannot be ignored. The poor still exist, the marginalized still feel excluded, the sick are still in pain and the hungry still suffer.

I know that it’s more difficult to get excited about giving when you have no direct connection to those who are suffering. This was true for the people of Corinth. They were being asked to give to people that they were never going to meet, to people whose culture and rituals were different than theirs. Yes, they were all part of the early church, but the people in Jerusalem came from the Jewish

religion and many still followed the purification rituals of that faith. The people that Paul was ministering to were Gentiles, people from other faiths or no faith, people who had certainly never celebrated Passover or been circumcised. In that way, this fund that Paul was gathering, was very similar to the Mission & Service of The United Church of Canada. It was a fund that going to those who many would see as “different,” as “the other.”

Of course Paul wasn't finished there. He went on to explain that he wasn't asking the church in Corinth to give beyond their means. He said,

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. That is how we strike a balance.

When I read that paragraph I thought of how many of the United Church ministers that are currently filling pulpits in this province have come from places where we used to send our missionaries (from Korea, India, and countries in Africa). I'm sure you've noticed the same thing happening in pulpits in other denominations as well. It's all about striking a balance and recognizing where there's a deficit and where there's a surplus.

But how do we know when we have a surplus? It's a question that we have to ask ourselves whenever we look at our own finances and think about the way that we are living. How much do we really need? What can we give without making

things difficult for ourselves? What is enough? Is there something we could change in our personal spending habits to make more room for sharing?

One thing that Paul recognized is that everyone's needs are different. We can't judge ourselves based on what others are doing. We need to make these choices for ourselves, with an understanding on our own circumstances. As Paul quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures, "The one who gathered much had no excess; and the one who gathered little did not go short." This quote comes from Exodus, the story of the Israelites gathering manna in the desert in order to eat. Each person gathered just what their family needed, some gathered more, some gathered less, and there was enough for everyone. There is enough. Enough for our own comfort and enough to share. We just need to decide where that line is in our lives. What do we need and what is surplus?

Once we have that figured out then we have to decide who will receive our surplus. Which worthy organization will get our cheque or e-transfer? I know that each one of us has causes that are special to us for personal reasons. We have local organizations that we want to support. But I am suggesting that we also need to give to "the other," the ones we will probably never meet. And I believe in the work of the Mission & Service of The United Church Canada. I know that the money that I give goes directly to partners on the ground in those far-off places. That's one of the ways that I strike a balance in my life.

May we all find our own way of striking the balance in our lives by sharing our surplus with others. May it be so. Amen.