

## **2024 09 22 – *Giving with Purpose***

**Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:1-15** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I had been working full-time for IBM for about five years and was around 30 years old, when I realized that something was missing from my life. I was living in Toronto, but every year I had moved from one neighbourhood to another and I figured out that what I was lacking was community and a sense of belonging. Having grown up in Eldad United Church in the village of Solina, I went back to what I knew. I went back to the church. I started attending Bellefair United Church in the Beach area of Toronto.

I returned as an adult, but my experience of church was that of child, a teenager. I really didn't know what it meant to be a full member of a congregation. I really didn't know what was expected of me or what this community of faith could offer me. Fairly quickly I started teaching Sunday School and then joined the Christian Education Committee. I started attending bible study and guided meditation groups. I was growing in spirituality and in faith. I was learning new skills, creating friendships, and building community. I was learning how to be one of Jesus' disciples, a disciple of Christ.

I had probably been attending Bellefair for close to a year before I learned about one of the most vital aspects of discipleship, of membership in a church family. Up to that point, I was totally unaware of what I should be giving as an offering on Sunday mornings. I had no idea what the financial needs of the church were or what each person was expected to give. My parents had never talked about

money, so I had no idea of what they gave to the church. I certainly wasn't aware of the Mission and Service of The United Church of Canada. I was actually grateful when I experienced my first Stewardship campaign and was given the answers to some of these questions. One of the components of that campaign was a chart that described the different giving levels in that particular congregation. It was helpful to know what other people were giving and to think about the level of support that I was willing to offer.

Today is not only Mission and Service Sunday, but it is also the first Sunday of this year's Stewardship campaign. In order to understand more fully what it means to be a disciple of Christ, we are going to spend three Sundays exploring the passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that Peggy read for us today.

In his letter, the apostle Paul is reminding the church in Corinth that they made a promise to raise a certain amount of money to support the poor in the city of Jerusalem. Corinth is a city in the part of the world that was then known as Achaia and is now a part of Greece. Jerusalem was, of course, in Judea, on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. So this particular gift is one that will support the needs of people that the congregation in Corinth will never meet. The Jews in Jerusalem speak a different language and have different customs from the Gentiles who make up the congregation in Corinth. It is fascinating to know that even in the earliest days of the church, raising money for mission and service beyond the local community was an important part of their stewardship, their discipleship.

Paul is sending this letter, along with some of his coworkers, as a reminder that he will soon be coming to pick up their gift. He writes that he has been boasting about them to the churches in Macedonia, telling them that the church in Corinth “has been ready since last year.” He writes, “

If any of the Macedonians should accompany me and find you unprepared, we—not to mention, you!—would be humiliated after being so confident. It’s for this reason that I thought it necessary for the coworkers to precede us, and to arrange in advance for this generous gift you promised.”

I’m not sure I agree with using the threat of humiliation when trying to raise money, but it is interesting that Paul is letting the people in Corinth know that the Macedonians are also raising funds and are aware the amount that has been promised by Corinth.

Paul goes on to describe how the members of the church in Corinth should figure out what to give. He says, “You must give according to what you have inwardly decided—not sadly, not reluctantly, for God loves a giver who gives cheerfully.” Deciding what to give to the church, whether you are giving a gift of money or time or talent, is definitely a decision that comes from the heart. It is a decision that should be made carefully and prayerfully. It is a decision that should be made with intention and with commitment. It is a decision that should be made based on the resources that we have, keeping in mind all the other commitments that we have already made.

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translates the same verse like this:

I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.

In his translation, Eugene emphasizes the fact that charitable giving, quite often, it is driven by guilt tripping, arm-twisting, and sob stories. It is hard to resist the heart-wrenching ad campaigns on TV or other media that urge us to give to the many needs that exist in our community and around the world. Those campaigns are aimed at our emotions, and can often lead to knee-jerk reactions that we may later regret. I must admit that I rarely respond to those requests because I know I have already prayerfully chosen the amount that I can give and have allocated those dollars to the organizations that matter to me.

We all know the joy that comes from giving to a ministry that is important. The satisfaction that we feel when we make a difference in the life of another human being. The delight that comes from bringing a smile to the face of small child in the pew in front of you, or an elderly person in a care home. When we give from a place of love and caring then what we receive is often worth more than what we give.

35 years ago, when I decided what my response to that first stewardship campaign was going to be, I chose an amount for the general budget of Bellefair United Church and another amount for Mission & Service. I chose keeping in mind that I was paying a mortgage and starting my RRSP's. I chose based on the sizeable income that I was receiving from my job at IBM and the fact that I was a single person with lots of disposal income. I chose knowing that I also wanted to give to other charitable organizations and have some flexibility if

another need arose. I chose an amount that was within my means and yet was much more than I had been giving previously. I chose an amount that warmed by heart and made me smile.

There are so many ways that we can support the work of our church both here in Swift Current and beyond. Many of us already generously offer our time, our talent and our wealth to this ministry. So we already know the joy that giving can bring.

In a couple of weeks, you will be receiving this year's Thanksgiving letter. That letter will contain a summary of your offerings for 2024 and some information about the different levels of giving in this congregation. Once we have that letter, I invite us all to think about what it means to be a disciple of Christ, a member of a church family. I invite us all to take the time to review our finances and decide the level of giving that is possible for each one of us. I invite us all to give generously, give intentionally, give with commitment, and give with love.

May it be so. Amen.