Growing in the Grace of Giving

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"*otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. 5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion. 6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"* (2 Corinthians 9:4-15)

1. The $100 Million Gift

Two weeks ago, the Washington Post published a story about Jane and David Walentas. The couple gave a $100 million gift to the University of Virginia as scholarships for students. The gift will be used as scholarships for students who are the first in their families to attend college.

When David was growing up, he didn't know anyone who went to college. Dave worked as a child on the farm. He would get up at 5 AM to milk the cows and muck out the barn, go to school and come back home to milk and shovel again.

Dave went to the University of Virginia on a ROTC scholarship. He said, "it was transformational for me." Dave was the first in his family to attend college. Dave is quoted, "my time at UVA completely changed my life. I wish all the recipients good luck, and have the courage to follow your dreams."

The couple is now in their 80s and want to help the next generation. I am sure the gift that the Walentas are making will make a big difference in the lives of the scholarship recipients and will have a ripple effect in our society.

2. Encouragement to Be Generous

In 2 Corinthians Chapters 8 & 9, Paul talks about the collection which he organizes among his missionary churches in Achaia and Macedonia for the relief of the Jerusalem Christian community. In his letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul shares what the Macedonian churches are doing.

The people in these cities experienced the grace of God through Paul. Although the believers suffered because of extreme poverty, they contributed to Paul's material support. In 2 Corinthians 8:4, Paul says, "***they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing***." The Macedonian Christians feel that being able to share with the other Christians at Jerusalem is a privilege.

Have we ever thought of giving as a privilege? The definition of privilege in a dictionary is "a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group." Is giving truly an advantage that is given to the followers of Jesus?

In 2 Corinthians 8:1, Paul says, "***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***."

Paul shares with Corinthian Christians what happened in the Macedonian Churches. The Macedonian Christians are poor themselves, but they still want to help the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem. Paul calls their giving "the grace of giving" (8:7). The grace of giving is the gracious inclination to give. This grace, flows from the source of grace, which is God's grace through Jesus' reconciliation of sinners to Himself. The grace of God made people respond in giving and they were able to give with "abundant joy" and enthusiasm.

How did the Macedonian Churches give enthusiastically and why do they believe giving is a privilege? The people are probably reminded of Paul's words in Ephesian 2:11-13, "***remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth,…(and) 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."***

Paul points out that there was a time when the Macedonians were hopeless and had nothing to do with God and His Kingdom. But in Christ Jesus, the Macedonians became part of God's family. The purpose of being part of God's household is said in Ephesians 2:10, "***We are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.***" Paul says that Christians are called to "be a blessing" just as God had promised Abraham in Genesis 12:2, "***I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing***.

Paul shares with Corinthian Christians "***the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia"*** (8:1). What does Paul mean in saying "the grace of God?" The grace of God that Paul is referring to is the grace of giving (8:7). The word "grace" (*charis* in Greek) occurs 8 times in chapters 8 & 9. The riches of God's grace had been poured out on the Macedonian Christians, and then they in turn poured out what they had on the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem in giving.

3. The Collection for Christians at Jerusalem

In Chapter 9 of 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that their enthusiasm to give aid to the Christians at Jerusalem incited the Macedonians to give. Yet, Paul prods the Corinthians to rekindle their initial enthusiasm for giving.

That is why Paul sends Titus and others ahead of him to Corinth to make sure their gift is ready, so that their giving would be a genuine gift and not look like people are giving at the last minute under pressure. Paul wishes that their giving would be a freely-given gift rather than an "extortion" (v. 5), or something that is given begrudgingly.

Here Paul describes two kinds of giving, a voluntary gift and extortion. In 9:5, Paul uses the word "the bountiful gift" that means literally "blessing." Paul reminds the people that their giving would be a blessing to others. Paul explains why they should give generously, "***the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully***" (9:6). Paul says that giving can be a blessing not only to others but also to the givers. The point of Paul's imagery is that those who give generously to the Jerusalem Christians will give as a farmer gives away his seed in expectation of a rich harvest of produce.

Paul also gives the Christians more reasons for the generous giving. First, "God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7). God knows how we give to others. God wants us to give with great joy. Second, God is able to meet our needs. We may hesitate to give generously because we worry about not having enough resources to meet our own needs. But Paul assures that God will provide with everything we need. Third, our giving brings thanksgiving to God. Those who benefit from our giving would give thanks to God. Giving makes others experience the love of God through givers. We become hands and feet of the Lord.

Last Sunday Diane Magnuson told us that we would continue to support backpack ministry for Bournedale Elementary School children. During last week someone brought lots of food items for the backpack ministry. I am sure that those who receive our gifts would be grateful to us and to the Lord for our generosity.

4. God is a Generous Giver

Why do we Christians help others? John 3:16 says, "***God so loved the world that he gave his only son***." God loves to give us everything we need and do anything to save us. That's why Paul says in Romans 8:32, "***He who did not withhold his own son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else***?" If we truly believe what Paul says, there is nothing that we need to worry about.

5. Conclusion

When Job had lost his possessions and family, he said, "***Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*** (1:21). Job acknowledges that God has sovereign authority over everything God had given him.

Everything we have is given by God. When we were born, we did not bring anything with us. Everything we have now is God's gifts. We know that God wants us to use them for God's glory.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians that God does not want us to give gifts begrudgingly. Instead, God wants us to have the same heart as the Macedonian and Corinthian Christians had when they gave to Jewish Christians at Jerusalem. They gave with the sense of privilege and great joy.

6. Application

I am so grateful that Swift Memorial UMC has so many disciples of Jesus Christ who make a big contribution not only with money but also with time and talents. Last Sunday Susan Scott, our lay leader, presented Certificate of Appreciation to Cathy Sharon-Matthews and Ted Burnham. I am sure that we have many more members who deserve such recognitions.

This morning the questions that I would to ask you and me are: Do we see our giving and contribution as a privilege or an obligation and a burden? Do we have the joy of sharing?

Often when giving is talked about at church, sometimes the congregation feels like a form of pressure from the pastor to give more in our tithing and offerings. But I learned that such a pressure does not make any difference. Giving pressure to you is not the purpose of this message. I would rather want you and me to experience the joy of giving. How can we have the joy of giving? When we see and treat others as God sees and treats us. When we focus not on money but on human beings that God loves, we can have the joy of giving.

When we love someone, we would give everything and do anything. That's what God does for us. As we grow in faith and truly trust the Lord, we can be cheerful givers and our giving would be bigger and greater. Amen.