

Giving with Purpose

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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We reflected at the last Stewardship worship on *gratitude as a practice*, the foundation of following Jesus. In short, we highlighted the fact that the spiritual practice of gratitude can make a difference in us and influence how we live differently and reach out to the world.

This week, we focus on how, maybe, giving more intentionally, more regularly – remember that we don't just give money, we give of ourselves – how it connects us with love that God has planted in each of us. We will take a deeper look at this letter from Paul in ancient times, a leader of the new movement after Jesus was crucified.

Paul writes this portion of his letter to the Corinthian church to address one specific area of their Christian witness: their financial giving to support those in need in Jerusalem, including needy Christians. This letter was also written to stir the people to give in the midst of a famine that had swept across Judea.

Within these two verses, there are two key principles for us to consider as we think about giving:

- 1) it matters how much we give; and
- 2) giving should be intentional with love in mind.

Using the principle of sowing and reaping, Paul highlights that generosity begets greater generosity. Here's what he says:

...the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."¹

This is a principle that holds true in the natural and spiritual world. More obvious to a farmer or a gardener. There is a direct relationship between the abundance and sparsity of a harvest based on the quantity sown. Now, I'm not a farmer. But, intuitively, we know that if we scatter seed sparingly in a field, it will produce a meager crop. Scatter generously, and it will produce an abundant crop. That word "sparingly" is a good translation from the Greek; it means to *hold back*, to give with restraint, *to measure with a teaspoon rather than a jug*.

We can imagine that Paul suspects that among his people are some who are measuring their generosity with teaspoons. Even though they have enough available to give more, they hold back. If that is the case, then the restraint is not just about the money; it is about the state of the heart of the giver.

The seed you and I sow may be our money, or the offering of our time, or contributing our talent. What holds you, or me, back from giving generously, with our whole heart? What holds us back from giving more, when in reality we can give? Remember that giving is as much our time, our talents as it is giving from our money.

Too often we give out of a sense of scarcity rather than from a sense of bounty.

¹ 2 Corinthians chapter 9, verse 6

Can you relate to giving, but with a worry that you won't have enough? I think we have all been there – feeling you don't have enough. Losing touch with a sense of trust in God – God who first provides and who promises to give us what we need. Trust is sometimes difficult to come by.

But Jesus says,

...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear ... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your Creator feeds them...And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ...But strive first for the kin-dom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”²

Here's the thing: if we want to make a difference, to be part of God's vision of making a difference, then giving with half a heart won't work. As we stumble across these scripture stories and parables, we are continually reminded that we need to sow our seeds differently. We are invited to change to the way we give, to give out of a sense of bounty rather than out of scarcity.

Paul uses this principle of “bountiful giving”, using the Greek word *eulogia*, literally means “good” “word”, but later evolves into meaning “blessing”. In essence it means that those who bless will be blessed, those who give generously will receive generosity in return. Where might the blessing come from?

Let me propose two possible directions. First, the act of giving itself – can you remember a time that you gave extravagantly to someone or something that was meaningful to you? We feel a burst of satisfaction, joy. Did I actually do that? I went all out, there, rather than following my rule of giving a little to this and to that.

Jesus does say, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”³

The other blessing, I suggest, comes from our Source of blessing, our Creator God. God promises blessing, and God, throughout the stories of our Bible, delivers time and again. The invitation for our modern reality, then is to believe in our hearts that our contribution will produce a greater outcome.

Paul moves from quantity of giving to the state of the heart of the giver. He says, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion”⁴. The Greek he uses translates to “out of grief or sorrow” and “out of necessity or compulsion”. Giving should not be a painful experience, or feeling like someone is twisting your arm, or holding your loved one for a ransom unless you give. Our heart should neither feel coerced nor guilty as we give.

Charitable giving these days seems often driven by guilt tripping, arm-twisting, and sob stories. It's hard to say no to images of poverty on the screen, children in need of surgery that will save their lives, parents who need assistance so that they can give their children Christmas presents. These are tactics designed to tug on our emotions.

² Matthew chapter 6, verses 25–26, 28–29, and verse 33

³ Acts chapter 20, verse 35

⁴ 2 Corinthians chapter 9, verse 7

For Paul, giving is not merely out of emotion. Compassion is the emotional response to suffering, but if after giving we feel guilt or regret, I might ask: what drove my response to begin with. Paul's directive in his letter is: give as you have "made up your mind," – the Greek word meaning to reach a decision beforehand, to commit myself to it.

Circumstances change, and we are asked to respond – but we must evaluate what we have to give, and also the significance and size of the needs we hope to meet.

That is the rational part of our giving. We have that usual offering we give. Paul suggests we prayerfully think about whether or not that is whole-hearted giving, or, if our heart is telling us to give more fully. Can you and I resolve to give with trust in our Creator that our gift will make a difference? If so, then Paul says, give with your whole hope, your faith with talents and treasure.

Christian giving is to be a product of thoughtful discipleship. Remember when Scott McClure rode his bike in the Mission and Service Hullabaloo to raise hundreds of dollars for "Bikes for Pastors"? Remember all the fun-raising we have done for community outreach? Yes, fun-raising. We quickly raised money for several causes, because we believed in it.

Paul says:

God wants invested disciples who are ready to give with heart and soul, to give because they are able to give, as they are able to give.

So, what do you think? Are you in?