

In our Giving & Living – Discipleship

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

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We have been reflecting for the past four weeks giving as a spiritual practice, a discipline.

First, we talked about how gratitude as a spiritual practise transforms us. The second Sunday of the Stewardship series was about how generous actions are most powerful when they come from true, loving intentions. Today, we end the series by reflecting on giving rooted in, and as an expression of, our sense of being a follower of Jesus – a disciple.

We had the story of Jesus observing the widow with limited means dropping in her two lepta, very meagre indeed, and so subtly. Jesus and disciples watching this alongside a parade of other rather ostentatious demonstrations of generosity, people parading up to the offering plate, making sure others saw their grand offerings.

You may recall that Jesus pointed to the humble widow and said that she gave far more than the wealthy givers. I joked that perhaps this observation will not help our efforts to inspire more generosity in our community. But hold on a moment.

In the reading Dan just did, the letter to the Corinthian church, Paul appears to be saying that the primary qualification for generous giving is not whether or not we have lots of money. The primary criterion for giving is in being a disciple of Jesus. Generosity is not in the amount, great or small, that we give.

Paul says that we give according to our means – quantity means less than what is in our heart as we give it. Do we give to fulfill an obligation, or do we give because we remember that the Creator first gave to us? Do we give to achieve some kind of goal or category, or do we give out of gratitude for the gift of Jesus, his life, his message, his life given, and his resurrection achieved for us?

The difference is not the amount, but what is in our heart as we give. Paul writes this letter to a Church, encouraging them to make a financial gift to the Jerusalem church. But not everyone in the Corinthian church is wealthy, just as we in this St. Andrew's community are not all wealthy. The needs in the Jerusalem church are great, so they are encouraged to give from their hearts by Paul. Another interesting thing in the time is an ethnic difference; the Church in Jerusalem was largely Jewish, but Corinth, a cosmopolitan city, was culturally, ethnically diverse. This was a big "ask" by Paul, because there had been some serious fault lines between Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles).

Some Jews had trouble swallowing the idea of Gentiles in the fold. The only commonality between the Corinthian Church being appealed to and the Jewish Church in Jerusalem is that they both followed Jesus. Being disciples, though, meant everything. It still does, in spite of theological and ethnic differences among our modern-day Christians around the world, we are one in Christ.

Paul says to Corinth, and to us, that we give to express what we believe. We give because we serve God, we are channels of God's grace. I remember as a child hearing about giving the first fruits. The ancient Israelites giving their best crops, animals, as an offering to the Creator, a thank you for life. I recall as a child growing up in a Church how that baffled me. That change my dad gave me to put in my pocket before church, I wanted, and probably did, hold back a portion of it my commission for staying quiet in church. But this idea of giving extravagantly according to my means, the first fruits from me to God's work. I get it now.

Paul says that we give from our deep desire to glorify God, giving not just of our treasures, but from our intentions, our heart.

I didn't know that the word Paul uses for "give", in Greek, has the same roots as the word we know as liturgy. To give is to worship. It is service by those who have ability to help financially, to those who are less fortunate. But to give for Paul also means service to the priest in the Temple. When we give, we become channels of the grace of God to others. Grace, being the free gift from God; you can't earn it. We give freely, sharing that grace, sharing our first fruits. We cannot know how many people are impacted by our giving. God gives to us first, and, in response, we are invited, not obligated, to follow Jesus as disciples. THAT is the most generous gift we can give, our whole heart. Our sense of discipleship, of serving, makes our gifts generous. I'll give Paul the final word, here: "Thank God for [God's] gift that words can't describe!" (2 Corinthians 9:15, Common English Bible) Amen.