

“GIVING TOGETHER”

2 Corinthians 1:3-5; 8:1-15

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The churches in Macedonia (think Greece) were poor. The church in Corinth had all kinds of resources: material and spiritual. The church in Jerusalem was dealing with some serious financial distress. The churches in Macedonia begged to be able to participate in the offering being collected to assist the saints in Jerusalem. The church in Corinth experienced some unexpected expenses (perhaps) and were slow in completing their pledge.

I know a woman who lived on a library aide's salary, plus a little rent from unreliable tenants, who tithed, paid her pledge first, and then worried how she was going to pay the rest of the bills.

By contrast, on extremely rare occasions, I get a phone call from someone threatening to pull their pledge unless.... Some people complain that the church asks for money too often, while others wonder why we haven't taken up an offering for....

All this makes talking about money tricky. I don't imagine the people of Corinth really want to hear about the generosity coming out of Macedonia. And to be honest, generous people like those in Macedonia, don't need to hear a sermon about money. Those who need to hear about generosity don't want it, while those who want to hear about it, don't need it.

But Paul plunges ahead anyway, so I might as well also. The first thing to realize when trying to encourage generosity, is that guilt proves to be a short term fix that becomes counterproductive in the long run. Embarrass me into making a donation and it will probably be the last donation you get out of me.

The problem here is that so many of the reasons to be generous can be twisted into guilt trips. Take these churches in Macedonia. Is Paul holding them up as an example of generosity? Or is he using them to embarrass the people in Corinth? And when he says, "Now as you [in Corinth] excel in everything," is he speaking about God's rich blessing that might also flow out to the needs in Jerusalem or is he criticizing them for their slowness to complete their pledge? Bottom line: you can't spark generosity in an ungenerous soul with examples of generosity. Despite the efforts of the spirits in Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, examples of generosity did not transform Ebenezer Scrooge. Nor did the attempts to expose his guilt. And though we are led to believe that fear helped him turn the corner, his conversion actually comes a little sooner. Something else moves him to change. More about that later.

The threat of hell, the guilt trip, and even examples of generosity will not convert the hardened heart. James Bryan Smith talks about two conditions necessary for generosity.

The first is a sense of abundance. People who feel blessed, give. People worried that there is not enough to go around hold on to their resources. Depending on the day, I could be either one of these people. I have a nice home and yard, more books than I can read, a variety of music to listen to, a wife whose love never ceases to amaze me, two daughters I couldn't be prouder of, and a congregation whose love and support hold me up. I've also recently acquired a car payment which will cut into the resources available for other things. To some extent, my pledge for 2019 depends on which reality I choose to live in: the sense of abundance or a sense of limited resources.

When Paul reminds the Corinthians of the giftedness of their congregation, I'm not hearing a guilt trip, I'm hearing an observation about their abundance, because that's where I am most of the time. Smith writes: "Everything we have is a gift. We were made without any effort on our part. We breathe undeserved air. The sun gratuitously rises and warms our planet, and along with the unmerited rain, nourishes the land, yielding delicious fruits and grains. It is all manna," he says, "the unearned provision of a lavish and loving God" (p.85). Something as simple as a deep breath draws our attention to the generosity of God and sparks our own generosity.

The other spur to generosity that Smith mentions is the "feeling of compassion." In my mind, this is what transforms Scrooge. Each of the three spirits presents scenes that appeal to his sense of compassion. With each scene, his compassion begins to peek through before he shuts it down. But in the end, the truth that his stinginess might lead to the death of Tiny Tim opens the floodgates of compassion that make him a changed man.

Compassion is not just a "feeling sorry for," but a "feeling with." It is a word that ties us together, that connects us, that brings one person's abundance with another's need.

It is a reminder that giving is not the isolated act of an individual, but a sharing between persons. Giving is always a giving together, an act of the community. The financial commitments we make today are our gifts to support the ministries of this congregation. No one person's gift is more important than another's gift because they reflect our commitment to each other and our compassion for the world. We give together out of the abundance of God's grace to us. Our giving reflects our interest in ministering to the needs of one another and to the world beyond.

Our giving together reflects our firm conviction that "God is good... all the time." And our giving together reflects the love that we have for one another... a love that is a sharing among us and beyond us as we live into God's vision for creation. Amen.

Resources:

James Bryan Smith, *A Good and Beautiful God*
Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*