

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 27-28, 2009
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

“Giving in Grace”

This morning, I want to begin today’s message by expanding that Second (Epistle) Reading from Paul the apostle. Sometimes where an appointed passage from Scripture begins or ends leaves out something pretty important, and that is the case today. Paul’s words to the Corinthian Christian in verses 1-7, which come immediately before where today’s lesson picks up, set the tone for what follows, and so I want to read them to you now (*read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7*). In particular, Paul’s words about how the Macedonian believers **“gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us”** (2 Cor. 8:5) are important. As we continue on with our summer preaching series, “Walking by Faith,” today’s message focuses on what it means to be a steward, a manager, of God’s gifts under the theme “Giving in Grace.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

The context of this Scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians 8 is a fundraising effort that Paul had undertaken. So you see, our own efforts today, like *Building God’s Vision for Tomorrow*, *Ablaze! for God’s Mission*, and others stand in a long line of other efforts that have gone before us. We don’t know if Paul had a catchy title for this effort, but the purpose was to provide relief for the saints in the mother church at Jerusalem; to help those in need where the faith began. As Paul traveled around the eastern Mediterranean, he encouraged believers to provide financial help for the poor in Jerusalem, since it was through them that the Gospel first went out. When it comes to stewardship, managing God’s resources entrusted to our care, Paul gets it right. He begins by holding up the Macedonian Christians as an example because they **“gave themselves first to the Lord.”** What Paul is saying here is that their stewardship response was grounded and rooted in devotion to God. That came first, and then flowing out of that devotion came their willing desire to help their brothers and sisters in need. Christian stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God’s family, the church, in managing life and all of life’s resources for God’s purposes. Christian stewardship begins with God, and here again, Paul gets it right. In verse 9 in of that Second Lesson, Paul writes: **“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”** We often speak of sacrificial giving in Christian stewardship, but our own giving pales in comparison with what God has given and sacrificed: the life of his only Son. How many of us would be willing to offer up our own beloved child for the sake of another? I don’t think I could do that, and that’s where the comparison between our own sacrificial giving and the Lord’s ends. If we need inspiration and a model for our own giving, we need look no further than God’s giving the life of his beloved Son to be the sacrifice for our sins on the tree of the cross. Jesus became poor so that we might become rich – not rich in material things or money, but rich in faith, hope, and love – the hallmarks of the child of God.

When all is said and done, Christian stewardship is not about fund raising, but faith raising. The purpose behind Christian stewardship is to help God’s people understand, grasp, and live the truth that God owns all things. He is the Maker and Owner of heaven and earth (Psalm 24:1), and because God is the Maker and Owner of heaven and earth, we cannot *give* anything to God, we can only *manage* what belongs to God. The truth of this radical call to discipleship sets us free; we are no longer shackled to things that imprison us. Instead, we now see these things – material goods, money, time, gifts and talents – as tools to serve God’s purpose in the world. As Thornton Wilder, author and playwright, once said: “Money is like manure; it’s not worth a thing unless it’s spread around encouraging young things to grow.”

This evening, we will gather for a Call Service for a Spanish Language Mission Developer. As the calling congregation, St. John's has both the privilege and the responsibility of extending this call in partnership with our brothers and sisters in Christ at Grace-Woodbridge and Prince of Peace-Springfield, our fellow covenant congregations. The honor of your presence is requested at the Call Service for this historic mission milestone. According to our congregational constitution, a quorum of at least 30 voting members is needed. My prayer has been and continues to be that the Holy Spirit will inspire and motivate us to far exceed this minimum requirement as a show of encouragement and support for this undertaking. It goes without saying that there are strong stewardship connections in moving forward with Spanish Language Mission: stewardship of finances as we provide a compensation package for the Mission Developer; stewardship of facilities as we provide office and meeting space for this mission; stewardship of human resources as we roll up our sleeves and contribute time and energy to launching this mission; and certainly stewardship of the Word and prayer as we continue to ask the Lord of the Church for his guidance and direction upon this emerging mission. In many respects, we are laying a foundation for Spanish Language Mission. As with any construction project, that foundation is critical for what follows. When the building itself goes up, that is what people see, but underneath it all is that firm foundation laid in confidence that the Lord who has begun this good among us will bring it to completion in the day of Christ (Philippians 1:6).

When all is said and done, this mission, like any other, does not belong to us, but to the Lord. We have been entrusted with managing God's mission as his stewards, and so despite the title of this sermon, "Giving in Grace," we cannot give anything to God. We can only manage in faithfulness and with grace what belongs to God, living out what Paul writes: **"For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich"** (2 Cor. 8:9). May God help us to do this, for Jesus' sake. Amen.