

Generous Like Jesus
The Monroe Congregational Church
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2nd Corinthians 8:1-15, John 13:31-35

It had been about a year since the church at Corinth had agreed to contribute to the Judean Poor Relief Fund. In the meantime, there'd been some intense drama. Some preacher boys from out of town had come to visit and tried to convince the saints in Corinth to ditch Paul and follow their church growth strategy. That's when everything turned into a hot mess.

So Paul wrote a letter to try and get their relationship back on track, a letter we've been wrestling with for the last four weeks that has covered so many good community topics: How to restore hope after a relationship is broken, the value of understanding our own histories and culpabilities, When it is best to move forward in faith, how to begin all over again with a fresh start. All important, all relational.

But this week, Paul's got money on his mind. For him, the collection for Jerusalem, the Judean Poor Relief Fund, was a pressing financial matter. The Corinthians zeal for the project had dwindled. Today Paul, more or less, encourages them to finish what they started.

He begins to light a fire under them by bragging about the saints at Macedonia: a people who gave what they could afford and even more than they could afford, and did it voluntarily. You see, he knew his audience. Corinthian culture was competitive, and Paul knew they'd be embarrassed if those poor Macedonians beat them at giving.

He didn't browbeat, guilt-trip, or nag his Corinthian friends. Instead, he drew a line straight from giving to the collection for Jerusalem to Jesus. Paul reminded them that Jesus was a giver. Jesus was uber-generous. And, of course, the point of everything we do is to become more like Jesus. So he frames the Judean Poor Relief Fund as a matter of imitating Jesus.

Here's how the formula goes: Jesus gave up the richness of life in heaven, in perfect union with Father God and the Spirit. And he became a human... not a king or nobleman or business tycoon.... not rich or powerful or famous... just a human. He became a poor kid, born to an unwed teenage mother who

grew up in a backwater town in Galilee no one had ever heard of. And he died a shameful, undignified death reserved for outlaws, slaves, and other defeated people.

And he taught us that generosity begins with giving yourself first - whether it's the money you give in the collection plate on Sundays; or the meal you bring to a grieving family; or when you drop what you're doing to help someone through a tough situation; or when you take the time to listen well... it is always a personal investment.

And it's here that I feel the need to insert a warning. We have heard Paul gushing over the Macedonians, who freely gave to Judean Poor Relief Fund even though they were poorer than a dirt floor, and persecuted to boot. Then we've seen him hold up Jesus as an example of generosity. Sometimes these words can be twisted to browbeat poor people into giving when they really can't; or giving more than they can afford. That's not right, and I don't think it's what Paul was trying to teach.

Paul says that Jesus gave up the privilege of his divine status, and embraced humanity by becoming one of us so he could better serve our needs. Jesus had all the power and wealth of the universe, but he gave it up to make us whole. So it's inappropriate to try to shake down saints for money they don't have - that's not the same thing. In fact, that's the exact opposite of what Jesus would have us do.

The point is this: The Jesus model of generosity involves someone who has status, wealth, privilege, power, or talent giving first, so that those who don't have can be blessed. It is humbling oneself so someone else can be exalted. And when we make our giving a legalistic requirement instead of an inspiration to follow Christ, we miss the point.

Do you know about the sacrificial giving that inspired me last weekend?

- The high schoolers who got up early to work in the strawberry fields, on one of the first days they could sleep in this summer.
- And the oldest saint among us who spent four hours on his feet pouring drinks for the wait staff because he loves to interact with the children.
- And the recently retired person who checked in with John and Clark all week to see what he could do to help them.

- And the kitchen manager who put her physical pain aside and served for three straight days with humor and kindness.
- And the new attendee who took the lead on take-out because she wanted to give back to a church community that gave her high school daughters so much, and who has already promised that she's "all-in" next year.
- And the attitude of everyone who, when they learned we ran out of biscuits and dipped berries for the celebration meal, said "wow, aren't we blessed to have such an active weekend?"

Here at MCC, we are surrounded with inspiration. We don't expect anyone to give what they can't afford, but we do want to acknowledge the generosity of those who can give and do so willingly.

Last year, the weather cut our Strawberry Festival profits. It was a rough year, and we were concerned about our finances so we were not as generous with our outreach as we have been in the past.

This year, I think we have turned that around – at least I hope we have! To be honest? Before my work here at MCC is done, my dream is to have a year that we can give ALL the profit from Strawberry Festival away. Certainly a church that can pull off such a tremendous weekend together can do something like that.

And wouldn't that be an amazing goal to reach? We could fund:

An entire Habitat House or ten Arks for The Heifer Project or we can settle a bunch of refugee families or sponsor a building project at Silver Lake or pay for two homes on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation or....

I know, I know. It's a bold, wacky move on our part. I can almost predict what you might say to me when you have a chance to respond... we would have to be certain of our own financial stability first, we would have to make sure that our stewardship was strong, that our forecasted pledges came in so that we could care for our staff members and these wonderful building assets that we are blessed with and pay for things we need like Sunday school curriculum and sheet music. Yes, yes, yes. Even Paul said he wasn't interested in afflicting the Corinthians in order to comfort the saints in Jerusalem! Giving it all away sounds hard!

Paul's hope was that the Corinthians would understand that their generosity contributed to equality. Because he wanted everyone—Macedonians, Corinthians, Judeans—to have enough.

That's why he wrote to them about the manna miracle in Exodus, reminding them that the one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little. All the saints are on a journey together toward their promised inheritance—just like the tribes of Israel during the Exodus.

As N. T. Wright puts it—God wanted *"to ensure that his people do not go hungry on their journey home."* I think that's our hope too.

Sharing creates community. Gifts can and do break down walls, ease tensions, build trust, and form friendships. The giver and the recipient are bound together. In the bond of friendship, giving becomes reciprocal. Gifts are freely exchanged, until no one can quite remember who owes what to whom. Sharing becomes a way of life.

There's this really cool dynamic achieved when we invest ourselves first and go "all in"; we become more deeply invested in not only the work; but in the lives of those with whom we share. When we invest ourselves, our definition of treasure changes. The relationship becomes the jewel, and seeing our friend hopeful and happy and growing and thriving is better than gold.

The early church was born and nurtured as a utopian vision of fellowship and generosity. The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. God performed many wonders and signs through them. They were united and shared everything, selling their pieces of property and possessions and distributing the proceeds to everyone who needed them. They even shared their food with gladness and simplicity.

We tend to dismiss this picture of the infant church as, at best, a necessity; or, at worst, a sign of their naiveté that was broken up soon enough by the reality of persecution. But both those ideas miss the point.

The movement from partnership to fellowship to sharing leads to deeper relationship and more sharing. It all began with them sitting together to hear the apostles' teaching around each other's dining room tables. Before you know it, they were all living on the same block, and you were never

quite sure whose house was whose. Everyone's house was kind of like Jerry's apartment on Seinfeld—kooky people coming and going, grabbing food out of one another's refrigerators, picking up conversations right where they'd left off. Like they all belonged there. Like they were a family or something. I wish we still liked each other that much, don't you?

Generosity and fellowship working together like that has the power to transform a bunch of strangers from all over the world into a family. When we follow the Jesus model of generosity—the self-giving way, the way of sharing-as-fellowship—it changes us. It transforms our hearts, our worldview, our values. We discover that our most valuable treasures are found in each other. And, like the man said: "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Luke 12:34). Amen.