

Sermon Series “When the Spirit Moves”
Sermon “Giving What You Have”
Rev. Michael J. Eaton
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
June 27, 2021

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 (NRSV)

⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For 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. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written,

The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.

The Grace Church treasurer went to the pastor with the bad news that they couldn't make the mortgage payment or pay the utilities. So the pastor went to his congregation on Sunday morning, “We need an extra-large offering this morning.” Then he added, “We will honor the person who gives the largest offering by inviting him or her to pick out three hymns for the service.”

To the pastor's delight, there was a one-thousand-dollar bill in the plate, which had him so excited he asked the big donor to identify himself so he could say, "Thank you."

A quiet little lady sitting in the back corner shyly stood, and the pastor invited her to the front. Telling her how generous her gift was, he also invited her to select three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation, pointed to the three handsomest men in the sanctuary, and said, "I'll take him and him and him."

When Paul was writing to Corinthian Church the first time a famine was occurring in the area surrounding Jerusalem. He invited a lot of churches to help the people experiencing the famine by asking for money. In effect, Paul was engaging in a steward campaign to help Christians in need.

The churches in Macedonia such as Thessalonica and Philippi responded to Paul's plea. In fact, these churches gave money to Paul even though they were experiencing some struggles of their own. Paul also encouraged the Corinthian Church to give as well. The Corinthian Church was a rich church. He wrote that they "excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking." If any church could do more it would be the people of First Church Corinth. "From <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~genepool/filelog.htm>;"

If the church at Corinth was fairly well-off, we might say they were members of the "upper crust" of Corinthian society. But what would we mean?

According to *Ye Olde English Sayings*, Visitors to Anne Hathaway's cottage (near Stratford upon Avon) are given this explanation while looking at the bread oven beside the fireplace in the kitchen: The bread was put, as a raw lump of dough, straight into the bread oven. No bread tin, it just sits on the floor of the oven. The oven is heated by the fire and is very hot at the bottom.

When the bread is done baking and taken out to cool, the base of the loaf is overcooked, black and also dirty. The top of the loaf is done just right, and still clean. The bottom of the loaf is for the servants to eat, while the upper crust is for the master of the house.”

In 2005, an economist, Steven Levitt, and a New York Times journalist, Steven Dubner, wrote a book, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Looks at the Hidden Side of Everything*. In their book, Levitt and Dubner show that economics is about a web of interconnected relationships. From their book, “Economics is, at root, the study of incentives: how people get what they want, or need, especially when other people want or need the same thing ... An incentive is a bullet, a lever, a key: an often-tiny object with astonishing power to change a situation.” If a person finds that a payoff is great enough then that person will possess a great deal of incentive to get that payoff.

Incentives cause people to do amazing things for good or for ill.

Take cheating, for example, which the book defines as “a primordial economic act: getting more for less.” People will risk an awful lot if the incentive is great enough.

In 1987, for example, 7 million children in the United States suddenly disappeared on April 15. Was it a massive alien abduction? Hardly. See, before 1987 people were only required to put the names of their dependents on their tax forms. Beginning in 1987, both names and social security numbers were required for each child listed. Overnight seven million kids, who had never been kids at all, simply vanished. The risk of getting caught outweighed the incentive of the tax break.

Incentives can cause a salesman to work harder, or they can cause him to fudge his numbers to look like he’s worked harder. Incentives can make a top sumo wrestler throw a match in order to fatten his wallet. Incentives can determine how a real estate agent lists your house for the quickest sale (incentives which are likely different from yours).

The bottom line? Incentives are the glue that really run our whole economy — we want the best for ourselves without having to do much for it.

Paul is hoping to give the church an incentive for helping out the folks in Jerusalem. He uses the Macedonian churches as examples. Bob Kaler writes,

In the Greco-Roman world, most learning took place through imitation as people modeled their lives after someone — be it in a trade, a sport, philosophy, household management or whatever. Think of it as a positive form of peer pressure: an incentive to be like someone else or even surpass them in character and practice. Paul not only encourages the Corinthians to follow the example of the Macedonians in their giving, but even more so the example of Christ, who became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (v. 9). All that they have, materially and spiritually, is the result of the grace of God and that grace is, in fact, a form of wealth in itself. God has poured himself out for them in Jesus Christ — how can they not do the same for others?

Paul would not agree with Freakonomics. Paul would speak about an economy of grace. Grace overflows in our lives. Should we keep that grace for ourselves? No! We have opportunities to share grace. The incentive to give away money is that we become a channel of grace. Jane Lancaster Patterson shares,

Paul’s rhetoric in this passage is like a carefully crafted painting, in which he builds up layers of related colors (grace, joy, thanks) as well as contrasting hues (poor, poverty, affliction) to try to convey what is essentially a mystery: the abundant grace of God flowing through the very vulnerability, marginality, and suffering of believers.

Paul shares, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” He is referring to the time of the Exodus when God provided manna to the hungry Israelites. Each day a person would collect what they needed. If they tried to hoard then the left-over manna would spoil. It was abundant grace that God showered on the Israelites. It is abundant grace that showers on us. Paul does not ask for what we do not have. Paul asks for what we can give from what we have.

Paul is encouraging the people at First Church Corinth to become channels of grace. The recipients of the grace are the starving Christians in Jerusalem. We are encouraged by Paul to be channels of grace through our giving. Our offering every Sunday provides the opportunity for each of us to be a channel of grace. From our offering plate, as an example, we are able to support Africa University through apportionments. Africa University becomes a channel of grace to its students. These students go back to their villages and cities in Africa to become channels of grace to whomever they encounter.

Our offering on Sunday morning helps Payson United Methodist Church become a channel of grace to our community and to our world. Is that not great incentive to give from what we have, courtesy of God's abundant grace? Amen.