

# “Joyful Generosity”

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

*2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15*

*“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” 2 Corinthians 8:9*

Today we begin a three week sermon series on the topic of stewardship as we approach our annual voters’ meeting after the Divine Service on May 17. During these three weeks our sermons will be based on various passages from chapters eight and nine of the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. Today we look at chapter eight and reflect on the theme of joyful generosity.

<sup>1</sup>In chapter eight Paul contrasts two groups: the congregation at Corinth and the Macedonian congregations. Paul had visited Macedonia (Acts 16-17). The people of the region were proud of their past but they were also very poor as we learned in verse two of our reading this morning. Yet, those from the Christian churches within that region gave generously to support the work of the Gospel through Paul and his coworkers though he never asked for it from them (Phil 4:10-18). While they did not have much to give, of their own free will they begged to be part of the collection Paul was taking for the Christians in Jerusalem who in their poverty needed support (vv.3-5). They gave what they could, even “beyond their means” (vs.3). Thus far the congregations in the region of Macedonia.

The congregation at Corinth, a large city whose citizens had about 400,000 slaves, had to be prodded in their act of taking an offering. Paul’s first letter had to deal with their splitting into factions, permitting immorality, taking each other to court, drunkenness when they got together, and doubts about the resurrection of Jesus. Although they had many gifts, they were acting immature and unspiritual. His letter had instructed them to abandon their sinful ways and to rely on the grace of God. They had taken Paul’s admonition to heart and had even joined in a special effort to take a collection for the Jerusalem Christians. Now after a year they were losing their zeal for generosity. They had plenty (vs. 14), but lost interest in giving some of their own resources to others.

So let us consider a very blunt question based on the comparison of the Christians in these two regions. Which group are we like? Are we begging to participate in helping others because of a joy in generosity? Or are we more like the Corinthians who start to be generous and then doubt that we can be generous and find no joy in it?

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<sup>1</sup> Selections of this sermon are adapted from insights provided by James L. Brauer, “Homiletical Helps—Sixth Sunday after Pentecost—2 Cor 8:1-9, 13-15,” *Concordia Journal* April 1997, Vol 23, no 2, pp.140-142.

To be sure, the people of Atonement Lutheran are generous in supporting the work of the Gospel in this place and within the immediate community. It has once been said that it takes an average worship attendance of approximately one hundred parishioners in a local congregation to be able to support a full time Pastor. Here at Atonement our average worship attendance is in the upper seventies and we are supporting financially a full time pastor, a part time music director, a part time administrative assistant, and a part time custodian. In addition to this we have taken it upon ourselves to serve the community through a tutor center and through annual outreach events like a vacation bible school program, a car show, and a living nativity event. Yes, the people of Atonement Lutheran are generous in supporting the work of the Gospel in this place and within the immediate community. And we want to be able to do more. We want to be even more generous. Like the Macedonians we desire that through his Spirit our God would create within us a fervent desire to have joy in generosity.

When we take on car payments or a mortgage, we make a written promise in the contracts to provide monthly payments. Before making that decision wise consumers determine how much income can be reserved for such payments. Some contributors take on payment schedules that are beyond their means either because they don't do their homework or because they don't manage their spending plan. They purchase too many other things or are not ready for emergency expenses. Wise contributors have divided their income into expense categories and can determine what percentage goes for each category. When income goes down, the percentages need adjustment—a greater percentage is needed for necessities, a smaller percentage for the less important items. When income goes up, the percentage for non-necessities can increase. To make plans to give a percentage of our income is perhaps the best approach to continue a discipline of joy in generosity with our financial gifts. And so here at Atonement we use our annual pledge cards as a tool to aid us in a discipline of generous tithing with our financial gifts that the Lord has given us. We offer those pledge cards to the Lord today during the offering.

The Macedonian Christians gave according to their means (vs. 3) and of their own “free will”—no one forced them into this commitment. The Corinthian Christians began giving a year earlier. They too are urged to give only according to what they have (vs. 12). In his first letter Paul had recommended that way of giving: “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (1 Cor 16:2). We get our practice of weekly tithing from Scripture passages like this. It was not a legal obligation where a mortgage holder could come and repossess when payments were missed. It was a voluntary contribution from the bounty which the Lord had provided. Less bounty, less to give; more bounty, more to give. This was a matter of free will, not coercion. In the Lord's design those who have more help those who have less. The beauty of it is that when conditions change and the giver becomes needy there will be someone who has more and will be generous.

But what happened in Corinth, and what happens to us? We start to give and the regular setting aside of money for the gift goes fine for a while. Then our priorities shift because we want something for ourselves and we don't want to give up anything else. We see the percentage for the gift and take that amount, or part of it, for ourselves. This selfish act thwarts good intentions and unbalances priorities. Now what we said we would do becomes a lie and we stop being the kind of person we said we wanted to be. Paul himself once admitted this when he said, “For I know that nothing good dwells within me,

that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:18-19). Similarly, we started out to do good, but have failed. We lost even a desire to do the right thing when it comes to generosity. We failed those who are to receive the gift. We failed ourselves. We failed God. How then can we find joy in generosity?

It starts with admitting our failure to God: "God, not only did I not do what I promised to do, but I even lost interest in doing good. Forgive me for Jesus' sake and teach me your ways." Then comes the word of God, "In Christ you are forgiven!" God put real "generosity" into our lives. Even before we were ready to admit our sin, God created a way to have justice prevail. He sent his own Son to take our sin on Himself and die on the cross so that we need not be punished. He took our punishment on himself—of his own free will. He gave up his riches so that our needs could be met. As Paul says in verse 9: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." By the merciful generosity of God we are made new people, able to serve others and not put ourselves first.

This is the secret of joy in generosity, for grace and joy are related. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians the word for grace (vv. 1 and 9: χάρις) and the word for joy (v. 2: χαρᾶς) sound alike; they share the same word stem. The state of joy or gladness for Christians is not just a matter of sound-alike words stems. Joy is what the women experienced who left the tomb after the angel told them that Jesus had risen (Mt 28:8). The grace of God, where God has a favorable attitude (Lk 2:14) toward us, is the key to our ability to show kindness to others. Our kindness is a result of being new creatures in Christ. Our kindness comes when we trust God's promises that he will care for us and we have no fear of releasing some of our riches for those who are in need. Our kindness mirrors God's kindness: the forgiven forgive, those with plenty share their plenty, and the blessed become a blessing to others. Joy in God's kindness leads to joy in showing kindness to others. Since we are God's and all that we have is on loan from God, we have no reluctance in giving part of what we have to those who need it. It is our joy to be kind and to say no to our flesh when it says, "Keep it for yourself! You might not have enough! Don't give it away!" Instead we say to our fleshly desires, "By the mercy of God I am his; it is my joy to show mercy and kindness to others. That is how God has treated me. Go away, selfish thoughts!"

The joy in doing good to others comes from God's grace. We can finish what we start when we continue to rely on the mercy that made it possible for us to abandon selfishness. Hear the word of forgiveness from God. Receive the body and blood of the Lord in the Holy Sacrament; it was given for you. Depart in joy and serve with gladness. Joy in generosity comes from immeasurable mercy—God's work in Christ. It is yours! Amen.