

“Summer Pledge Drive”

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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Introduction to the Epistle Lesson –

As we read this passage, we come into the middle of a conversation that has been going on about a relief effort – a giving campaign – as Paul asks the Christian community in Corinth to help some Christians in need in Jerusalem. Paul talks about it here for a couple of chapters in 2nd Corinthians, but speaks of it already before in 1st Corinthians and mentions it in the letter to the Galatians and in Romans – this project is a big deal; and here Paul is making his appeal.

I have in the past professed or confessed my propensity for listening to NPR – National Public Radio – and here’s a quick test to see if you too might be a bit over the top in your NPR listening: can you complete this phone number? 888-258-.... (9866) ?! It’s the toll-free pledge line for Michigan Radio, the local NPR affiliate. That number is repeated constantly during the periodic fund drives – and after years of fund drives, the number is engrained in my brain 888-258-9866. And I always think, as I’m listening, ‘why am I listening to this?’

Well, here are at least two initial goals for this sermon: that you find my summer pledge drive less annoying than NPRs, and that you do not wonder about this sermon: ‘why am I listening to this?’ And really I shouldn’t be talking about this at all, because I’m just trying to be a bit clever with the whole ‘summer pledge drive’ thing in the sermon title – I’m not really going to be talking about money much at all – I want to talk about broader issues of abundance and generosity and gratitude. But I thought bringing up a pledge drive might get your attention – perhaps stir up some anxiety...which instead we could call ‘creative tension’ – because the truth is, talking about money and

pledge drives and such is often an anxious topic for folks, particularly in churches.

And the Apostle Paul is really ‘exhibit A’ for observing that whole dynamic. In the Corinthians passage, Paul IS talking about money – a pledge drive of sorts – and as he does so Paul dances gingerly around the subject like he’s walking on hot coals. In Paul’s writings I would characterize him most often as often forceful, opinionated, sometimes downright aggressive – but not here: he is diplomatic and gracious...or you could say pandering and wishy-washy! Paul starts with flattery (‘you excel in everything!’...why not excel in giving too!) – but ‘this isn’t a command...this is just advice...’ – ‘and it’s not that this is meant to put pressure on you...but giving really is the right thing to do’. It’s quite a song and dance from Paul. It really is kind of amusing to see the great apostle Paul wrestling with how to delicately approach this issue. This request for money. This pledge drive. It is somewhat reassuring to see that there is nothing new about the anxiety surrounding such issues.

But I’m not talking about money, right? Remember? ☺ Well, I’m almost ready to not talk about money... but I just want to ask: ‘why?’ Why is this such delicate territory for Paul? Why such anxiety for us? It’s a good question. And I’m sure there are parts of the answer that would reveal the shadow side of that anxiety – the truth that money and materials things are made too important, and that we are attached too much to such things. OK – but in addition to those shadows it’s also simply true that part of the challenging energy of this is that it is very personal – it really is difficult to say for or to someone else what they could or should do. Paul doesn’t know everyone’s circumstances – doesn’t know everyone’s resources – doesn’t know everyone’s motives: it’s very personal. So instead of me teasing Paul as

pandering, how about if I give him some credit for his sensitivity? This is personal, and Paul speaks graciously to the issue.

And that's how I'd like to approach this too – that is, by speaking from the personal nature of this. I'm ready to not talk about money, but more about abundance and generosity and gratitude, which are the themes here that have spoken to me. And I have to say that I am genuinely bemused, amused with myself, to be preaching on this text, given the other lectionary passages this Sunday – the Old Testament and Gospel stories are marvelous, rich narratives to hear and reflect on, matters of life and death – while Corinthians is a sort of obscure story from the early church. But what's there in Corinthians struck a chord with me a while back when I read these texts, and has continued to resonate through the events of this past week. What resonates is the sense of looking at life through a lens of abundance and generosity – or, to put those ideas together and use a word not used in this passage, to live from a perspective of gratitude.

And it seems the only way to do that is to speak personally, and then have you and God's Spirit make your own connections about such things – because I know how particular these things feel to my own circumstances. And my experience has been what a difficult and ongoing struggle it is for me to live from that perspective of abundance and generosity – and how meaningful and rich (to use an evocative adjective) it has been and is for me when I actually do.

Part of it does have to do with stuff...even though I'm not talking about money 😊. And it has become important for me to have a full awareness of just how much stuff I have – the abundance, and over-abundance of it. In this world, I am VERY wealthy. It has recently become a catch phrase in our political culture to talk about the 1%, right? About how there is a concentration

of wealth in our country for the very rich, while the rest fall behind. Well – OK – that is a way of bringing up very important issues on economic and government policy. But I also think it's potentially very dangerous and harmful for me – because what it allows me to say is 'yup – that's right – the problem is that 1% – and I'm part of the 99% dealing with scarcity'. I believe that is, to put a profound theological term on it: BUNK. The truth is, in this world, I am the 1% – it is phenomenal the amount of resources I have in my life and in this country – financially and politically and economically. If I somehow accept the spin that there is some 1% faction out there with all the stuff, then I am accepting a very harmful spiritual deception that skews my reality. I possess and have access to an incredible amount of stuff – I have enough – and have to make choices about how much more – that is a privilege. And it is first of all something to be grateful for – each day – an attitude of gratitude; each day. That is very important to me.

And make no mistake – it has consequences. Because as soon as you are grateful, it changes you – forms in you this interesting thing called generosity...Paul says:

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between¹⁴ your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance

When I am grateful, then I become aware of the needs of others, and I want to share what I have. It IS that simple for me: when I am aware of my abundance and grateful for it, then I am generous. I like being generous – and it is a spiritual struggle for me.

So let's really not talk about money – let's talk about people – because I think that really is an even deeper part of this for me. And here's what I mean: when I think of others, do I do so with a sense of abundance? That each person is someone for whom I desire abundance; can I be grateful for each person –

and generous toward them? As a citizen, can I be so deeply grateful for and celebrate this marvelous country in which I live, and also feel the same abundance for and toward other, all, nations and peoples? A spirit of generosity toward them. As a person of my culture, my race, my gender, my orientation, my political views, my talents, my gifts, my joys in life – all part of my personal abundance...can I desire and feel the same abundance for those different than me; see those differences as a source of gratitude? Can I meet difference with a spirit of generosity?

As a Christian, can I be rooted in this kind of abundance and gratitude:

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.

...and have that generosity of God live in and through my life to others?...a generosity of spirit to other faiths, to those without faith, to those with whom I disagree, to those who hurt and hate me, to those I dislike or worse, despise... I like being generous – and it is a spiritual struggle for me.

I say I like being generous, but it is more than that: I feel the struggle of it, but also the deep richness of it when I access it – when the Spirit blesses me with it: when I recognize the generosity of God to me, then I find abundance and gratitude – and when I have that, then I am generous – it is that simple; and it is the way I want to live. That's where it's at for me, personally – what I long for and achieve and pursue, by God's grace, day by day.

Because I do realize this is a day to day, maybe even ordinary day, sort of spiritual challenge and growth for me. It's not a template for the extremes – to David's lament over the death of his friend, I do not say: "oh David...are you being grateful?" To people dealing with suffering and illness and death, Jesus did not check first on their spirit of generosity. For people suffering, grieving, in scarcity of substance and spirit, dealing with horrific violence,

victims of actions and circumstances – in my own struggles and needs...abundance and generosity and gratitude are not tools to suppress or deny those realities.

But day to day, this is what I need: recognize my abundance, be grateful, and live in generosity. And in a sense when it comes to the extremes, isn't that a prayer for what God intends all to have as a daily challenge, rather than those circumstances of scarcity and suffering? And it is my own sense of abundance and gratitude and generosity that gives me the resources to reach others in those needs – even in the extremes – and even in my own struggles.

That's the personal challenge for me – and I offer it to you to see what the Spirit speaks to you about it. And the summer pledge drive is simply this: to live with a sense of abundance, to find there a depth of gratitude, and to live it out with true generosity to others – with my stuff; with my life; with my faith; in all circumstances. It is my pledge for this summer, and by God's grace, for all the seasons of my life. Thanks be to God. Amen.