

## The Grace of Giving 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

This week marks both Veteran's Day and the end of our Irresistible Invitation study, ending with this notion of being partners in the gospel, gospel, which means "good news." These themes seemed at first to be completely opposite to each other, but upon further reflection maybe what ties Veteran's Day and the Irresistible Invitation theme of being partners in the gospel is the notion of sacrificing for a cause greater than ourselves. Anyway, let me begin.

My wife Susan has a strange aunt, but in all fairness you should hear what she says about me. But this strange aunt used to live beside Susan's parents. Similar houses, though truth be told the aunt's house was maybe just a touch better: a little larger, but not much, an enclosed Florida room instead of a screen porch in the back. It came to be tax evaluation time and Susan's aunt, who has always been more than just a little. . . inquisitive, demanded to know what the tax assessor had said about Susan's parents house. Susan's mom, always gracious, told her. Susan's aunt hit the roof (symbolically, not literally, since we are talking about houses).

How dare they assess that house as more valuable than hers! So, she went to the tax office, and became among the very first ever to demand that her house be valued higher, with of course the added privilege of paying more in property taxes.

Demanding to pay more than her share. Strange when it concerns taxes.

But then again, blessed when it concerns what we offer to God. Imagine giving more than is required. That's what inspires St. Paul as he writes to the church in Corinth asking them to take up an offering for the poor in Jerusalem.

Now, evidently things are going pretty well for the church in Corinth. Right now they have food to eat and money in the bank.

But not so with the churches in Macedonia. They are undergoing a severe ordeal, unspecified, yet certainly a part of it was abject poverty. And, as bad as it was in Macedonia, it was worse in Jerusalem. There was a famine there.

And so, reading between the lines, we can infer that Paul had decided not to ask the Macedonians for an offering to help Jerusalem. After all, they could barely feed themselves.

However, the churches beg Paul to allow them to give. To do more than is expected. Imagine that. "Begging earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry." Foolish if the giving involves taxes, but a special blessing when it concerns giving for the sake of ministry.

It's as if a church in Beaufort, ravaged by a hurricane, the next week begs to be able to take up an offering to help folks, say, who had been hit by wildfires in California.

Paul is more than a little touched by the Christians in Macedonia. Having little, they didn't spend their time wondering how to hoard the little they had, they looked for ways to share it with others.

Centuries later Winston Churchill would write: You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give.

With the churches in Macedonia in mind, Paul dares to challenge the church in Corinth to respond generously to the offering for Jerusalem.

Paul invites the church in Corinth to excel in this grace, this blessing of giving. Why would giving be called a gift? Perhaps, because when we give we align our souls with the soul of Jesus. We feel good, we feel blessed, when we know we are doing God's will.

And when we give, to charity, to the church, to the hungry, to the homeless, that's when our heart rejoices. Maybe that's why it has often been said the secret of giving is not to give until it hurts, but give until it feels good.

Paul is to the point: the Macedonians have given generously as nothing other than a response to Jesus Christ, who became poor (that is gave up everything, emptied himself upon the cross) so that they would be rich (spiritually if not materially) . .

What we give, financially, of our time, or our heart, is not the only indicator of the depth of our faith in Christ, our commitment to him, our love for him, but it is one indicator. And Paul says it is an important one.

Paul is sincere. He has been inspired by the poverty-stricken, ordeal facing congregations in Macedonia. Having so little, and facing all sorts of adversity, their hearts are filled to overflowing, because Christ's love has broken through all that is wrong to make them feel blessed.

The Macedonians realize their lives are filled with blessing. . . amidst their ordeal and poverty.

And this was the profound faith that touches Paul so. No matter what they faced, they believed in, rejoiced in, the Lord Jesus Christ who had given them new life in the midst of their ordeals.

And they found blessing in giving in response to the love Christ had for them. Not so that God might suddenly whisk their problems away, but simply so that they could respond to the work Christ had done within them and among them. Simply so they could become partners in the Gospel, if you will.

It's a strange principle, isn't it? That blessing is found not so much in the receiving as it is in the giving.

But many in this sanctuary this morning know this truth better than I. For this is the Sunday before Veteran's Day, when we honor those for whom sacrifice and giving of themselves for the good of others is, or was a way of life.

I can only hope that those who have made such a sacrifice, and their families, will deep down know a special joy, a special blessing, that they have given of themselves for a greater cause.

And by the way, I hope that as Christian people, we will always be people who seek peace. I'm not a pacifist. It could simply be that my faith is not strong enough simply to allow Nazis and Soviets and terrorists to have their way and trust God to sort it out.

But I hope every Christian is at some level a pacifist, if not in our living our faith, then in our dreams about the future. May we work constantly and dream and pray of a time when war is no more, when dynamite is used no

longer for building bombs, but for building bridges.

And again by the way, that's why if we have an American flag in our sanctuary, it must never be near the center. National pride, national self-interest must never be central to the church. Christ and Nation must never be paired as if there is no difference between the two. I don't mind the flag being in the sanctuary. I rather like my nation and what, at its best it stands for. But I'm pleased the flag of our nation is in the sanctuary; I'm pleased it's off to the side. I'm pleased that at the center is . . . the cross.

And we Christians must never be blind to the cost of war. If on Memorial Day we remember those who gave the last full measure of devotion, to quote Lincoln, on Veterans' Day we give thanks for those whose lives have been altered, often in difficult ways, because of war. You don't go through combat unscarred, even if a bullet never touches you. You veterans have given and given generously, sacrificially.

Which leads me back to the overriding theme of this sermon.

The deepest blessing is in the giving. Veterans know it, and in a slightly different way, people whose hearts are turned to Christ in such a way that their faith leads them to commit, to give, know it as well.

St. Paul calls this whole thing the "grace of giving." Well, grace means among other things, "gift." Which is a paradox. How is it a gift to give away, rather than to receive? What does that mean? That means that when you

give yourself, financially, emotionally, . . .to another person or to a special cause or to your church for the sake of Christ, then there is a blessing that exalts you and strengthens you and inspires you.

Paul knew he could not command that Church in Corinth to give. The best he could do was to report on those extraordinary Christians in Macedonia. Who having little, gave much, so grateful were they to Jesus Christ.

And in their giving they offered help and hope to those they would never even meet. And in their giving received a blessing that the world cannot begin to imagine. Dare we believe these Macedonian Christians were on to something? Amen.