

For the people of St. Philip's
Proper 8, year B
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Maria Hoecker, preacher
June 28, 2009

The Epistle reading this morning has me thinking about money. Wouldn't this reading be great for October when we have our Every Member Canvass?! Stewardship IS year-round right? I can talk about stewardship in June, can't I? We just had a vestry retreat yesterday and we heard that everything is on target for mid-year as far as the budget goes. We're hoping that this carries out for the rest of the year. We also talked about sharing the stories of the wonderful stewards of this parish who give so generously of their time, treasure and talents throughout the year.

I wonder, have you ever heard of "Money Sunday?" I read about it recently in an archived article in the Christian Century (by Daniel Harrell, quoted throughout). This was a practice in some churches, which began in the 1950s. Churches that wanted to support missions would dedicate one Sunday a year to raising money. As the pledges were collected during the service, the minister would read the amounts aloud from the pulpit: "Here's one for \$50.... Here's another for \$100 and one for \$1,000!" Occasionally a pledge came in for, say, \$10,000, eliciting all sorts of approving oohs and aahs from the congregation, and for the rare pledge of \$50,000 the organist would leap from his pew and play a rousing fanfare of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." If the end of the service had not met the fundraising goal, the minister would send the offering plate back around, shaming the members into emptying their pockets. Ministers had lots of power over people back then, I guess. Those were the good ol' days, right?

How would that feel if we did that? -- it sort of feels like something a televangelist would do. Of course the minister doesn't keep the money, it's given away for missions. So, perhaps it's not that much different than the other fundraising auctions that we gladly attend to support a good cause. Surely we can agree with Paul that "God loves a cheerful giver" and that God does not ask for a giver to be coerced by shame or pride (2 Cor. 9:7).

But, in today's epistle reading it sure looks like Paul is resorting to both shame and pride in order to raise money for the struggling Jerusalem church. First he plays up the Macedonian church seemingly to embarrass the Corinthians into giving, and then he flatters them to try to get them to give even more.

Like the minister on Money Sunday, Paul is pressing the Corinthians to give, but he is also trying to make them understand why giving is so important. It's never an easy subject to talk about. Our God is a God who generously gives, and through Christ we receive God's grace. Then it's sort of passed forward through us. We receive grace from God, and then through forgiveness and reconciliation, the Fruits of the Holy Spirit flow out from us. Like manna from heaven, grace cannot be hoarded. If the grace of Jesus truly resides in us, it can't stay in one place. We can't hold onto it. We are compelled to open our hearts and our hands as grace continually passes through us.

Of course, Paul knew that nobody can give it all away as totally Christ did for us. We are not Jesus Christ. We can give our lives, but that won't save the world in the same way that Jesus saves the world. "Match actions to your eagerness," Paul writes in 8:11, "but do it according to your means. Give what you can." Paul's not letting up on us; he's creating a good boundary for us. We give all we can, but not so much that we become financially needy ourselves. If we don't have money, we share something else with which we have been gifted.

Bishop Probal Dutta will be visiting our parish this week. On Wednesday evening he will be joining us for dinner and he will give us an update on how things are going in Durgapur. We pray generously for our sisters and brothers in our companion diocese every week. We will take up a collection for his diocesan ministries in India.

His story is one that is hard to wrap our brains around. It's a story from the other side of the world that is nearly invisible to us. All around the world, nearly 3 billion people live on less than two dollars a day. Globally it's estimated that 30,000 children die every day due to poverty. Yet if all the Christians on earth marshaled their resources given to them by God, the horrid extremes of world poverty could be obliterated.

What we're talking about here isn't just global politics. When Bp. Dutta comes to us for a visit, we as Christians are transcending cultural and political borders. We are in relationship with each other, through Christ. Christ died for all in order to reconcile the world to himself. Giving and forgiving go hand in hand, every step of the way.

In Paul's time, it was the Jerusalem church that was in dire need of financial assistance; Paul's appeal for help was directed at gentile churches. Jerusalem didn't always approve of Paul's missions to the Gentiles. Jerusalem probably didn't even want the "tainted" money that Paul collected for them because the Gentiles were outsiders. But Paul pressed on with a vision for reconciliation. Paul lays it on thick, using every method he can think of: Shame. Flattery. Fear. He did whatever it took to get the Corinthians to eagerly give because that's just what people who are reconciled to God do.

But how could the Corinthians become eager givers if Paul was twisting their arms? I know that someone might be able to scare me or guilt me into giving, but they can't guilt me into being cheerful or eager about it.

I have a story about that. I recall a priest that I knew well in Atchison KS. His name is Ray Hartjen. He came here for my ordination four years ago. Ray is a twice decorated bronze star Vietnam War veteran, commander of an armored tank division, who became a priest. I was on the search committee who called him to our little wealthy parish, and I was also senior warden at the time. Ray had a vision. Soon after his arrival he announced that our parish would start a feeding ministry for those who were hungry or lonely on Saturday mornings. Didn't matter if they were rich or poor, we fed them if they came through the door. As you can imagine, he had a heck of a time getting our parish to sign off on it. We were great at giving big checks to local charities, we had one

of two \$2 million endowments solely devoted to outreach giving. We were very proud of our financial generosity. Even though a number of people expressed frustration that our parish was all check writing and no action when it came to mission work, actually moving from talk to action was not easy. But, The 6'6" Rev. Col. Dr. Hartjen forged ahead and pressed people into service. His point was not that much different than Paul's, he insisted that in doing the mundane work we would discover grace as we worked to be reconciled with God and our neighbor. Sure enough, he guilted us into it. We were all sort of afraid of him at first, so reluctantly we did it. Sure enough, it grew. And do you know that 12 years later that ministry is a community-wide ecumenical effort that is continuing on long after Ray Hartjen retired from the priesthood?

All of us have stories to share. Come join us here as we listen for and tell the stories of our faith. It is in this place that we share the stories of our lives and the lives of God's people. We can trust that God's grace abounds as we open our hearts and hands in reconciliation with our neighbors, both near and far, in this place and beyond.