

God who has existed throughout all time. And then, when Jesus took on a human body in the incarnation, he became poor. He became subject to death, to physical pain, to the limitedness of human life and the sorrows that go with it. All of which he did for us, for humanity, for God's beloved children. "So that by Christ's poverty, you might become rich," the passage says.

But Paul is not making any promises about material wealth. So what kind of riches does Christ give, does being generous give us? Best continues, "[Being rich] does not consist in money or in power but in fellowship. In the Christian community we discover a multitude of new ties, new homes with new mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, possessions, lands and eternal life...[We receive] the wealth of a new relationship with God through Christ realized in freedom from sin, in victory over the evil cosmic powers, and in the continual presence of Christ."³ Our riches are found in our relationships, which is to say in the messiness and beauty of being with other people. Of growing together. Of facing tragedy alongside each other, as well as celebrating our joy. Of asking questions and wondering and dreaming and imagining what could be, not just alone in our heads, but out loud with other people. One place we especially do this in a congregation, especially this one. This is a place where we bring the stories of Jesus to bear on the stories of our lives. We carry each others' sorrows to God in prayer. We are present to each other, reminding ourselves that we never go it alone because God never leaves us alone. In faith, we're honest about our sin and trying to change our lives. Just as we are honest that nothing we ever do can put us outside the love and grace of God. Those are the riches of faith. That is what our wealth consists of. And because we have it in abundance, we can be generous in sharing it. In fact, when we share that wealth, it doesn't diminish, it grows exponentially!

Faithful generosity includes sharing the space of our actual church building, like with the pantry. It looks like the hundreds of boxes of cereal stacked in the church that will be shared with kids in Metro Detroit this summer. Faithful generosity takes the shape of sharing our lives and building friendships. It definitely looks like all the adults who shared their time and energy and laughter with all the kids at Vacation Bible School this week. Their wealth, and certainly that of the kids, was increasing by the day.

God was not stingy in taking on flesh for us in Jesus. God is not stingy in giving us riches. So we are invited to respond eagerly, that we might excel in the generous undertaking of sharing those riches of love and building the relationships that shape us in faith.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians: Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1987), 78.

2 Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians, Interpretation Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 80-81.

3 Best, 81.

June 30, 2024

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

"From Stinginess to Generosity"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

The Corinthians were being stingy. Paul was, tactfully, calling them out for it. An ongoing collection was taking place for the saints—the Christians—in Jerusalem, who tended to be poor. This was the birthplace of the church, the region where people first began to follow Jesus, and hence Jerusalemites held a special place in the wider church of their day. There are various reasons these Christians were poor—because it was rare for wealthy people to join their ranks; because many new Christians sold all their possessions and shared the proceeds with the church community; because they expected the return of the Messiah in their own lifetime, so they didn't think they'd need much to live on for very long. There are good reasons, then and now, to figure out the *causes* of poverty so they can be addressed. But immediate needs call out for assistance, right now. People need to eat, have a roof over their head, clothes to wear and shoes on their feet. The saints in Jerusalem needed all that, too. And they were relying on Christians in other places to support them. But these Corinthians were not contributing to the cause in a way Paul felt was reasonable.

So he carefully brought in a little element of friendly competition. As one commentator reminds us, "Comparisons can be dangerous."¹ Paul was judicious about it, but I suspect he wanted them to feel a little motivation to bring honor to their city, to make sure Corinth didn't get a bad name. So he lifted up the Christians in Macedonia, who themselves were actually quite poor. Yet *they* overflowed in a wealth of generosity. The Macedonians gave beyond their means, begging for the privilege of sharing in this important ministry to the people in Jerusalem. Paul was clear that it wasn't just them being great. They were responding to God's grace in a fruitful way. This result was, in fact, God's grace, working through them. But still, his message has the ring of "Well, those Buckeyes from Ohio sure did donate a lot of money. So we want you also to excel in this generous undertaking." Perhaps if he got under the Corinthians skin a little bit, they'd rethink how much they wanted to contribute.

All kinds of things can lead us to be generous. And most of them, in the end, are actually the signs of the grace of God. It must be the grace of God working through us, because without that, we often choose to keep a lot more for ourselves. Something like this happened to me, and thus to our church, this spring. Back in March, I found a hard copy letter placed in my church mailbox. It was from a couple folks named Jim and Bonnie who run a mobile food pantry. The letter said they operate out of another local church in Royal Oak, whose building is being sold. They were looking for new space. I read the letter. And then I did nothing. I let it sit under a pile of paperwork on my desk. I was feeling stingy.

I had lots of reasons why. Couldn't they have sent me an e-mail? I didn't want to have to pick up the phone and tell them 'no' personally, or send them a letter back by the USPS. This was also about the time we'd just agreed to the Backyard Playroom moving to our church. I could not contemplate one more shake-up happening in our building. I didn't think I could ask our leaders or volunteers to consider one more new activity. And it was just one letter, after all. So I kept on ignoring it.

But God had other ideas for our church to excel in this generous undertaking. As Paul wrote, "I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others." A month later, in April, I got a voice mail message on my office phone. Jim was calling to see if we might have space for his mobile food pantry. Politely, he did not mention the letter. The pang of remorse hit me, as I shuffled papers and looked for that darn letter that I'd been ignoring. That was about the moment when the realization of the grace of God hit me. God's grace helped me see how stingy I had been acting, on behalf of our church. I'd been keen on exploring the Backyard Playroom. I knew that often 30+ parents and kids visit it each day it's open. And in good news—they are still doing so now that it's here. The Playroom is absolutely bopping in there with kids and toys and laughing and playing. That opportunity felt flashy and fun. It has the potential to invite new families to join us for worship or Sunburst Singers or Sunday school. But if we said yes to that fun and exciting ministry, why was I saying no to the mobile food pantry, by not saying anything at all?

I raised my hands and told God "OK, I'm getting the message." If our church is really eager to serve the community, as I think we are, then we needed to at least explore this hunger ministry. The decision, of course, wasn't mine to make, but belonged to our elders on the Session. If we decided to move forward, as the scripture says, our gift would be acceptable, according to what we had to give. Finally, I picked up the phone and called Jim to learn more about this mobile food pantry.

Everything I learned made the pieces start falling into place. Generosity is easier when you build relationships, get to know folks. Jim and Bonnie, who are the chief leaders of the pantry, helped us understand what they do. They

and a handful of other volunteers rescue surplus food from grocery stores and bakeries around our area—from Trader Joes to Whole Foods to Starbucks. They bring it back to their location, sort it, then drive it back out to distribute it, often to lower income senior living facilities. Clients do not visit the pantry location itself. The pantry has a few freezers and a fridge, some shelving and workspace. They already have dedicated volunteers, though they're always open to welcoming new folks. They don't require funds except to pay the electricity on their appliances. The main things they were looking for were space in a building and friends who shared their mission.

At our Session meeting this month, the elders discerned together about this ministry. After doing our due diligence, God's grace urged them toward generosity. They voted to welcome the Mobile Food Pantry as a new ministry of our congregation. The space they're going to occupy is currently our Religious Studies Library. I know that's a change. We are currently clearing out the space to make room for the pantry. And so after we clean up from the service today, I invite you to please go into the Religious Studies Library, and see if there are any books, or maybe a lamp, that you'd like to take with you and put to good use. You can take it home with you today. Then after a little paint, those freezers and shelving will be moved in and the pantry operations will start up soon. Our existing Little Free Pantry storage will continue to be in that room, too. We see this new pantry as a beautiful way to scale up our existing ministry to the community through the little red box just over there.

To be clear, the Mobile Food Pantry is not a group renting our space. This is *our congregation* taking on and taking part in a new ministry. You'll soon see Jim and Bonnie and others bringing in loads of baked goods and fruit, cereals and frozen foods. And then taking it out again for distribution. The Session asked a lot of very thorough questions about what the pantry would mean for us. And they ultimately determined that if we said yes, we could trust that it was God's grace working through us. Our eagerness to serve could become real through this small act of generosity.

As Paul urged the Corinthians toward generosity, he pointed them to the example of Jesus Christ. He said, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." The people in Jerusalem were poor in material things. They needed actual money or resources to help them live. Many of the people who may be served by the mobile food pantry need that tangible assistance, too. But Paul was speaking on another level, also, when he spoke about Christ. As commentator Ernest Best writes, "Paul is not thinking of the actual poverty of Jesus' earthly life: a poor wandering preacher with no place to lay his head. He is not contrasting the poverty of the cow shed of [Jesus'] birth with the magnificence of the palace where he might have been born."² Paul meant that Jesus was full of the riches of God. He was Divine, fully part of the Triune