



Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: July 2, 2006

Sermon Title: Generosity

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every night, Mrs. Hollis Sharpe of southern California took her miniature poodle, Jonathan, out for a walk. She always took with her a plastic bag so that after her dog would make a mess in someone's yard, she could clean up after Jonathan.

During their walk on the night of November 13, 1974, Jonathan finished doing his duty, and they were returning home when a mugger jumped from behind some bushes attacked her from behind. He shoved Mrs. Hollis Sharpe to the ground, grabbed her plastic bag, jumped into a waiting car, and drove off with the spoils of his crime.

Although Mrs. Sharpe sustained a broken arm, she still maintained a sense of humor. She told the police, "I only wish that there would have been more for him in the bag!"¹

We're talking about generosity this morning – and I am certain that what you and I have to share with the world is a bit more valuable than what was contained in Mrs. Sharpe's bag.

Here at Saint Peter, *Financial Generosity* is one of the five habits of discipleship that we encourage every believer to adopt.

I had someone ask me about the habits of discipleship this past week, and it was a very interesting question. She said: "I thought Lutheran theology was all about grace – about receiving faith and the promise of eternity from God as a free and undeserved gift. So why are you emphasizing what we have to do as disciples?"

She is right, of course. When Christians from various traditions gather to talk about the faith, one of the primary gifts that we Lutherans bring to the table is our understanding of God's grace. We don't believe that there is anything we need to do to deserve God's forgiveness and the promise of eternity. I could even say that stronger: We don't believe that there is anything we can do to deserve God's forgiveness and the promise of eternity. We believe that God has given it all to us as a free and undeserved gift – as a sign of how much God loves us. That is our definition of grace. While some Christians claim that you have to do this or that or the other thing in order to be sure that God will save you, we disagree. We believe that the Bible is clear in teaching that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves – even the faith that saves us is given to us as a gift by the Holy Spirit.

So yes, Lutherans are focused on grace, and the belief that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has done it all. But you don't have to spend a lot of time reading the Bible to discover that the story doesn't end there. God's grace is not end of the story. In fact, the opposite is true: God's grace is the beginning of the story. When we truly experience God's love and grace, and

FIRST LESSON

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-33

OR

WISDOM OF SOLOMON 1:13-15; 2:23-24

PSALM

PSALM 30

SECOND LESSON

2ND CORINTHIANS 8:7-15

GOSPEL LESSON

St. MARK 5:21-43

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD, YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE YOU JOYS BEYOND UNDERSTANDING. POUR INTO OUR HEARTS SUCH LOVE FOR YOU THAT, LOVING YOU ABOVE ALL THINGS, WE MAY OBTAIN YOUR PROMISES, WHICH EXCEED ALL THAT WE CAN DESIRE; THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

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when we realize how far we are from deserving it, it completely changes our relationship with God – and completely changes our lives. We find ourselves looking for ways to show God how grateful we are. Discipleship is a way of describing how it is that we thank God for all that God has done for us. Prayer, Bible study, worship, community service, financial generosity, small group support – each of these is a way that we give a portion of our lives back to God, in response to the incredible gift of grace that we have received.

There is nobody who knew that better than the Apostle Paul. Paul spent the first part of his religious career trying to destroy the Christian church. He thought that was what he had to do to please God. But once Christ got Paul's attention, he began to understand his faith quite differently. He realized that God's love was there for him, even before it occurred to him to ask for it. He realized that God wanted to give him far more than Paul deserved to receive – as an expression of how much God loved Paul. And once God's love touched Paul's heart, Paul was willing to do just about anything, in order to honor God with his life. That is the way grace works. And that is the way grace that transformed Paul's life.

Today's New Testament lesson is a portion of a letter that Paul once wrote to the Christians who were living in Corinth. In this section of the letter, Paul praises them for the strength of their faith. He encourages them with these words: "You excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you." (8:7) He sees these strong gifts in the community of faith at Corinth, and he gives thanks for all that God has given to them: far more than any of them deserved.

Then he offers them a word of challenge. He reminds them of one of his favorite efforts: the financial offering he is taking from the churches he started, to support the Saints who were suffering back in Jerusalem. He had recently received a gift to that project from the church at Macedonia – a church that was suffering great difficulty, and living in severe poverty. But despite their difficult situation, "their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." (8:2).

On the other hand, the church in Corinth (which was a relatively wealthy community – made up of artisans and craftsmen and those who were profiting from a strong trade-based economy) had fully intended to participate in that offering, but never quite got around to giving the money to Paul. So Paul encourages the Corinthians, who had made a commitment to support this effort a year earlier, not only to fulfill their commitment, but to "desire to" fulfill their commitment (8:10).

Paul knew that the need in Jerusalem was great. And he knew that the potential in Corinth was significant. He wanted the Corinthians to do more than promise their support. He wanted them to deliver on that promise, and experience what it is like to be generous with the gifts God had given them. He knew that God had given them so much, and he was bold in encouraging them to use what had been given to them in order to make a difference for the Saints in Jerusalem.

Why did Paul do this? Did he think the Corinthians, by their generosity, could obtain God's grace? Did he think that giving a certain amount of money to the church was essential to their salvation? Did he think that the more they gave, the better place they would be given in the life to come? No, none of these statements are true.

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to be generous, because his story was similar to theirs. He knew what it was like to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. He knew what it was like to know that you are forgiven; to know that God wants to make a new beginning with you; to know that God has

promised you a place in eternity. He knew what it was like to experience the gifts of God as far more than he deserved. He knew how important, how healthy, how central it was to the life of faith that they have a chance to give back to God, in thanksgiving for everything God had already done for them.

You see, the question Paul was asking the Corinthians was not: "How much are you willing to give, so that the Saints in Jerusalem can be supported?" The question was actually: "How rich has your experience of God's grace and love been?" Those who experience the power of God's grace – those who know how incredible God's generosity is – find themselves drawn to be generous themselves, as they think of how God is calling them to support the ministry of the church, and to make a difference in the lives of those who are in need. And so he wrote to them: "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking."

He asks that same question of us today. What has our experience of God's love and grace been like? God has given us life and faith and family and home and food and health and on top of all that, God has given us Christ, who is our hope and who is our strength. All this has been given to us, not because we earned it, and not because we deserved it, but because God enjoys giving it to us. Because God loves us so deeply. What does our response that look like? And more specifically, today, how have we put our financial resources to work in a way that expresses the depth of our gratitude to God?

Think for a moment about your own faith life. Where are your personal strengths? What has the Spirit created in you? Perhaps you are great at working with kids. Perhaps you have a certainty to your faith that is unshakable. Perhaps you have depths of compassion. Perhaps you have great knowledge about the Gospel. Perhaps you have enthusiasm about living out your faith. No matter which aspects of our faith lives are strong, Paul would want us to be every bit as enthusiastic about our financial support of ministry.

Friends, we are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We are called to put our whole lives to work at thanking God for everything God has done for us. Today's message from Paul's letter to the Corinthians challenges us to be as strong in our financial support as we are in any other aspect of our faith lives.

Let me leave with you with this one question:

QUESTION OF THE DAY:

God has given us so much – so much more than we deserve.
How will we use our money, in a way that most appropriately express our gratitude to the God who makes it all possible?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (July 2, 2006)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For 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. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written,

“The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.” ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

⁷Ἄλλ' ὡσπερ ἐν παντὶ περισσεύετε, πίστει καὶ λόγῳ καὶ γνώσει καὶ πάσῃ σπουδῇ καὶ τῇ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐν ὑμῖν ἀγάπῃ, ἵνα καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ χάριτι περισσεύητε.

⁸Οὐ κατ' ἐπιταγὴν λέγω ἀλλὰ διὰ τῆς ἐτέρων σπουδῆς καὶ τῆς ὑμετέρας ἀγάπης γνήσιον δοκιμάζων· ⁹γινώσκετε γὰρ τὴν χάριν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὅτι δι' ὑμᾶς ἐπτώχευσεν πλούσιος ὢν, ἵνα ὑμεῖς τῇ ἐκείνου πτωχείᾳ πλουτήσητε. ¹⁰καὶ γνώμην ἐν τούτῳ δίδωμι· τοῦτο γὰρ ὑμῖν συμφέρει, οἵτινες οὐ μόνον τὸ ποιῆσαι ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ θέλειν προενήρξασθε ἀπὸ πέρουςι· ¹¹νυνὶ δὲ καὶ τὸ ποιῆσαι ἐπιτελέσατε, ὅπως καθάπερ ἡ προθυμία τοῦ θέλειν, οὕτως καὶ τὸ ἐπιτελέσαι ἐκ τοῦ ἔχειν. ¹²εἰ γὰρ ἡ προθυμία πρόκειται, καθὸ ἐὰν ἔχη εὐπρόσδεκτος, οὐ καθὸ οὐκ ἔχει. ¹³οὐ γὰρ ἵνα ἄλλοις ἄνεσις, ὑμῖν θλίψις, ἀλλ' ἐξ ἰσότητος· ¹⁴ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ τὸ ὑμῶν περισσευμα εἰς τὸ ἐκείνων ὑστέρημα, ἵνα καὶ τὸ ἐκείνων περισσευμα γένηται εἰς τὸ ὑμῶν ὑστέρημα, ὅπως γένηται ἰσότης, ¹⁵καθὼς γέγραπται·

ὁ τὸ πολὺ οὐκ ἐπλεόνασεν,
καὶ ὁ τὸ ὀλίγον οὐκ ἠλαττόνησεν. ^{iv}

ⁱ From a sermon entitled “The Generosity of God” by Dave Stone, pastor of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky., January 1, 2001. Obtained from www.preachingplus.com.

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ 2nd Corinthians 8:7-15, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} 2nd Corinthians 8:7-15, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.