

The Imperative of Grace
II Corinthians 8:7-15
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“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ...” II Corinthians 8:9a

If you have not tuned your radio dial to 90.1FM in the past two weeks, you may have missed National Public Radio’s fall membership and fundraising campaign, which ended on Friday evening. I promise, it’s over, guilt-free listening can resume. What has always made me uncomfortable about these semi-annual fund drives is that their arguments make so much sense. One morning last week, Sara and I were listening as one of the commentators began to make his pitch. Some of you, he explained, listen to us every morning when you wake up, on your way to work, driving home in the evenings, on the weekends. You are grateful for what we offer and yet you have never made a pledge to support the station that gives you so much. We looked at each other, caught red-handed. We made a pledge. We felt better.

I think that the Apostle Paul would have liked NPR’s approach. In addition to his career as evangelist and missionary to the Gentiles, the Apostle Paul was a fundraiser; you could say that he was the chair of his own stewardship committee. Part of Paul’s mission and call was to collect contributions from all over the Roman world and deliver them to the struggling and impoverished Christian community in Jerusalem. This collection was both practical—the Christians in Jerusalem were a persecuted minority lacking in basic necessities—and it was symbolic, a demonstration of the unity and generosity of the church of Jesus Christ.

So Paul, in this letter to his congregation in Corinth, encourages members of the church to give generously to this worthy cause, and to complete the good work that they had begun the year before. In other words, we have before us Paul’s stewardship campaign for First Church Corinth. And it goes something like this: through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has given God’s own life to enrich the lives of others. We should do the same.

Paul grounds his theology of stewardship in the abundant grace of God in Jesus Christ. He encourages the Corinthians to give because they have received so very much. It is a stewardship that is grounded in gratitude for God’s overflowing abundance. It is giving as celebration (haven’t we heard that somewhere before?) for all that we have received.

In another place, Paul puts it this way: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in

human likeness” (Phil. 2:5-7). He emptied himself, giving all that he was and all that he had. This is the grace of God. As you have received, Paul says, so you are able to give.

This was the central message of the Protestant Reformation, which we remember on this Reformation Sunday — the good news of the gospel that all that needed to be done has been done, that we are saved and given new life *sola gratia* (by grace alone). Not by accumulation of good deeds or stars in our crowns or dollars in our bank accounts but purely by the generous grace of God through Jesus Christ. Unearned, unmerited, undeserved, and yet freely given by our gracious God.

Paul, and his Protestant Reformer descendents were all accused by some of proclaiming a gospel of grace that required nothing of his followers. A law-free gospel they called it. Too easy—something for nothing, a handout. But those who make such a claim have forgotten the imperative of grace. We might call it the “can’t not” approach to giving. Paul says that the way we give thanks for the free gift of grace and salvation is by living in new and different ways. By being transformed into persons of faith and hope and love. Our Presbyterian tradition calls it “the election of the people of God for service as well as salvation”¹

The truth is that no gift comes to us without a call. After six glorious days of creation, six days of celebration—it is good, it is good, it is good, God placed our ancestors in the garden to till it and keep it. Even the gift of creation comes with a call to care for this precious natural order. It is the same with Christ’s generous act toward us. The call attached to this gift, according to Paul, is to finish the good work that we have begun. To bring it to completion in courageous faith and bold hope.

Why? Why must we complete the good that we have begun? Because others depend on it. Others depend on our generosity just as we depend on the generosity of God. The phrase that Paul quotes at the end of this passage, “the one who had much did not have too much and the one who had little did not have too little,” comes from the 16th chapter of Exodus. Do you know what generous act is recorded in the 16th chapter of Exodus? The Israelites have been freed from slavery in Egypt and have made their way into the wilderness, led by the spirit of God in the form of fire and cloudy pillar. But the people have grown hungry and weary in the wilderness and have begun to complain against God, even growing nostalgic for the life of forced labor in Egypt. Then, early one morning, the Israelites come out of their tents and discover a fine flaky substance covering the ground like dew. They ask, “What is it?” in Hebrew: manna. And manna becomes its name. The people greedily gather the manna up, but when they measure it, the writer of Exodus records, “those who gathered much had nothing over and those who gathered little had no shortage” (Ex. 16:18). There was enough for everyone and no one had too much. Like the grace of Jesus Christ, the manna covered the earth and there was plenty for everyone. Paul tells the Corinthians that this story is their story—they have been given all they need and now are called to share the richness of God’s grace and the riches of their wallets with those who do not have enough.

The key, I believe, is gratitude. The Apostle Paul urged his congregation to be bold and generous, not out of fear or compulsion but from a place of gratitude. The great Reformed theologian Karl Barth said that, “gratitude is the precise creaturely counterpart to the grace of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ The imperative of grace is gratitude. I can think of no greater motivator than gratitude, and no better sign that a person has gotten the point. You simply cannot be both grateful and selfish at the same time. True gratitude has a way of overpowering greed and extinguishing egotism.

Ever since I read Marilynne Robinson’s wonderful novel *Gilead*, I have not been able to get it out of my mind. It is the story of Reverend John Ames, a Presbyterian minister who is preparing to die and decides to write his young son a letter about his life. At one point in the novel, Reverend Ames describes a sermon he has preached on Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. He writes, “I believe it concludes quite effectively. It says Jesus puts his hearer in the role of the father, of the one who forgives. Because if we are only the debtor, that suggests no graciousness in us. And grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that we also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ The great restoration of ourselves to ourselves is the ability to give generously what never belonged to us anyway.

Greed, selfishness, insatiability, these characteristics of our lives that our economy and our culture keep calling virtues are sinful not primarily because of the harm they do to others but because they deny us a part of who we truly are. They deny us the ability to be givers rather than merely consumers. The consumption of goods and services can never fulfill our deepest longing because we were created not for consumption but for gratitude and praise.

Our Reformation ancestors knew this, and so the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of faith, written 361 years ago, begins with this question: What is the chief end of humanity? What is our greatest goal and our deepest need? Answer: to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. We were created for gratitude and built for generosity.

In this week’s *Christian Century*, the eminent historian and insightful theologian Martin Marty notes that the word generosity does not make it into most theological dictionaries. The term we use is most often, with apologies to Bill Humphries, is “stewardship.” Marty laments this lack, arguing that the plot of entire Bible shows the generosity of God. From the generous abundance of creation in Genesis 1 to the promise of Christ’s continuing presence in the life of the church in Revelation 21. The theme of the Bible is the generosity of God. And so, Marty expresses his hope that we preachers will reclaim the power and meaning of this word in our sermons. He writes, “One hopes that it seeps into the lives of Christian people until generosity gives stewardship a run for its money.”^{iv}

Generosity, modeled after the gracious and unending love of God, is a hallmark of the Christian faith.

One of my favorite pieces on the generosity of God was written by a Reformed theologian named Lewis Smedes, just months before he died at the age of eighty-one. The title of the essay is “God and A Grateful Old Man.” Smedes describes the lessons that he has learned about receiving gifts, including the fact that real gifts always come with a person attached. He writes, “we teach our children to say thank-you to their grandmother for her birthday gift; why should we not teach them to say thank you to God for the gift of their birth? Why should we not teach them that every new dawn of every morning, every drop of rain, every budding tulip, every blade of grass, every lovely thought we think, every wonderful feeling we feel, every memory of pleasure past, every tingle of pleasure present, every touch of a loved one, every hug from a laughing child, every note of a Mozart concerto, every coming home to our own place and people, every new hope that sees beyond a hard present—all of them are gifts with a person attached.”

Listen to how he ends: “I remember magnificent things and I remember little things, and I feel grateful for them both. I remember that Jesus died to do whatever needed doing to let the river of God’s love sweep me to himself, and I also remember the Velcro that makes it easy to put on my sandals. I remember my mother’s weary weeping after a long day’s labor and I remember the pleasure my wife and I had with our first garage door opener. Big things, little things, it matters little as long as they were gifts with a person attached.”^v

Everywhere grace. Everywhere abundance. Everywhere gratitude.

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ...

You know the generosity of God, you have experienced it in your own life and you have felt it in the life of this congregation. You know the generosity of God, obvious and on display.

You know the grace of God. And you know how to respond.

ⁱ *Book of Order* G-2.0500a (1)

ⁱⁱ Quoted in George W. Stroup, *Before God*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), p. 145.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*. (New York: Picador, 2004), p. 161.

^{iv} Martin E. Marty, “G is for Generosity” in *The Christian Century*, November 4, 2008. p. 13.

^v Lewis B. Smedes, “God and a Grateful Old Man” in John Wilson, ed. *The Best Christian Writing 2004*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 147-149.