

“An Eagerness to Share”

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 – June 28, 2009

INTRO: Having heard about the giving of the people in the church at Corinth, Paul is writing to these people, asking them to take up a collection for the poor people in the Jerusalem church, the mother church of all the churches. Paul begins his appeal by telling them what the people in other places (Philippi, Thessalonica) have done, and reminding them they should respond in a similar fashion. That’s where this reading today begins.

People love incentives. We want to get a good, save some money. We look for: restaurants where we can buy one meal, get the second one free; coupons for Summerfest which if we enter the grounds between certain hours, we get in for discounted rates, or if we bring canned food for food pantries, there is a special discount. If we buy a new car, we may look for a factory rebate, or cash back, or our first three payments being covered by the manufacturer. Maybe the “cash for clunkers” is an incentive to get older, less energy efficient cars off the road. Rebates and tax credits are incentives to complete energy audits in our homes, businesses, and churches and make improvements that save gas and electricity. We wonder whether Michigan may have offered more incentives to GM than Wisconsin, since the new small-car assembly line plant will be there rather than in Janesville.

Yesterday I was watching a bike race over on Downer Avenue and heard a great incentive being offered for anyone who might consider buying a raffle ticket to support the races. The young woman walking the sidewalks hawking her \$5.00 tickets, advertised that we might win a new bike or \$250 worth of services from area businesses. But the biggest reason she proposed for buying a raffle ticket was that she had only sold 6 tickets so far, so the odds of a person winning were really good.

One Sunday a pastor told his congregation that the church needed some extra money and asked the people to consider giving a little extra in the offering plate. He offered the incentive that whoever gave the most would be able to pick out three hymns. After the offering plates were passed, the pastor glanced down and noticed that someone had placed a \$1,000 bill in the offering. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he’d like to personally thank the person who placed the money in the plate. A very quiet, elderly, saintly lady all the way in the back shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front. Slowly she made her way to the pastor. He told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much and in thanks, asked her to pick out three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation, pointed to the three most good looking men in the room and said, “I’ll take him and him and him.”

When it comes to what we do with our money, incentives often help us make decisions. In writing to the people of Corinth, Paul was probably aware that they didn’t have a clear incentive in mind, to help them decide to share their resources with others. “The collection Paul was asking for, was to support the work of the Jerusalem church among the poor and the needy. A year earlier, the folks in Corinth has been all for this asking, but since their relationship with Paul had apparently been strained, they had become less enthusiastic about giving to this cause.”

(Homiletics, 07/06)

Paul first reminds them that other churches have helped out—the churches in Macedonia, and even though they were going through tough times, they were happy to share from what they to help support the people in Jerusalem. They were eager to give and they gave more than was even hoped for. Then Paul goes for what I think, is his best incentive for giving, which is that everything we have comes from God in the first place, and the gifts we receive are meant to be shared. “God has seen fit to share with us—to the point of sharing the amazing person of Jesus Christ with us. (And no matter how much money is in our pockets,) we are rich because of God’s grace. We give not to get, but because we have received. We love because we’ve been loved.” *(Homiletics, 07/06)*

We must work to “balance the accounts of the needs of others against the column of our own abundance.” *(David Tiede)*

Many people are worried about jobs, paying bills, investments, IRA’s, pensions, and rightly so. Yet, while some of us are concerned about our own situations, we are a little like the Christians in Corinth—we need to be encouraged to not forget the needs of others. We need to share what we have—to share our financial resources, our time, our talents—any of the gifts that God has given us.

Victoria Sirota, an Episcopal priest, has said: “If you have five apples, give three away. They were going to go bad before you ate them anyway.”

We might agree to this plan, especially when we have something extra that we can share with someone who doesn't have as much. But if we wait to share until we find ourselves with surplus, we may never share—because our perceptions may tell us we don't have enough money, time, resources, skills. We have been subtly taught in our culture, to think we don't have enough. In the process, we lose sight of how much is genuinely enough. God doesn't ask for what we don't have. God asks us to share from what we do have.

A few years ago, the UM General Church established a special Pension Initiative for retired pastors, lay workers, and their surviving spouses who served the church in areas outside the US—Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe. The church is seeking \$20 million to fully fund this pension initiative, for hundreds of people who, after giving decades of faithful service to the church, retired and are living in poverty. They receive minimal or no pension for all these years of service. Those that do receive something, may get \$55 per quarter. I remember hearing about this initiative at General Conference last year. It was lifted up this year, at our Annual Conference. And, probably like many others, my first thought was that I am concerned about what my own pension funds are doing. My incentive for not giving to this fund has been very self-centered. Yet, when I look at my standard of living, the fact that I have a pension which the church and I have been making contributions to for over 25 years—well that has given me pause. Somehow I need to be more eager to balance others needs against the abundance I have. This next year, I am going to rethink my earlier decision of not making a contribution. And if others are interested in more information, just ask me.

The way we share from all that God has given us, needs to be characterized, not by an attitude of guarding what we have for ourselves, but of recognizing the abundance of God's gifts to us, and being willing to share them eagerly and not hesitantly.

There are places in our world, where architects are using the gifts and skills they have, to create designs that will improve the lives of other people. One of their creative ideas is called a Global Village Shelter. This prefabricated, bio-degradable laminated cardboard home can be assembled without tools and has been sent to Afghanistan, Indonesia and Pakistan during recent natural disasters. The materials will last up to a year and a half and will provide temporary housing where people might otherwise have none. In Peru, other architects and designers have created a water sanitation system for victims of the recent earthquake. “They've taken all their experimental energy and channeled it” into these creations that improve the lives of lots of people. “In the past, young designers were interested in consumer items like making the next jet-ski pack or a really cool toothpaste tube. Now, there is a new sense of moral imperative. They all want to make the next ecofriendly shelter. They all want to have an impact for the betterment of the planet.”

(The Christian Science Monitor, 6/14/09)

This may be one example of idea tithing. Tithing is commonly understood as giving 10 percent of our income to the church or charities. And “idea tithing is defined as taking 10 percent of our intellectual effort and creating concepts that, when executed, benefit everyone.” *(Homiletics, 07/06)*

It sounds like some of these architects and designers are already eagerly embracing that idea. And, what would happen, if we carried that concept a little further? Looking at our time and our other talents, and paying attention to balancing the needs of others against the ways we recognize abundance in our own lives. How does what we share stack up with what God has given us? Are we eager and willing to share, or do we closely guard what we have, for fear there won't be enough for us?

The mother of a close friend of mine, died a week ago. At Margaret's funeral this last week, I was moved by what her children and grandchildren shared about her. They described her as a person who never had many monetary resources—all through her life. Like so many people who had lived through the depression, she knew how to accomplish miracles with a small amount of Margaret and her husband built their home with their own hands gleaning a board here and a cinder block there. When a few bricks became available and they had a few dollars saved, they would purchase them and add use them efficiently. When they didn't have very much, she always made sure our needs were met. If she couldn't afford it, she would sew it, knit it, crochet it or remake it out of something else. Besides all the tangible ways Margaret cared for her family, there were many stories of simply spending time with her. She loved card games and board games, and it became obvious she loved sharing time with her family. She listened to their problems, she told

stories from her life. She eagerly shared her time with others, and the people around her remember that as one of her greatest gifts. Without knowing it, maybe Margaret was “time tithing,” something we can’t take lightly in our busy world.

“The incentive to give of our time, talents, financial resources in service to God and other people, has little to do with what we may get in return. Instead, it has everything to do with what God has already given us—God’s gifts. For, God’s gifts may just come to us, on the way to someone else.”

Homiletics, 07/06)

So, instead of hesitating, let’s be more eager to pass them on.

--Sue Burwell