

“Thanks and Giving” – Stephanie Wing, 11.22.09

Last week you probably received your pledge letters in the mail. If not, fear not – we can always get one to you! It is fitting today, then, to look at one of the earliest pledge letters we have in the Bible – an excerpt from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. It starts out with a warning – “we’re going to be asking you to give, so get ready!” Paul has been traveling around collecting money for the church in Jerusalem, and he is counting on the Corinthian churches to dig deep and give generously. The first 5 verses of this chapter lay out his expectations:

“Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.”

There is also a message that those who give generously will be rewarded.

We hear this in verses 6 through 11:

“The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, ‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever.’ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;”

Of course there is also a message that in order to support and further the ministry of the church, an investment in that ministry must be made. But lest the Corinthians give simply to receive the blessings that come through giving, just to pat themselves on the back, the chapter ends with Paul driving home the point that all giving is done to the glory of God. He writes:

“for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The church in Jerusalem had needs. Certainly there were people who lacked food and other basic necessities, and the Christian church from the earliest years saw a strong mission to care for those in need. They understood that if they were materially blessed, it was their responsibility and their joy to share with those who were in need. This formula for caring for the less fortunate was established early in Judaism, and emphasized in the ministry of Jesus on earth.

But it also appears that Paul's fundraising for the church in Jerusalem had some other motives. Paul's missionary journeys had been quite fruitful. Many in different regions came to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior because of Paul's ministry. But the situation in Jerusalem was a bit different. Jerusalem was the center of Judaism. It was the place where Paul, back before his conversion when he was known as Saul, brought Christians to trial. Since then, Paul had been commissioned to ministry among the Gentiles. Jerusalem had a number of followers of Jesus, but all Jewish followers, and many of them were not happy with Paul's ministry and his suspension of the Jewish law for Gentile converts.

Paul's stewardship campaign was not simply about raising funds to support the ministry and meet the needs of the people; it was also about bringing together factions in the church. By giving generously to the church beyond Corinth, the

Corinthians were uniting themselves to the larger church of Jesus Christ. Their gifts were a testimony to that unity to the church in Jerusalem.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “voting with your wallet?” It is widespread in many areas of our life. In politics, certainly, though each of us may have one vote, there is great disparity when it comes to contributions made to political campaigns and issues. It happens with restricted gifts to educational institutions and nonprofit organizations. And it also happens in the church.

Sometimes it is a good thing, like in the case of Redeemer Episcopal Church in Cincinnati, which received a \$12million dollar bequest to be used at the church’s discretion, but with mission and evangelism as a focus. I’ve also heard stories of churches where members have threatened to withhold their offering for various reasons and disagreements. Even more prevalent are the churches that withhold their contributions to denominational bodies as a form of protest over one thing or another.

Paul understood that giving can unite, and it can divide. We don’t always agree over how our church business should be handled here at United Presbyterian Church. At times we might not agree with the decisions made by our Session, by the Presbytery, or even by the General Assembly, but we continue to give faithfully, trusting in the uniting work of the Holy Spirit, and knowing that our giving is not predicated on agreement or disagreement, but rather depends on our gratitude to God for the grace God has given us.

There is a third reason why Paul asks the church in Corinth to give generously. He says that giving also causes the saints to overflow “with many thanksgivings to God.” All of our giving should be done not to receive thanks and praise ourselves, but so that God will be glorified, and so God will receive all thanksgiving. Paul knows that the church in Jerusalem will receive the offerings and gifts with gratitude, and that the gratitude should be directed not towards the donor churches, but towards God, from whom all blessings flow.

If we are honest in our giving and our receiving, we will acknowledge that the true giver of all blessings is God. When a family in need cries out to God for help with food, the food that answers this prayer might have been donated by you, either from the Hunger Offering we take each month, or the collection of food that goes each month to supply the Christian Life Center’s food pantry. Though we have the privilege of being the conduits of God’s gifts, the prayers that our gifts answer are answered not by us, but by God. Of course we have the reward of knowing that through our gifts, others may come to know the love and generosity of Jesus Christ. We must learn to give with two hands – one outstretched with the gift, and the other pointing to the Giver of all.

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving. For many, it will include families gathering from far and near around a lavishly set table with a turkey as centerpiece. I know of some families who routinely volunteer together on this day, showing their thanks by giving their time and energy to those less fortunate. Perhaps your

Thanksgiving will include football games or the Macy's parade, or even looking over the advertisements for Black Friday shopping deals.

Whatever your holiday plans include, I hope you pause to give thanks for all that God has given to you – materially and otherwise. And in pausing to consider our own gratitude to God, I pray that we also consider the giving that we are called to do, in virtue of having been blessed so richly by God's grace. We are all called to give to support the ministry of the church, to witness to the unity of the Holy Spirit, and to spread God's generosity far and near, so that all that we do may point to God, the Giver, who is worthy of receiving all of our thanks and praise.

Thanksgiving is also the traditional kickoff for the Christmas season. Did you know that Americans spend an average of \$450 Billion dollars every Christmas? That is higher than the Gross National Product of dozens of countries, including Sweden, Switzerland, Pakistan, Thailand, Ireland, and New Zealand, just to name a few. How does the \$450 Billion dollars spent at Christmas point to Jesus Christ? How does it glorify God? These are questions I'd like us to challenge ourselves with this Advent and Christmas season. How many gifts do we give simply because we feel an obligation to have something under the tree? How many gifts do we receive that we really don't need, or in some cases that we don't even want?

I wish that we could all just easily step away from the consumer-driven Christmas to which most of us have become accustomed. But I know it isn't easy.

I love picking out presents with loved ones in mind, and seeing the joy in their faces as they open them. And since I get to see my nephews so rarely, I want to be able to give them things that they will use and enjoy, and think about their Aunt Stephanie, so many miles away.

But what if we each gave just one less gift? Could we provide more clean drinking water to people in developing countries? Or to families in Appalachia? What if, instead of spending money on another knick-knack that will just collect dust, we donated that money to a ministry in honor of the recipient? The beneficiaries of that money will never know who gave it, except to know that it is an answer to their prayers, and a gift from God. Think of the gifts that we collect under the Christmas tree back there for families in Breathitt County; or the contributions for Mercer County school children, or for the children under care of Bellewood and Buckhorn. They will never know the faces of the givers, but instead will look with all thanks, praise, and gratitude to the true Giver – God.

This Christmas, I encourage you to consider a combination of traditional and alternative Christmas gifts. Consider making a donation in honor of someone. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance works at home and abroad to address both immediate and long-term needs of people in the wake of disaster. They are still a faithful presence on the Gulf Coast, helping people rebuild their lives from the ongoing devastations of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Recently, they sent a team down to Killeen, Texas, to serve in ministry at Fort Hood, not only to address the

recent shooting crisis there, but to provide longer-term help and support for those returning from combat. The Medical Benevolence Foundation, which is affiliated with the PC(USA), has a whole list of alternative gift ideas. For \$5 you can buy one more stocking stuffer, or you can provide life-saving medications for malaria or tuberculosis. For \$50 you can give the latest video game, or you can sponsor a hospital bed in a developing country for an entire year.

Another form of alternative giving is gift-giving that gives back. The necklaces that Mary Weber and others have been selling for \$5 each make a great Christmas gift, and the proceeds go to Living Waters for the World. There are shops that sell fair trade gifts like coffee, chocolate, and crafts that pay the workers who produce them sustainable incomes to support their families with dignity.

As we approach Thanksgiving this week and the Advent season next week, let us do so with true Thanks and Giving. Let our giving point to God, and be in response to God's gracious mercies and generosity. Let all of our thanks be directed to the God who made us, who sustains us through the power of the Holy Spirit, and who sends us out as the Body of Christ in the world. Amen.