



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“ENCOURAGING GENEROSITY”

Scripture Lessons: II Corinthians 8:1-15

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, November 22, 2009.

Our selected theme for this year's stewardship season is “Generosity --- A Habit of Heart.” We chose that theme partly because the call to generosity, and dare I say it, the command to generosity is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. For example, Paul writes to young Timothy and says, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up for themselves treasure as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (I Timothy 6:17-19)

Other passages in the scriptures abound reminding God's people that generosity is both an expectation of them and a blessing to them as God's people. For example, Proverbs 11:24-25 says: “Some give freely yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.”

But another reason we chose the theme of “Generosity --- A Habit of Heart” is because an unacceptably large portion of our membership here at First (Scots) has never developed this essential habit that the Lord commands. You can see the numbers on the back of today's bulletin. Last year less than half of our family households (45%) and less than half of our members (42%) even submitted a pledge to support the ministry of their own church in this current year.

I know that I must accept part of the blame here. Clearly I have not instructed or motivated or inspired our people sufficiently to be generous with what God has entrusted to us as his people. I thought all week as I contemplated what to say this morning, what I might say, or say differently than I have been saying for the past 13 stewardship seasons. And I happened to notice in my new Bible, the English Study Bible which I have been using since July, I noticed II Corinthians 8 is entitled “Encouragement to Give Generously.” Consequently, I decided to let Paul make the case for Generosity this morning and I would like to share with you how he makes his case to the church at Corinth nearly two thousand years ago.

Here is the situation. We know that Paul wrote as many as four letters to this church but only two are still in existence. We call them I & II Corinthians. Chapters 8 & 9 may be the earliest stewardship letters ever written by a minister to a Christian church. Paul knows about the Corinthians what I know about us as Charlestonians. They were not a poor lot of people and had resources both personal and financial which can contribute to the work of Christ and the needs of people in desperate situations. Paul is writing the Corinthians in an effort to raise money for the relief of struggling Christians back in the mother church of Jerusalem. He wants the Corinthians to have their gifts ready by the time his colleague Titus arrives for a visit in the not too distant future. Paul knows that the Corinthians are capable of being generous but whether they are willing to be generous is another matter completely. And to be quite candid, we are never told in the scriptures what the result of Paul's appeal to generosity was. But his appeal is worth consideration nonetheless.

The first thing Paul does to encourage the generosity of the Corinthians is that he holds up before them as an example the generous sacrifices toward this offering that have already been made by their fellow Christians in Macedonia. Paul wants the Corinthians to see what the grace of God is able to accomplish among Christians, in spite of the fact that they are impoverished and persecuted. These Macedonian churches would have included churches Paul helped to establish like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea and at the time of Paul's writing these Macedonian Christians were not only very poor but were undergoing intense religious persecution because of their old allegiance to Jesus Christ. Rome had exploited Macedonia, stripping it of its natural wealth, its minerals and its timber.

If you had to pick a group of people who would seem, at least on the surface, to be incapable of generosity it would have been the Christians of Macedonia. Nevertheless, despite what others may have expected of them, including Paul himself, these Macedonians gave miraculously and willingly and gladly. They gave as Paul says "beyond their means" and they even "begged" for the "favor" of taking part in this relief effort for fellow saints. We are not told the extent of the Macedonians offering but clearly Paul was overwhelmed and gratified.

Paul even reveals the secret to the Macedonians generosity and he wants the Corinthians to understand a great truth that I want all the members of First (Scots) to understand as well. Why was the grace of generosity so evident among the Macedonians? Because first they "gave themselves" to the Lord, we are told. Giving to the Lord and giving to others was the result of their prior decision to give themselves wholly to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why their giving was joyful and generous and even extravagant. They had already committed themselves to Jesus as Lord. All they were and all they had were at his disposal as the Lord of their lives. This was the example Paul held up before the Corinthians as I hold it up before Charlestonians today. What does your giving saying about the allegiance to and your love for Jesus Christ and his church?

Not only does Paul place before the Corinthians the loving and generous example of the Macedonian Christians but he also reminds them of the example of their own Lord. Paul tells them of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who, though he was rich became poor for their sake so that through his poverty they might become rich. Paul here is speaking of something more than material wealth. He is speaking of spiritual wealth. Corinthians and Charlestonians and all sinners alike who have nothing in the terms of spiritual capital and who have not prospects for anything because of our enslavement to sin and death, but in Jesus Christ we have been given everything through his sacrificial death and resurrection. Jesus willingly left the splendors of heaven and the presence of the Father to come to earth for those who deserved nothing and who had no hopes for anything beyond their own damnation and death.

If the example of the Macedonians doesn't inspire generosity and sacrifice then surely the example of the Lord Jesus should. Are we not to follow in his steps in both our living and our giving? In a similar vein, Paul writes to the Philippians who were among those who had given so faithfully and he says to them: (Philippians 2:4-8)

- 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.
- 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
- 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
- 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Why don't the majority of our members respond to our pleas for gratitude and generosity? Maybe they don't know about the sacrifices of other Christians who have far less than they do. Maybe they don't even know about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on their behalf. If that is the case, then shame on us who haven't effectively informed them. Then again, maybe it is not because they do not know but rather they do not care. If that is the case, then shame on them.

Our Stewardship Committee recommended this Sunday for Stewardship Dedication Sunday because in as much as it was the Sunday before Thanksgiving we thought that people might be more conscious of God's blessings in their life and more eager to respond in gratitude. But as it turned out this is also Christ the King Sunday and I think that might be providential as well.

This last Sunday on the liturgical calendar reminds us that the one who was first anticipated in Advent, who was incarnate at Christmas in the child of the manger, who was crucified on Good Friday and raised on Easter morning, and who sent the spirit among us at Pentecost is now the King of all creation and deserving of our homage, our allegiance, our obedience, and indeed all that we are and have.

Have we really acclaimed Jesus king, or bowed down before him, or given ourselves fully and truly to him. That is the question each of us must answer on both Christ the King Sunday and Stewardship Dedication Sunday.

I have a minister friend who was invited to leave the church he was serving and he said perhaps it was because he spoke too bluntly and said things that the congregation did not want to hear. He said the final straw may have been the Sunday morning when the ushers brought forward the offering and his prayer was as follows: "Lord, regardless of what we say or do, this is what we think of you." The question is not whether or not what he said was offensive but whether or not it was accurate.

Certainly giving is not the only measure of our devotion to Jesus Christ as the King of our lives and the Lord of our living. But it is a primary measure of what we value and where our allegiance resides. Nearly all people give generously to what and who they love. We cannot help but do so because the joy and fulfillment it brings to the giver. My prayer is that any more of us will know that joy in the year ahead and that all of us will discover the grace of generosity.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.