



Making A Difference

Sermon for Sunday, November 17, 2019

HOW EAGER ARE YOU?

In preparing for this week's message, I discovered that in the last 45 years, this is the 6th time I have preached on this Corinthian text. I absolutely love this passage – because I find it paradoxical and passionate and compelling.

First, a bit of context. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth – a cosmopolitan stew of cool, intellectual Christians, where self-absorption is compromising who they are called to be. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have excelled in many ways. They are smart. They speak and argue theology extremely well. And they are eager to be good at God.

But then Paul, not so gently, reminds them, that in one area of their life they do not excel. In one area of their life they are lukewarm. In one area of their life they simply pale in comparison to the poor Macedonian church, a frontier congregation struggling to survive just a few hundred miles away. Poor as *they* are, the Macedonia church is extremely generous. With energetic hyperbole we hear that the Macedonians, despite a severe ordeal of affliction, are overflowing with abundant joy. And with a wealth of generosity they are begging earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of the saints. And what is this ministry that they are begging to be part of? Stewardship – the offering of themselves – all of who they are – talent, time, energy, possessions - yes, to do what the Apostle Paul calls all of us to do – which is to offer our bodies – our whole selves – as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

Paul tells this story about the Macedonians because he is describing what I like to call sacred squandering – the impulse, against all reason, to be as joyful and generous in our living and our giving as our extravagant God is in squandering grace in our lives. So, let me tell you three stories that describe what sacred squandering looks like.

Years ago my husband and I shepherded a group of 20 college students on a mission trip through Ecuador. It was the first time I had traveled to a developing country, the first time I really experienced the pain and the privilege of poverty. And though it was almost a life-time ago, I can still see and feel, smell and hear the Gospel grace of that trip.

One Sunday morning we found ourselves worshiping among the Otavalan Indians, in a small village nestled beneath the stunning beauty of Mt. Cotopaxi. Our hosts for the day lived in the only concrete structure in that village – a house made possible by our Presbyterian mission dollars – and its sturdy construction sat in striking contrast to the straw and mud homes of their neighbors. The three small rooms of that house could not hold all of us, so we worshiped in the back yard – with children and chickens running between our legs. The sermon that morning was delivered by a young farmer – nervous, earnest and humbled to be proclaiming God's Word to a bunch of North American gringos.

Then it was time for the morning prayer. A woman came forward, draped in a bright Ecuadorean shawl, her thick shiny braid falling to her waist. Maria immediately fell to her knees, her hands lifted to the skies – and she began a twenty-minute ode to her God. Not being a Spanish speaker, I couldn't

understand a word she said. But I didn't need to. Her joy, her passion, the lilt of her voice and the glow on her face was all the language any of us needed. Her persistent praise taught us what the music of thanksgiving can sound like – and grounded all of us in the universal extravagance of God's generosity and grace.

The prayer was followed by the offering. Maria took her Bible – opened it to the Psalms – and then passed that open Bible among the worshippers – creating the most theologically authentic offering plate I have ever seen. Soon coins and bills were spilling over the pages on to the dusty ground. That day the poorest of the poor taught the richest of the rich what it looks like to beg, to beg eagerly, for the privilege of giving generously – giving out of their poverty - in order to say thank you to God. Sacred squandering indeed. Those Ecuadorean peasants were practicing what Brian McLaren calls "the discipline of daily dependence and daily gratitude."

The second story I want to share is about Julie and Bruce – and their daughter Annabelle. Julie was a successful stockbroker, and Bruce was the General Counsel for General Electric. They were smart, busy, and very successful, at a relatively young age. And then Annabelle was born. Soon, it became obvious that this precious little girl was not developing at a normal pace. After way too many doctors' appointments, it was discovered that Annabelle had a rare neurological disability, that affected both her physical coordination and speech patterns. And so began, a lifetime of special care. Special schools. Special therapy. Special, time consuming patterns of learning at home. Julie made the only decision her heart would let her make. She quit her job, and focused on loving Annabelle into wholeness.

As Annabelle grew, the church embraced her, and she sang in the choir and livened up every classroom. And the Director of Music quickly discovered that she was extraordinarily gifted as a pianist – and eventually an organist – playing music by ear with no score in front of her. Her parents found her the best music teachers in the area, and made sure she went to be part of the summer program at Interlochen, the summer music school for gifted young musicians in Michigan – and her mother traveled with her to make sure she could embrace the full experience. Today, Annabelle is living in a group home, has a good job, and continues to play her music at church and in the community. Through it all, I have watched both Julie and Bruce change – from ambitious career people into gentle nurturers of hope and possibility. I could never have done what they did, but I learned from them. Their generosity of spirit and selfless love has been a witness to all who know them – and they have shown the world that the sacred squandering of personal time and energy and personal ambition CAN lead to deep joy.

And then, finally, there is the story of Lily and Pat. They were newlyweds at the beginning of World War II – second generation Japanese immigrants living in Los Angeles at the beginning of World War II. They had started professional careers – Pat as a psychologist, and Lily as a business woman. And they had met at a young people's group at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. But then came the cruel decision of the United States government to put all Japanese Americans in internment camps.

Lily and Pat were forced from their jobs and their homes, and taken to the Santa Anita Racetrack, where they lived in horse stalls – before being transported to a camp in Wyoming, where they were locked into frugal and uncomfortable circumstances until the end of the war. By the grace of God, following the war, Pat was offered a job at Boys Town in Nebraska serving as a counselor – which eventually led to a career as Deputy Director of the National Institutes of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland. Pat and Lily became pillars at the local Presbyterian Church, and we cherished their presence and their leadership.

In the late 1990's, the United States government finally voted to repent of the cruelty of the Japanese Internment Camps, and the Congress voted to give reparations to all those who had been imprisoned. I will never forget the day that Pat came running into my office, tears in his eyes, waving his \$20,000 check. And then he handed me a different check – made out to the church. He wanted to tithe - give ten percent of his reparations money to the church – because throughout the struggles of his life, the Church of Jesus Christ had embraced him and loved him and given him hope. That day Pat was begging for the privilege of saying thank you – despite the ordeals and indignities of prejudice in his life.

All my favorite stories in scripture are about the extravagant generosity of God – our gracious God who squanders holy stuff in order to bless us and love us. Walter Brueggemann calls creation an “orgy of fruitfulness” - that explosion of grace, when day after day, God flings beauty and breath and calls it good. Then there is the blizzard of manna in the wilderness when the muttering people of the Exodus are blessed by God– blessed with just enough to eat but not too much- just enough to keep on going. And let's not forget the ocean of wine that Jesus provides at the wedding at Cana, celebrating life – yes, saving the very best for last. And then there is Luke's story about the waterfall of forgiveness that a joyful father lavishes on both his prodigal sons. And, of course, the extravagant suffering of Jesus – the crucifixion that tears open the Temple curtain separating us from God – the cross breaking down the dividing walls of hostility that separate us from each other. All these biblical stories help this morning's crazy dance of the Macedonians make sense as they beg for the privilege of giving extravagantly out of their poverty so that others might live. My friends, with such eager, foolish generosity woven throughout the testimony of scripture, how can we possibly withhold who we are or what we have from God?

In just a few minutes you will have the opportunity to come forward, bringing your offerings and your pledge cards, and yes, dedicating your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Ushers will have baskets up here, and will also come to you if you choose to stay in your seats. There are pledge cards in the pew racks in front of you – where you can indicate if you have already mailed your pledge in, or given online. Or you can simply take one of the blue prayer cards and on the back, offer to pray for someone during the next week.

My friends, this morning and always, I hear God calling us to be eager stewards – begging for the privilege of dedicating ourselves – time, treasure and talent – yes, enthusiastically engaging in the ministry of sacred squandering. May we offer ourselves generously - not until it hurts – but until it feels very, very good – all to the glory of God.

May it be so. Amen

A sermon preached by
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TEXT: II Corinthians 8: 1-12