

So That Others Can Give

2 Corinthians 9:6



©Rev. Joyce Shin
Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
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Stewardship season began on September 17, eight Sundays ago, and since then you have heard four Moments for Stewardship given by your fellow church members, you have received a pledge letter from me, and you have gotten weekly Friday e-news updates from the Financial Stewardship Committee. As early as last May, the Stewardship Committee, dressed in their farming apparel and hauling their wheelbarrow down this center aisle, began sowing seeds for our stewardship season. Our Session has led the way with their full participation. What preparation, what energy and joyful effort, is going into asking you also to give! Every year you know the ask is coming. We all anticipate it.

In the scripture lesson we read today, we find one of the first pledge invitation letters to a church congregation in history. It seems that from the very beginning the church has been invited to give. Paul is writing to a congregation in Achaia, and the whole letter is to encourage them to get over the finish line, to complete the financial collection for the church in Jerusalem, where people had been facing harder than usual economic times due to famine. Paul knows that the recipients of his letter are all too familiar with the subject of the collection, and, as we can tell from the way he begins the letter, Paul anticipates that they have likely grown tired of hearing about it.

Because he knows that the collection had become a matter of weariness for the congregation, Paul bends over backwards to take a very positive approach, one that borders on flattery, saying, “I know your eagerness” and “I have been boasting about your eagerness to all the other churches.” A master of language, Paul even makes frequent use of the Greek word “perisson,” probably because that particular word means both “redundant” and “abundant.” The collection, rather than being redundant, should be abundant!

It makes sense that Paul would bend over backwards to write this compelling letter to the Achaians, because the Achaians, it seems, had been fully prepared since a year ago to give, and now Paul returns to them to finish the collection. Some other churches, like the church in Corinth, though willing, needed additional help to complete the collection. So Paul calls upon the Achaians to help them cross over the finish line.

The good news, we know from his letter to the Romans, is that Paul was successful. Not only was the financial collection completed, but more than that, the collection fulfilled its original, spiritual purpose. That’s what we want to talk about today. In his letter to the Achaians, we see Paul make a case for stewardship, a spiritual case, and to do so, he puts to use all the cultural, philosophical, and theological assumptions people held about giving, wealth, and the economy in his day.

In Paul’s day there were particular assumptions about giving. The custom of giving gifts followed a principle known as “do ut des,” the Latin phrase that meant “I give in order that you may give.” Built into this principle was usually the expectation of reciprocity in social relationships. “I give to you in order that you may give to me in return.” “Do ut des” could and often did slide easily into “quid pro quo” or “tit for tat” or “something for something” or “this for that” or “I give in order to get.”

I encountered a crude example of this in an unexpected place. A few summers ago, to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary, my parents took their daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren on a trip to South Korea. Together we toured South Korea, visiting the places of historical and cultural significance. As part of our tour, we visited several Buddhist temples, many of which were decked out with decorations for the occasion of the Buddha’s birthday, which I learned had been celebrated earlier in the Spring. Thousands of brightly colored lanterns hung along the mountainous paths leading up to the temples and thousands more hung from the high temple ceilings. Hanging from each of these lanterns was a brightly colored band of paper on

which a wish was written. Our tour guide explained that visitors to the temples could, for a small fee, make a wish. Each wish would be written down, then tied to a lantern, and hung. Indeed, a lot of the wishes that people had written down were wishes for great wealth. As our tour guide noted, by giving a dollar, all these people wished to receive a million dollars in return. Surely, the temple's collection of wishes for a dollar presumed light-hearted fun and not a serious gamble for a big win; still, built into the temple's fundraising economy on the annual occasion of the Buddha's birthday is the principle of "do ut des," "I give in order to get."

When Paul drew upon this principle, however, he combined it with yet other ideas, including an ancient Greek idea of self-sufficiency. It seems that the idea of self-sufficiency was debated in Paul's day. Not so different from the asceticism that the Buddha himself was known for, the Socratic tradition of ancient Greece held self-sufficiency to be attainable by scaling down your needs. According to Socrates, the ideal was not to need anything. To be like the gods, human beings would need to disengage from human needs. Such asceticism is probably what shapes our notions of self-sufficiency today.

And that was precisely the view of self-sufficiency that Paul could not accept. For Paul, self-sufficiency did not entail the sense of not needing anything, but rather it presumed that you had some amount of wealth in the first place, because self-sufficiency meant that you had enough to give. Probably because, first as a good Jew and then as a good Christian, Paul inherited the conviction that God created the world - the material world - and called it good, Paul viewed all of creation as a gift from God to be enjoyed and valued, certainly not something to be disdained, scorned, or scaled down. With Paul's idea of self-sufficiency, the principle of "do ut des" became "I give in order that you may have enough to give." We see this at work in his stewardship appeal to the Achaians to give to the Corinthians so that they could have enough to give to those in Jerusalem.

There is in Paul's thought an economy of giving that presumes that everyone gives in order to enable others to give and so on. And this economy is based on and made possible by a prior, more fundamental presumption, which I have already mentioned: that the whole world, everything in it and everything we have, is a gift from God. Any wealth we might have is a gift from God, God the creator, God our provider, God the sower. In God's economy of grace, the notion that we have earned and thus are entitled to what we have is simply false.

So, the very first thing to come to grips with in God's economy of grace is that we receive. Ironically, for some of us, probably for most of us, the posture of receiving is harder than the postures of earning and giving. The posture of receiving requires so much trust that you can refrain from the impulse or need to control, to ensure that you get what you need or want. This posture of trust is what Jesus preached about in his Sermon on the Mount when he tells his disciples not to worry about their lives, what they will eat, what they will drink, or what they will wear. "Look," he tells them, "at the birds of the air," and "consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. . . . Are you not of more value than they? . . . But if God so clothes the grass of the field, . . . will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:25 ff.)

In a TED talk that became an instantaneous hit, spreading from 100,000 views on the first day to a million and then 8 million, artist and musician Amanda Palmer speaks about this posture of receiving. After graduating from a liberal arts university, Amanda Palmer worked five years as a self-employed statue. Painted white, dressed like a bride, she stood on a crate, with a hat at her feet, on Harvard Square. When passersby would drop money into her hat, she handed them a flower and gave them some intense eye contact. She employed herself in this way until her music career took off enough that she no longer needed to work as an eight-foot bride statue. The experience she had, however, standing and asking for money taught her a skill that continued to serve her well in later years. When Twitter came along, she was able to connect instantaneously with her fans, asking them to help fund her band. When online crowdfunding came along, she was able to continue asking her fans to help on a bigger scale. Through Kickstarter, she was able to raise \$1,192,793, the largest amount of money at the time to be raised by crowdfunding, far surpassing her goal of \$100,000. Rather than working with a music label that relies on making people buy her music, Amanda Palmer just gave away her music for free and would raise money simply by asking her fans for help. While she got some criticism for giving away her music for free, she came to the conclusion that the music industry and

people in general have been obsessed with the wrong question. Instead of asking how do we *make* people pay for something, she thinks we should be asking how do we *let* people help when they want to help.

The posture of letting, trusting, and receiving instead of controlling and forcing is a posture that enables freedom. It enables people to give freely. This freedom is essential, not incidental, to God's economy. In God's economy, we freely receive and we freely give. This is why Paul says to the Achaians, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

In Paul's theological outlook, everyone should have the self-sufficiency and the freedom to give. The reality, of course, is that not everyone always has enough to give. According to The World Bank, in 2013 10.7% of the world's population lived on \$1.90 a day. Closer to home, just next door in Chester, about 35% of the population lives below the poverty rate (civicdashboards.com). The truth is that poverty takes away the freedom to give, and it removes the possibility of self-sufficiency.

As a people who every Sunday praise God for the gifts from whom all blessings flow, we acknowledge the wealth we have received from God. As people who every year are asked to make a financial pledge to support the ministry of Christ's church, we are asked to take stock and measure our wealth. Of course, we can use different measures. The only measure, however, that matters here, that grows God's economy, is the measure of what we give so that others can give. Just as Paul told the Achaians, we can say to one another, "Friends, we are wealthy in every respect, and our wealth is a gift intended for every kind of generosity. . . .

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift."