

November 12, 2017

**Reading from the Bible** *II Corinthians 8:1-20*

**Sermon** *“Pleading for the Privilege to Give”*

The scripture that we are going to read this morning is in II Corinthians 8: 1-20 and I am going to use The Message Version because it is a somewhat difficult scripture in other versions. It is one that I have not wanted to preach on for a long time but God has drawn me back to it. He keeps saying that this is the one I should use this Sunday. This particular version warms up the message so here are verses 1-20.

“Now friends I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonian province. Trouble came down on the people in those churches pushing them to the very limits and trying to expose their true colors. They were incredibly happy although desperately poor. The pressure triggered something. It was totally unexpected. It was an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and I saw it for myself, they took up offerings wherever they could; far more that they could afford pleading for the privilege of helping out Christians wherever they could. This was totally spontaneous. It was their idea. It caught me completely off guard. They had given themselves unto God and to us and the other giving flowing out of purposes of God working in their lives. That is what prompted us to ask Titus to bring the offering so what was so well done could be finished up. You do so well in so many things. You trust God. You are articulate and helpful and you love us so do the best in this as well. I am not trying to order you around against your will but by bringing in the Macedonian’s enthusiasm of their offering, I will be able to bring out the best in you. You are familiar with the generosity of our Master of Jesus Christ because rich as he was, he gave it all away for us with one stroke. He became poor and we became rich. So here is what I think is the best that you can do right now and that is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale. Your heart is in the right place all along and you have what it takes to finish it up. So go to it. Once the commitment is clear do what you can and not what you can’t. The heart regulated the hand. Don’t take it easy while you sweat it out. . No, you be shoulder to shoulder and go all the way. You should match their deficient as they are matching your deficient and in the end you come out even. And there is nothing written that the one with the most and nothing lacking in the one that is the least.”

As I said this is not a scripture that I was eager to preach-if you read it in various versions it sounds like St Paul is sort of twisting their arms to give money to the

offering. We are in Greece about AD 54, Paul had been to those churches and now he is revisiting them. Apparently the churches had all ready been invited to participate in a special offering. What was this special offering? It is for the whole church in Jerusalem where everything had started and from which everything spread out. The people in Jerusalem are incredibly poor; they have been persecuted; they have famine; they are hungry and they are spiritually persecuted and they have had long trials. Paul brought that message to the churches in Macedonia, Thessalonica, Philippi, and also to Corinth. He wanted to let them know about their brother and sisters in need in Jerusalem. You might think why in the world would the Greeks want to send their money to Jerusalem when they were so poor themselves. The Macedonian's hearts were just torn; they wanted to help their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul had a little different relationship with Corinth. It was a problematic relationship. They had a lot of immorality in Corinth. It was the place where they would eat their big meal while the poor would eat what little they had and then they would all go around the Communion Table as if nothing had happened. Paul had some pretty hostile things to say back and forth. First and Second Corinthians are two letters but we don't know how many other letters there were. It is like having a telephone conversation, we are hearing Paul on one end but we are not hearing the Corinthians on the other end. Things were not really rosy between Paul and the people of Corinth. He is trying to rebuild a relationship. He is trying to call them back to being faithful to what they had committed. They apparently had committed to take up a collection. They had gradually collected the money but hadn't fulfilled their commitment and they haven't produced. He is trying to politely say to them are you going to do it. He had used their enthusiasms and their faithfulness at first to encourage the people north in Macedonia, in Greece and now using the Macedonian's report to give the Corinthians a little push, a little nudge to get off center and to do what they had promised. Paul had already had talked to them before and now he is coming back to them and reminding them why they had started. The Corinthians had responded favorably even a year ago but they hadn't done anything. So now, he told them again about the Macedonian churches that were very poor and had all kinds of struggles- crisis, civil war and their resources had been plundered by the Romans but when they heard about the poverty of the people in Jerusalem, their hearts opened up.

It is a difficult passage and I know very few pastors who really like to preach on stewardship. I remember preaching one in Quilcene, Washington and it just

happened about this time of the year that a man came to church and later said according to his Mom.” I am never going back to this church. All they talk about is stewardship. And they have their hands in my back pocket and in my wallet.” He never came much before and he never came again. I think what happened was I touched his sore spot .We don’t like people messing with our money. We don’t mind the pastor talking about prayer or about time but all of sudden when the pastor talks about money people get very uncomfortable. It is really hard for a pastor to talk about money because salary is a big part of church budget. So it sounds a bit self serving for me to preach for what you give to the church. So as pastors, we are uncomfortable about stewardship. But Paul didn’t have any trouble at all because he understood to have people address their stuff reflected their character and their character were influenced as to how they took care of their money and their stuff. He would have them examine and look inside themselves think about all kinds of things including finances. Paul is asking these Gentile churches to take a collection for needy Christians. But guess what they are Jews. Why in the world would Gentiles Christians help the Jews because they had been eager to persecute them and would not let them in the church? So why then would they care about Jewish brothers and sisters? Why indeed, Paul would say, but Macedonians did it and this is the way to build a bridge. Paul is saying, this is the way to help people that you will never see in your entire life. You will probably never in your entire life go to Jerusalem. You could just as easily not give any money because you would never know who died from hungry if you didn’t send any money. You don’t have to be aware of that you can be in your own little world. . But Paul said that the Macedonian begged to give the offering. I must admit I have not been in a church where the congregation begged to have a special offering. It doesn’t happen very often and usually it is for something that is really locally. But these folks felt in their heart that this was something that they needed to do. They felt in their heart that that was the thing to do. They had a choice in giving by compulsion or feel good but that is not why they gave. They gave because their souls were touched. They gave for what is known as the Collection for the Saints. They had accumulated the funds and they were going to send the funds with Titus. It was a compassionate response. They were poor and yet they were rich. Paul points out that how in their poverty they gave much.

It is a little bit like Eddie Ogan. I didn’t know about Eddie Ogan, but I read about her this week. And Eddie Ogan wrote,” I never forgot in 1946 when I was 14 and my little sister Ocy was 12 and my oldest sister Darlene 15 and we lived at home

with our mother and we knew how to get along without many things. My Dad had died five years leaving Mom with seven school kids to rise and no money. By 1946 several members of the family had left home. A month before Easter, the pastor of our church announced a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially. Our family got to talking and decided to buy potatoes and live on potatoes for a month that would allow them to save \$20 of grocery money. Then they thought if they kept the electric lights off they would save money on the electric bill. Darlene got house and yard cleaning house jobs. And everybody babysat. For 50 cents we could buy enough cotton material to make three potholders that we would sell for a \$1.00. We made \$40 on potholders that month and it was one of the best in our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we saved. We talked about that poor family and how much they would enjoy the money that the church would give them. We figured that whatever money that we would give to the offering that it would be matched by the church people. Before Easter our sister got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We were so excited we could hardly stand it. They had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the hole and we didn't own an umbrella but we proudly walked a mile to the church. The church people continued to talk about the poor family wearing old clothes. I looked around and I felt rich. So when the sacrificial offering was taken Mom put in the \$10 bill and each of us put in the 20s. We sang all the way home. Later that afternoon the pastor drove up and Mom went to the door and she came back with an envelope in her hands. We asked what it was. But she didn't say a word and she opened the envelope and out fell a lot of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and 17 one dollar bills. Mom put the money back into the envelope. She didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor, we gone from feeling like millionaires and now we felt like poor white trash. We had such a happy life and we shared with each other. We shared silverware, two knives, and a couple of forks and if one of us needed one, we shared with each other. But on that Easter day I found out we were poor. The minister brought us money for the poor family so we must be poor. But I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and my worn out shoes. I didn't want to go back to church because probably everybody knew we were poor.

So time went on and I went to church on Sunday evening and we had a missionary speaker who spoke his church in Africa. His church had dried mud brick walls but they needed money to build a roof. He said a hundred dollars would put a roof on

the church. The minister said, “Can’t we sacrifice for these poor people and help them.” We looked at each other and smiled the first time in the week. When the minister announced after the offering was taken that there was over one hundred dollars, the missionary was excited. He hadn’t expected that much in the offering from the small church. He said, “You must have some really rich people in your church.” Suddenly it struck us. We had given over \$87 out of the \$100 for that offering. We were the rich family in the church. The missionary had just said so. From that day on I have never been poor again I always remember how rich I am because I love Jesus.

This lady now lives near Colville, Washington and she and her husband just celebrated their 65<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary last spring. They had one child 12 adopted kids and fostered 77 children. Eddie and Phil had red, yellow black and white children. Six were Korean and two of them were half black and white, three American Indian and three Caucasian. She said she wanted one of every color. I grew up with so much love that I was sorry for the ones who didn’t have my Mon. I wanted that for all my children I knew we couldn’t afford to adopt any more children, the house was empty and I thought I had a lot to give so we tried fostering until 2002.

Who is rich and poor? The Corinthian were challenged and we are challenged. The Holy Spirit challenges, teaches, and helps us to look at our inner life. What motivates us, what goals, what priorities we should have to please and serve God and all God’s people? Finances is good in the private areas of our lives especially here in the United States but it is the spirit of devoted and single- minded generosity that matters and by which and that alone is what God measures our acts of giving. Giving is the outgrowth of seeing ourselves as a much bigger pictures connection. They are tangible witnesses of what God has given and we can give and receive in common fellowship in thanks giving. It is a beautiful picture.

Let us pray:

Gracious God We like to talk about easy things. We would rather hear about churches that get along well. And we would much rather talk about what we might plan in programs but you are talking to us today about what is in our wallets. We ask you that we might be open and that what you want is what we want to do. We pray in your name. Amen

