

SERMON

Giving Thanks For What God Does When We Excel in the Grace of Giving

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Lamentations 3: 22-26 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

We began our series on the grace of giving with Paul's letter to the church in Corinth appealing to the worshipers to take up a collection for the church in Jerusalem. A famine had affected everything from the food supply to business trade. Paul asked these new Corinthian Christians to do this for a people they had never met and who lived in a distant country that was considered a Greek Gentile territory. We remember that the request was not based on Paul's position nor the attitudes of the Corinthians. This is an appeal based on the abundant generosity of God. As we have been blessed by God, we are called to be God's blessing to others. We are called to excel in the grace of giving, which is a gift from God!

As we move into our scripture from 2 Corinthians, chapter nine today we find an even deeper reason for making a holy commitment to excel in the grace of giving. Listen to the passage again as Eugene Peterson writes it: The point is this. A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over and make up your own mind what you will give. Do not give reluctantly or because of pressure. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving. God can pour out blessings far more than is simply needed. God can, in astonishing ways provide for what we might not expect. As the psalmist says, God throws caution to the winds, giving to the needy in reckless abandon. God's righteousness never runs out, never wears out.

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for our meals is more than extravagant with us. God not only provides for us, God gives us something we can then give away. The provision of daily bread, literally and figuratively, grows us into health and wealth in God in every way so that we can be generous in every way, producing the best we have to offer, praise to God.

This ministry of exceling in the grace of giving is more than meeting the bare needs of others and producing abundant expressions of thanksgiving to God, it is a prodding for us to live the best expression of gratitude to God by being obedient with heart and hand as was Jesus.

We just returned from California, and I can tell you with heart and hand, we give thanksgiving to God for Molly and Morgan, and even more grateful to God for Ryan and Katy who are teaching the girls how to say thank you to God. There is nothing sweeter than a unrehearsed prayer from the heart that, on the one hand is cute, but

on the other, touches the very core of what it means to see all things as blessings from God. Here is Molly's bedtime prayer one night, with little sister chiming in, "It my turn! It my turn!" Dear God, thank you for today, thank you for Mommy, Daddy, Molly, Morgan. Thank you for Pops and SherBear. Thank you for food. Thank you for drinks. Thank you for the good food that are in our tummies. Thank you for Pops and SherBear. Thank you for lights, thank you for games, thank you for chairs. Thank you for Mommy, Daddy, Molly and Morgan. Amen. She may live in California, but she still has that Texas drawl!

We were blessed to be able to be with family and celebrate a milestone, a birthday. As Popper says, "I am three and a half, almost four, then I will be five!" What a joyful gathering. Now we are edging closer to Thanksgiving, that time when we gather, perhaps in smaller numbers this year, but we gather and we remember those we love, those we have lost and we express thanksgiving for our blessings to God in a variety of ways and traditions. As a family, we celebrated yesterday because we are expecting Elaina Marie Holloman, Jordan and Katie's gift from God, to make her entrance into the world around the day of Thanksgiving.

At our last family Thanksgiving Days with Dorothy, Gary's mom, she gifted us with family heirlooms that had stories behind them. Some of the stories she told; others she had written in a storybook about her life. It was a time when we were gifted with more than "things" as we were able to see her expressions of joy, passing on to us what had been passed on to her.

Since she lost her brother during World War II, the letters from him were life-long, deep-heart treasures for her. One of those, as I think about the grace of giving, stands out. For the most part it was a generic letter asking about the happenings at home and wishing everyone health and love. But, at the end of the letter, written from a distant land, given for the ministry of Christ's church, some missions known to him, others not, was this PS: I hope you received the \$20 I sent for my church offering." That is excelling in the grace of giving!

In his lifetime, he had embraced our passage for today: the one who sows generously will reap abundantly." In his giving what came in return was joy. Pure, simple joy.

Farmers better understand the joy, the generosity, and the abundance when it comes to sowing and reaping. They know how a seed, containing so much life and possibility can spring from its hidden place in the earth and become more than anyone could have imagined.

The Apostle Paul was a tentmaker by trade, not a farmer, but he draws on agricultural imagery throughout this passage in 2 Corinthians, as he urges the Christians in Corinth to give to a collection because of urgent need. As a result of these pleadings in chapters eight and nine, we find one of the most important scriptural teachings on practices of generosity, which is so much more than releasing our money. It is a way of opening our lives in response to the grace of God so freely released to you. As we have considered exceling in the grace of giving with Paul these last weeks, we began with the question of why we give. Answer? It is out of thanksgiving to God who gave first to us, and gave the best, his only son, Jesus. Today, we conclude this grace-filled giving emphasis by asking what happens when we give. What grows from what we plant?

It is an important question because we cannot always see the result of growth. Like the farmer who releases the seed, we can prepare, plan faithfully, make an informed decision, but in releasing, we give that gift over to something other than ourselves. In grasping we can control, but in releasing, we give our offerings and ourselves over to trust the process of grace that we cannot always see or see clearly.

Rev. John Buchanan, long-time pastor of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago speaks about coming face to face with clarity. A local newspaper was featuring a segment about the practice of giving and how different clergy approached the sometimes-sensitive matter of financial offerings. Accompanying the articles were photos of the pastors in their sanctuaries. I have only seen Fourth Presbyterian online, but it is one of those stately, old buildings in downtown Chicago. There is a west window that is the architectural hallmark of the church, probably much as we see the Rose Window here at Eastminster. That west window made the most sense for a photographic backdrop. It is grand and majestic, and the article drew attention to the fact that because of the generosity of generations, this was a holy place of worship.

Buchanan would later say he had an epiphany as he glanced down from his balcony pose with the glimmer of the stained glass all around him. This Presbyterian congregation, much like iconic Glide Memorial Methodist in downtown San Francisco, has followed the voice of the Spirit through the years, engaging in the ministry that God has placed before them, not trying to create their own mission. For both of those congregations, that has meant reaching out to many who call the streets home. Both churches, even with their stately architectural design and formal worship, focus their mission on those whom Jesus called the least, the lost and the little. Buchanan says that as he looked down from the balcony, with the same streaming light shining on the floor, there were about a dozen people, mostly

homeless, many sleeping on the cool pews on that hot summer day. In the heat of the summer, the church is known as a place of welcome and cool cup of water and in the winter, a hot meal and a warm coat. If only for a moment, it becomes home. Buchanan believes the Spirit drew his eyes downward for a reason. At that moment the church, he says, was framed differently for him. He was looking down with God's eyes.

Eastminster is not a high-steeple, generations-old, old-money wealthy congregation like these two. But, we share this in common with Fourth Presbyterian and Glide Memorial and all Christian churches, in lands that are distant and ones that are near--we are called and commanded to look at the world with the eyes of God and at any moment in time step into the ministry with which God has already surrounded us. So, on this Dedication Sunday, these are questions we need to be asking ourselves:

How do we frame our identity as a congregation? What do we see? What is growing from the ministries of our church and the gifts that we give? Grand buildings, moving worship? These are not to be overlooked. But what else grows, perhaps not as easily framed, outside our most natural or common range of view? The apostle Paul asks us to reflect on this question, "What happens when we give?"

His short answer to that question is this. Transformation, and even resurrection happens. New life springs up through the gifts of the followers of Christ, collected and then transformed by the grace of God. No longer are our lives about daily survival. When our lives are characterized by the generosity of our God, we begin to truly live and live with abundance.

It is what we hear about in Acts 2 where the believers gathered and had things in common. It was about sharing possessions so that the needs of all are met. It was about worshiping, breaking bread together, fellowshiping, and praising God. And it was about generous, grace-filled giving that led to abundant living because God was and is daily saving souls and adding them to God's kingdom. That is what happened when they gave.

When we sow generously, giving of ourselves and our resources in a manner that is deliberate, without hesitation, and cheerful, as we order our life according to grace and commitment to Christ, the same grace and blessing that God so generously released and shared with the early church, God now shares with us. And in so doing, Paul says that abundance abounds. We find what we would otherwise miss if we lived a life more sheltered in a world that tells us at every turn to claim what is ours, to store up the best things, to possess and preserve the good gifts of God. When we

reframe the photos of our lives, we come to see that the gifts of God are meant to be shared together. And when we do this, we find a true miracle: there is enough. The best gifts in this life are not scarce, but abundant.

It happens when we give in this church. What we see is a budget that allows us to maintain the life we share together as a congregation. Even in the craziness of 2020, Eastminster has been blessed to receive a forgivable loan that has, in part, helped sustain our expenses. But that is not the only source. You, this generation of people, have this past year given generously from your hearts, in surprising and blessed ways. We have used the gift of insurance monies to help preserve this holy home of God. At the end of this sermon, you will “see” the ways in which God has so generously given that we might share with others the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ.

However, there are things we do not see or do not see clearly. But God does. We may never see the life transformed by the grace of giving a kind word, a shared prayer, a bottle of water on a hot day or a cup of coffee on a cold one. Those may be the tiny seeds beneath the surface that we cannot glimpse, but that God will grow. We are not called to always see the results of Christ’s ministry among us, but we are reminded that we need to look down more often than not and see the world as God sees it and trust that, in giving, God works toward recreating the world as God intended.

When we commit to doing that, as individuals and as a community of faith, we give to something larger than ourselves. God provides for our needs as we would never be able to do on our own. An abundant life and generous life are shared. When we give, Paul says God is able to provide us with every blessing in abundance. What is sown generously is reaped abundantly. Giving thanksgiving to the One who gave first and gives always, may we excel in the grace of giving so we can see what God does when we give. Amen