

March 18, 2012

A Spirit of Generosity

2 Corinthians 9: 6-15, Matthew 6: 1-4

Paul writes, "The surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" He writes this after telling us that God loves a cheerful giver, that God will enrich us in every way so that we can be generous, and that God is able to bless us abundantly.

God has given us grace, that indescribable gift. While grace may be indescribable, there are many, many examples we can give that show what the grace of God does.

Throughout the Bible, we read about God's relationship with people and, in fact, with all of creation, human, animal, vegetable, mineral. The story begins with the creation of all that exists --- light and dark, sun, moon, and stars, the dry land and the oceans, everything on the land and in the sea, everything in the universe. And God pronounces it all to be good!

And so begins the relationship between God and all of creation.

God is the creator, and the creation is good!

The psalmist tells us, as a reminder, that “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it!” and “It is God who has made us and not we ourselves!”

We are God’s. Everything we have and everything that’s around us is God’s. Without the grace of God, we would not exist and we would have nothing! That’s grace! That’s the “indescribable gift” that Paul is talking about!

And more than that, God continues to want us to be good!

Forgiveness is ours whenever we are sorry and choose to try to live a better life. God wants us to be the good people we were created to be, and so forgiveness comes from God again and again and again!

Every single time we fail to believe God’s word. Every single time we fail to choose light over darkness. Every single time we fall short of trusting God to take care of us, when we refuse to let God be God and instead behave as though we can take care of ourselves!

God’s forgiveness---that’s grace. That’s the indescribable gift that Paul is talking about!

I want you to look around for a moment---look at each other and see all these people who gather here each Sunday to worship and realize that all these people love you. And then close your eyes a minute and picture all of the other people who love you, all the ones who are far away and those who are now with God. And know that all those people love you as well.

All of that human love-----that's God's grace, given to you! That's the indescribable gift!

And now picture all of the beauty of the earth! All of the wonderful places you have been to and all of the ones you've only seen in pictures. Imagine God's hands forming those places and knowing how much joy it would give to us to be among all that beauty!

That's God's grace! That's the indescribable gift!

And now remember a clear night when you looked up and saw multitudes of stars. A morning when you watched the sun come up. A glorious day at the beach. A perfect day in the mountains.

All of that is God's grace. All of that is God's indescribable gift!

Because God chose to share all of creation with us, everything is grace!

“The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it!” Apart from God’s grace, we would have nothing!

God has given us everything we have! God has a spirit of generosity. God IS a spirit of generosity, giving and loving and holding nothing back!

And because we are made in God’s image, we also have a spirit of generosity!

We, because we are human, are also fearful, and that makes us want to be selfish and keep what we have for ourselves. We give back to God a little of what he has given to us, but we do not often get brave enough to give back a lot!

We act as though the earth might be the Lord’s, but a lot of what’s in it is actually ours and it needs to remain ours.

And what ends up happening sometimes is that we give God what’s left over instead of what’s the first, the best, and the most.

Picture this---- at fellowship time after church, someone has brought cookies--- delicious, homemade, yummy cookies! The first people in line

get the whole, perfect cookies that are on top. Some people even take two or three of those perfect cookies.

The last person in line---what does that person get? A few of the cookies got burned around the edges. Some cookies were broken from being underneath all the rest of them. The last person in line gets broken pieces of burnt cookies.

The good stuff is already gone.

Is that how we treat God? Leaving the broken, burnt pieces after we have kept the best of what we have to ourselves? After we have bought not just what we need but what we want?

Do we give our best to new gadgets and clothes and cars and entertainment and then give to God what's left over at the end of the month?

When we plan our budget, do we think about putting God first, or do we put him last?

The Bible talks about tithing. In Numbers and Deuteronomy and Leviticus, the people are instructed to give 10% of their harvest, the results of their labor, to God. Even the priests are told to give to the poor and needy a tenth of the tithes that come to them.

And the tithes are to be the best or at least a random sample, not the leftovers or whatever the people don't need or want for themselves.

The perfect grain, ripe from the field, the perfect wine, the perfect lamb----

All of the best the people had was to go to God, not as a payment or a penalty, but as a way of worshiping God, from whom all blessings came in the first place!

When we don't give to God first, it's not a financial problem. It's a spiritual problem.

When we don't give to God first, we are holding a very significant part of ourselves back. We are not trusting God to take care of us!

Jesus said, "Remember the lilies of the field. They don't work or earn money, and yet God loves them and takes care of them!"

Do you trust God enough to take care of you? I'm not saying we have to be irresponsible with our money. We have basic necessities to take care of and we need to be responsible for our obligations.

But maybe we need to rethink what we consider necessities! Maybe we need to stop worrying so much about tomorrow and let tomorrow take care of itself!

When the Bible talks about tithing, it doesn't mention about holding back in case of a drought or a famine. In fact, Jesus told a story about a man who built barns and silos to store up the biggest harvest he had ever had and as soon as everything was stored safely away, he died!

He was described as "foolish." Not wise for being prepared for a rainy day. Foolish.

God in grace had blessed him with abundance and he wanted to save it all up for himself. He could have fed a lot of hungry people! He could have given it all away! But he stored it all. What good did it do him? He couldn't take it with him!

How much do we store away?

How much do we give away?

Every week we collect our tithes and offerings here. They are not payment for a good sermon. They are not an obligation and they're not dues for being a member. Our tithes and offerings are part of our worship! We give because we are grateful for God's grace, which is unlimited and abundant!

We give because God's work in this world is our priority---it's important to us and we are called to be part of it. We are bringing God's reign closer to being done on earth as it is in heaven, and that takes resources-----Sunday School curriculum, choir music, electricity, heat, support of the broader church such as UMCOR and bishops and missionaries, food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, and on and on.

We love because God first loves us, and we give out of gratitude because God gave us everything first!

The spirit of generosity originated with God, and because by grace we are God's children, we also have a spirit of generosity!

Tithing---that Biblically mandated portion we are to give to God. Tithing literally means that a tenth of everything you earn goes back to God. Think about how much you make in a pay period.

Whether you get paid monthly or bimonthly or weekly----however you get paid, think about the amount and just divide that by 10----just move the decimal point to the left one place. That's your tithe amount.

For example, if you get paid \$1000 a month, your tithe for the month would be \$100. If you get paid \$200 a week, your tithe would be \$20 a week.

Whenever you get paid, give your tithe on the same schedule.

Now, I know some of you support churches or schools in the Philippines or other places. Wherever you give money, if it goes to do God's work, it's your tithe. Those of you who are members here, when you joined you vowed to uphold Linda Vista United Methodist Church, but God's work is God's work wherever it is happening.

And what your vow said was that you would uphold this church by your gifts. Tithing was not specified and it's not required for membership. Gifts

can be a full tithe or an offering to God for your birthday or in thanksgiving for some other blessing God has given to you.

Offerings include our tithes and our gifts. They can be sacrificial, like the widow's mite. They can be dedicated to a specific purpose, such as building maintenance or missions or janitorial, or they can be given to the general fund for whatever need the church has.

We give because we believe in the church's purpose, because we believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior and we believe that we are called to be part of the church's mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world!

That mission includes some pretty ordinary things like having electricity and keeping the facilities clean. It includes some very spiritual things like music in worship. It includes some physical things, like mission trips and work days at church. And it includes some things that are removed from our direct involvement, like supporting missionaries around the world.

As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to be part of this mission of the church, and so we support all of this with our tithes and our gifts.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, lived his life by the rules, “Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.” He believed that God gave us strength and intellect and skills to earn a living with and he did not believe in wasting time being lazy!

He also didn’t believe in being a spendthrift and wasting money on things you don’t need or paying too much for things. Saving all you can didn’t mean stuffing money in your mattress or loading up a bank account. It meant to Wesley that you were careful with your money and not frittering it away.

“Give all you can”----Wesley believed that money was to be used to help others and to advance God’s kingdom here on earth. He felt that holding on to money too long was dangerous to your spiritual health.

So “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” Money is not the root of all evil. The proverb is clear that “LOVE of money is the root of all evil.” Money is fine when used for God’s purposes, but when it becomes

important on its own, something to be accumulated and held on to, it gains a dangerous power over us.

Remember the rich young ruler? Jesus told him to sell all he owned and give the money to the poor. He went away sad. Money had a strong hold on him, a power that only God should have had in his life.

One way to give all you can is to tithe.

Whether or not you tithe is up to you, of course. But people who tithe will tell you that it makes a difference in your relationship with God. By trusting God with your finances, you will find that you trust God with your whole life. Or maybe it works the opposite direction---you trust God with your whole life so it becomes possible to trust him with your finances.

It's also up to you to decide to base your tithe on your before-tax or after-tax income.

Beginning to tithe may be too hard for you right now. Figure out what percentage of your income you are giving now and decide to increase that percentage every year until you reach a full 10% tithe. Most people find that it gets easier and easier to live on 90% of their income.

When you make these decisions about tithing, consider this----how generous has God been to you?

Once we really believe that everything is grace, that all good gifts are from God, given to us in grace, how can we not be grateful?

And if we are grateful, how can we hold back any part of ourselves from God? God's spirit of generosity will be part of us and we will surrender everything to God in gratitude and humility!

To fail to recognize the overwhelming grace of God, to take what we have for granted or to think of it as something we have a right to or that we have earned, is to reject that indescribable gift from God.

To reject grace is to live a miserable, wretched life.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!

May God awaken a spirit of generosity in each one of us that will invade every part of our heart, soul, mind, and strength! Amen.