

Commitment Celebration Sunday
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
November 12, 2017

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Lake Forest, Illinois

Our New Testament Reading in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Shortly after Hurricane Harvey dumped around 27 trillion gallons of water on southern Texas and Louisiana, in what was one of the most damaging natural disasters in our country's history, my daughter and I took a

walk on one of our usual routes, early on a Saturday morning. About a quarter of the way into that walk, we heard what seemed like dozens of kids' voices. These were animated voices, shouting and singing. It seemed awfully early for kids to be out, so we were curious, wondering what was going on. Their enthusiasm was inviting. As we turned the next corner we began to hear, with more clarity – "CANDY FOR HURRICANE HARVEY! CANDY FOR HURRICANE HARVEY!" Ha! It did occur to me that their marketing pitch could use a little tweaking; because, seriously, the last thing that hurricane needed was a sugar rush. But what they lost in marketing finesse, they more than made up for in enthusiasm.

As we got closer, we saw a crowd of kids scattered all over a street corner, selling candy to raise money for hurricane victims. "CANDY FOR THE HURRICANE!" they continued, and then: "\$1.00, GET TWO PIECES...\$5.00, GET THE WHOLE BAG!" They might have needed a pricing agent too, but you couldn't help but be impressed with their passion for the cause. They stayed out on that corner throughout the day.

Our neighborhood was not at all unusual at that time – lemonade stands, toy drives, book collections...children all over the country were moved by the images of families losing everything. Five-year-old Matthew, in Gainesville, Florida, watching the flooding on TV and children's possessions floating away, asked his mom what they could do. His mom stumbled a bit and said, "We're miles and miles from there; there's not much we can do." Her son replied, "Well we can send toys," and he initiated massive toy drives that sent two truckloads to the children of Texas; first through the Red Cross, next through the Salvation Army. Kids want to help. They see need and respond because they also see abundance and provision. Like the children in our

neighborhood, Matthew wanted to help and needed to share. We are wired for generosity. Created in God's image, we live fully into abundant life when we care for one another and share. These kids, in their generosity, were experiencing the joy of living into who we were all created to be, and pleasing God while at it.

I was reminded of the joy of these generous children as I reflected on our lesson for today and our own generosity. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, to encourage them to share with people in need in Jerusalem, people whom they likely would never meet. The language of this passage gushes with generosity. The words bountiful, abundant, multiply, increase, overflow, great, surpassing and, ironically, indescribable, attempt to describe God's lavish and generous abundance; provision in which every need is met. Into this extravagant generosity, we are invited. We worship a giving-God, whose ultimate gift of Jesus Christ shows us a generosity that knows no bounds. God wants us to experience the joy of this generous living too. Paul teaches that our giving brings God joy. "God loves a cheerful giver," Paul observes. He further explains that God provides us an *abundance* of blessing just so that we can share that blessing (vs. 7-8). God's giving brings God joy, and God wants the same joy for us, so provides us endless opportunities for us to share.

Because of fiscal calendars and the practical needs of annual budgeting and planning, stewardship in churches often gets relegated to an annual event and even one of duty or obligation, rather than an invitation into ongoing and joyful participation in God's grace, as Paul describes here. As a result, we lose sight of the truth that we *get* to do this! We GET to participate in God's generosity! This idea was a revelation, and ultimately life-changing to two Harvard MBA students, Greg Baumer and John Cortines, who wrote *God and*

Money: How We Discovered True Riches at Harvard Business School.

Baumer and Cortines took an MBA course, as part of joint curriculum between Harvard Business and Divinity schools, which explored the intersection of faith and money. They describe their whole perspective on money changing as they studied generous people and engaged deeply in the Word (which has a lot to say about money). In that study and reflection, they say they came to realize that in calling us to be generous givers, God wants something *for* us, rather than *from us*. In

other words, God doesn't need our generosity, God allows us to participate in God's generosity so we can know the joy of giving that God knows. God invites us into God's joyful abundance to share with others. These two highly successful Harvard MBA students, once rewarded for investing and saving, then began to seek ways to give away; to participate in God's kingdom-building through generosity. They began to accept God's invitation to the joys of generous giving.

We see evidence of God wanting generosity *for* us, rather than from us, in the earliest Scripture. In Genesis we read that God created a world in which everything is "good" and later God created community for us to share that goodness with each other. The baskets on the chancel area are reminders of the instructions to the ancient Israelites to put the first of their harvest, or "first fruits" they were called, in baskets, and bring them to the Lord so that they might be shared (Deut. 26:2). This text from Deuteronomy 26 that opened our stewardship season, is part of the instructions that God gave to help form community. Stewardship was foundational to healthy, thriving community. Sharing God's generous provision, the very best of their harvest, gave the Israelites an opportunity to proclaim their trust in God and to share in God's

abundance. Generous giving – of not just our money, but our time and talents - is one of the most tangible forms of worship; a very public and essential proclamation of where we place our trust. God instructed the earliest communities to give first, because giving is good for the individual and good for God's purposes in the community.

Our communities today are formed differently. Rather than organized around giving first to God, we are incented to give first to ourselves and our families, then share what's left over, if we share at all. The instructions to share our first fruits, while intended for our joyful experience of God's provision, are mighty radical today. Paul says to the people in Corinth that the *one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, but the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully* (v. 6). Reaping bountifully in our culture is typically counted in material possessions or status. Paul, in this passage, is introducing a different kind of reaping; a bountiful reaping in which giving away is gaining, for us and the Kingdom.

There's a verse in Proverbs that describes this paradox of giving and gaining – *Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want* (Prov. 11:24). It's a paradox that brings to mind the teaching of Jesus, that if we lose our life for God's sake, we'll gain it (Matt 16:25). This is growth and gain in goodness rather than goods. Paul tells the church in Corinth that in our giving God will "increase the harvest of our righteousness" (v.10). This is a whole other definition of rich and successful. It's a richness of goodness, and a deep joy that only generosity can yield.

Ken Blanchard, in his book *The Generosity Factor*, provides a distinction between success and significance that's helpful here. He describes the success-motivated person who measures life in terms of money, power and status;

compared to the significance-motivated person seeking to empower and build others up, to be generous. He writes that the successful person has learned how to make money, but the significant person has learned how to give it away.¹ It reminds me of Dr. Nicholas Pearce's urging that we seek a life of consequence; to do what matters to God and for God.

Experiencing significance and leading a life of consequence seems to be the 'reaping bountifully' that Paul describes; an inner joy of sharing in God's generosity – generous whether with money or our time. In our all-church book read, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, author James Martin expands on this inner joy and distinguishes it from happiness. Biblical joy, which is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), is "happiness in God." Rather than a feeling that comes and goes, it is a "deep-seated result of one's connection to God."² This is the joy that Paul describes; joy in sharing God's abundance; deeply connected to God and "enriched in every way for our great generosity" (v.11).

So many of you know this joy. I see it in you and you tell me about it. I have too many examples to name them all. But with all of our recent memorial services, I can't help but think of the chancel guild. If you've served on chancel guild you know this joy of generous giving. These women give so many hours of their time to provide for families in both their joy and sorrow – ministering in weddings and funerals. Ask them and they will describe the joy of being a part of people's lives in this way. It's certainly not about status, frankly sometimes I'm sure it feels like grunt work! But it's work of *significance*. They *get* to participate.

PADS workers notice the same thing – working 11-3, or 3-7 in the middle of the night certainly isn't status. But in giving freely, your lives are

¹ Ken Blanchard and S. Truett Cathy, *The Generosity Factor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 64.

² James Martin, SJ, *Between Heaven and Mirth* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 25.

richer, more significant, as you GET to participate in God's work of providing for all. Another example: when the Mission Committee passes along your generosity to educate children, provide safe space for abuse victims, necessities to those impacted by the way too many natural disasters...we GET to participate in God's provision, to do something of significance. Neal school volunteers, tutors, Sunday School teachers, servers at Festival Sunday, ushers each week, elders governing and Deacons visiting the homebound, stewards of our building and properties, the list is varied and goes on and on. None of it status, but instead significant. This is not identity as defined in this world, but identity in God's Kingdom. It's not about accumulating then finding ourselves "suffering want" as the prophet says, but instead the paradox of giving and experiencing abundance.

The joy of the children collecting for hurricane victims, echoes the scene after the Israelites' gathering of the first fruits. We read in that passage that after bringing our first fruits we are to celebrate, with all the bounty God has given us. So today is a day of celebration. It's a day to celebrate that we *get to* participate in the wild and abundant generosity of God.

In the wake of yet another church shooting, in the midst of our suffering world, our celebration today is a witness to that world. We gather as a community of faith to proclaim God's goodness, and we commit to sharing generously what God provides, so that God's abundant grace and the joy of participating in God's generosity might be known to all. With our gifts of time, talent, and treasure may we thank God for this indescribable gift!