

Sowing Hope
2 Corinthians 9:6-8
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You know—Midwesterners often get razzed by people who live on the Coasts—that “there’s nothing out here except corn and beans.” One of my in-laws, a Southern Californian by birth who made his career marketing technology in Massachusetts, told me the Midwest is best seen from an altitude of 38,000 feet. He once saw a copy of Midwest Living in my wife’s tote-bag and called it “an oxymoron.”

Well...for my part, I love corn and beans. I love to eat them, and more importantly, I love to ride my bike out in the country along back roads that pass by miles and miles of fields filled with deep, rich Midwestern topsoil. Each April, when the cycling seasons returns in earnest, I go out riding and, when the ground is dry enough, watch the farmers planting their soybeans and seed-corn. As the days lengthen, the corn springs up, tiny and tender at first, then climbing higher and full summer comes on. Often enough, on the other side of the road, the soybeans cover the land with a thick, deep carpet of green.

By August, I can find myself riding between walls of corn nearing nine feet tall, bending and whispering in the breeze. And come September, the soybeans fields are turning into gold. I continue to be amazed and in awe of the harvest in the American Midwest. Around this time of year, weather

permitting, the Combines are cutting down the last of the cornfields, their waterfalls of bright, yellow corn pouring into waiting trailers—enough to feed the world. No—I love corn and beans. I could cheerfully ride my bike along their munificent margins forever...

I

Today on this Sunday when we bring forth the fruits of our own harvests, our text is taken from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, where the Apostle Paul is urging his Corinthian community to be generous in their giving to alleviate the need of the mother church in Jerusalem. There has been a famine in Palestine lasting a number of years, and Paul is urging his Greek congregations to support their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the purpose of the Offering.

Paul is in full teaching mode in these chapters, and this is what he says: “the person who sows little will also reap little...but the person who sows bountifully (the Greek word here is “eulogiais” meaning literally “with blessings”) the one who sows “with blessings” will also reap with blessings.

Paul is working off his own knowledge of Scripture, where we find in the Book of Proverbs this statement: “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their bread with the poor” (Prov. 22:9).

What is the connection between generosity and being blessed? In a world full of selfishness and greed, it is only too easy to forget that we were all created through the abundant generosity of God—we were created to become generous ourselves, and blessed that we too might be a blessing to others. I can remember happy times with my two grandchildren when they were barely 12 months old: over dessert, they would spontaneously offer me a bite from their cupcakes and then shriek with laughter when the frosting got stuck on my face just like theirs. How many adults do you know who will happily share their cupcake? But that's the point: God designed us to be generous. We are social animals—hardwired for life together. We are made not just to consume but to contribute, and when we choose to do that, it seems like just about every time, we get more than we give. Talk to anyone who's gone on the Work Trip, or volunteered at the PADS shelter; who's signed up to make a meal, or sorts Rummage, or sings in the Choir. They will all tell you the same thing: it truly is more blessed to give than to receive.

But there's more to it than that...Paul says, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us." What does it mean to you to be "rich?" Does it mean having a great deal of money? A fine house? A beautiful wardrobe? A fast car? The truth is, just one calamity can make ashes out of all those things—and where

will your riches be then? True wealth comes from the richness of our relationships, which are the cause and outcome of our joy in living. I have seen this joy in the smiling faces of Haitian orphans who literally have nothing; and I have seen and participated in the rhythms of Ghanaian Presbyterians in worship, who, when the Offering is called, get up from their seats and dance...

Many of us worshiping here this morning have been enriched through our labors and good fortune in the things of this world. But what does it mean to be “rich toward God,” as Jesus invites? What does it mean to be rich in the things that are not of this world—like the Gifts of the Spirit: Love, Joy and Peace? What would we not give to possess all of these?

We know that Gratitude brings forth Generosity. But what we often forget is how Generosity brings forth Blessings—and how Blessings can become Exponential—or as Paul puts it, “overflows with thanksgivings to God.”

II

Let me share three examples with you of exactly how the generosity of just one person can bring forth a “harvest of righteousness.”

1) Consider these two people: Al Whittaker, an executive with Bristol-Myers International, and David Bussau, an Australian entrepreneur. These two individuals were successful businessmen and committed Christians who, in their travels around the world, saw firsthand the vicious cycle of extreme poverty. Back in the Sixties, there was much being given to alleviate poverty, but little being used to bring people out of poverty altogether. These men wanted to give people a “hand up,” and so in 1971, they founded Opportunity International, an organization with a vision to end extreme poverty altogether by investing in and training ordinary people to become wealth-producers themselves through sustainable business practices. 95% of their loans went to women, and today, Opportunity International has helped create over 20 million jobs in 23 countries with a loan repayment rate of 99%--which means the money is being used again and again and again. That’s what the “overflowing of many thanksgivings to God” can mean.

2) Consider Adam Braun, a Millennial rising star on Wall Street who, when in college, met a young boy begging on the streets of India. When he asked him what he wanted most in the world, he simply answered, “a pencil.” This encounter inspired Braun some years later to leave Wall Street and start a charity called “Pencils of Promise,” with the mission of bringing educational opportunities to third =world nations. Using the bests modes

of entrepreneurship, “Pencils of Promise” has raised 60M to date to build more than 500 schools in Guatemala, Ghana and Laos. In 2014, Braun’s book “The Promise of a Pencil: How an Ordinary Person can Create Extraordinary Change” topped the NYT Bestseller list, selling out at Amazon in less than five days. In 2015, Braun received the prestigious Jefferson Award for Public Service—at age 32.

3) My last example is the story of a church lady—a faithful Presbyterian chemistry professor with no children of her own who started a foundation to support and encourage young men and women to consider careers of full-time Christian service. Her vision, carried out over thirty years, resulted in dozens of scholarships being awarded for college and seminary and fifteen people becoming ordained Ministers in the Presbyterian Church—all of them coming from just one congregation.

III

Today is Commitment Sunday here at First Presbyterian, which is a Congregation distinguished by its commitment to Mission both locally and globally. The heart and soul of that mission begins here, in our life together in the Lord: our life of worship and learning; of service, connection and prayer. When we give to the church, the harvest is greater than philanthropy. It’s a lot like sowing corn and beans. God provides the soil of earthly abundance, but God gives us also the seeds of FAITH. We sow those seeds into all that’s

been entrusted to us: our minds and bodies; the use of our time and possessions; and the breadth and depth of our relationships—the greatest riches of all. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9, “whoever plows, should plow in hope.” There is no other way. We don’t know what the weather will be tomorrow—but we sow our little seeds anyway—believing in the One who will supply and multiply those seeds. Think about the person who gave you your first opportunity—who first believed in you.

We can all be sowers of hope, you see. This morning, you aren’t being asked to give to a Budget, or to maintain the status quo. You’re being asked to give to a vision of our future where this church will grow in its mission to welcome one another in Christ, build up one another in love, and send out disciples into a broken and hurting world with compassion and resilience; with wisdom; and with great generosity.

As our scriptures say: Those who sow grudgingly will reap grudgingly, but those who sow with blessings, those who sow in hope—they will be blessed indeed, and their generosity “will overflow with many thanksgivings to God.” Let that be the quality of our commitment, and the content of our prayers today.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.