

MOMENT OF GRACE
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
November 22, 2020
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 10-15. Paul Takes Up a Collection for the Jerusalem Church

Our lesson today takes the form of a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth halfway through the first century of the Common Era.

Corinth is a thriving metropolis along the Mediterranean Sea, along the southern coast of modern day Greece. Corinthians who have committed to The Way of Jesus come from all walks of life: male and female, rich and poor, of many ethnic backgrounds.

In Paul's first letter to this church, he chastises them for their failure to share in abundant life together, especially for perpetuating income inequality in their practice of communion.

But now, in this second letter, Paul celebrates their newfound generosity, across all those walks of life. You figured it out! he says. God's gifts of abundant life for all, shared by all, in true communion with all. And if you, Corinthians, can figure out how to do it, there may yet be hope for the church at large. And indeed, for the world!

And then Paul proceeds to tell them about another congregation that follows The Way of Jesus, this one in Jerusalem, which has far fewer resources than the congregation in Corinth. And yet that church is on fire! Paul says. Engaged in ministries of healing and compassion and justice. They are living the value of abundant life in covenant community, even without the resources you share.

But they could really use your community's help, Paul says to the Corinthians. You have the chance to strengthen and nurture and expand the vision of abundant life for all by contributing to their ministry.

But it is not an act of charity, Paul insists. It is a relationship of reciprocity. By sharing your generous gifts with them, you might just receive in return the generous gift of their enthusiasm for this vision of abundant life you share.

The point, Paul says, is this:
(2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 10-15)

*the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and the one who sows with blessings will also reap with blessings,
each as the heart has intended,
not out of regret or under compulsion,
for God loves a cheerful giver.*

*And God is able to provide your community abundant grace,
so that your community will always be sustained,
as your good work abounds. ...*

*The one who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food
will supply and multiply your community's seed for sowing
and increase the harvest of your community's righteousness.*

*Your community will be enriched in every way for your collective generosity,
which will produce thanksgiving to God through us [Paul and Timothy];
for your community's liturgy-in-action not only
supplies the needs of the saints
but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.*

*Through the testing of this liturgy-in-action you glorify God
by your community's commitment to The Way of Jesus
and by the generosity of your sharing with the church in Jerusalem
and with all others,
while they long for your community and pray for your community
because of the surpassing grace of God that God has given your community.*

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

Sincerely, Paul

Through these words, may we hear a Word of Hope. Amen.

.....

A few months after Czechoslovakia freed itself from communist rule, in the early 1990s, its new president, Václav Havel, lamented the vast human suffering his people had endured under totalitarian rule: death; profound economic decline; horror and humiliation.

But, Havel admitted, that same totalitarian rule "has given us something positive: a special capacity to look, from time to time, somewhat further than those who have not undergone this bitter experience. ...

"We too can offer something to you," Havel says, to his north American audience. "Our experience and the knowledge that has come from it."

We who have known deprivation and hunger and torture and death, have something to offer *you*, Havel says. We are not merely victims, he insists, dependent on a handout from you "more fortunate" others. We have a gift to share in return. Perhaps an even more valuable, more essential gift. The gift of our perspective, Havel says. A perspective that your abundance renders impossible for you to have yourselves.

This gift the other has to share in return, this perspective from the "underbelly" of human experience, is what Paul insists the Christians in Jerusalem have to offer the Christians in Corinth from our Scripture lesson today. This gift of shared knowing, from a perspective the Corinthians simply cannot buy for themselves. This gift of understanding their liturgy-in-action as a liturgy of reciprocity. Those who live well are not engaging in a paternalistic "helping those less fortunate" as an act of charity, Paul says. They are literally enacting a moment of grace that permeates the fabric of the entire covenant community.

And the moment of grace is reciprocal.

Yes, the church in Jerusalem is poor, Paul admits. By its very location this "mother church" serves a people and a land that is exploited by foreign powers. In the land of promise and plenty, the hard truth is that the "plenty" is actually "promised" to the colonizing powers. Powers that just so happen to reside in places like ... Corinth!

Yes, the church in Jerusalem needs your financial assistance, Paul admits. Not through any fault of their own but because of the hoarding of the empire.

They are poor, but they are on fire! Paul insists. They are doing the work of Jesus wholeheartedly in this world: healing the sick, welcoming the stranger, binding up the brokenhearted. And they do this work so well in part because *they* know what it's like to be sick, stranger, brokenhearted.

And they know what it is like to be made well. And they can hold out that hope for others, in a way you Corinthians in your abundance may not have the capacity to do.

But they do need your help, Paul says to the Corinthians.

The plain truth is that you are the ones with the money, Paul says. And even when you do not think you do, believe me, you have more than enough to take care of yourselves and then some. Especially compared with the Christians in Jerusalem. I know you are afraid it might not continue. I know there may even be a small part of you that thinks you deserve to keep your wealth because you worked so hard for it.

But I promise you, Corinthians, Paul is trying to say, if you let go of your fear of not having enough. If you open your hearts in thanksgiving for your overflowing cup – not because I am compelling you to do so but because you feel genuine joy over this vision of abundant life for all – if you can do that, Corinthians, Paul is trying to say, I promise you, *your* community will be enriched in every way.

Not rewarded, Paul is saying, not in a transactional quid pro quo, but *enriched*. Filled with a moment of grace so profound your life will be transformed into a life more meaningful than you can possibly imagine.

This genuine joy of abundant life for all, this overflowing grace within covenant community, *this* is the wisdom Václav Havel proposes as the lesson from his country's totalitarian experience.

What we have learned, Havel says, what we have to teach you, he suggests, is that “the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human modesty, and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness,” Havel concludes, “nothing will change for the better.”

Let me say that again: the salvation – the *healing* – of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart. In the open-heartedness that Paul describes in his letter to the Corinthians. In the capacity to “repent,” which as I keep on saying means simply to “change our hearts and minds.”

The whole point, Paul says, Václav Havel says, the Grandmothers say, is to share.

God really has given *homo sapiens* – as a collective species – everything we need. Not only to survive but to thrive. The United Nations tells us the earth produces more than enough food to feed us all. They study it every year. We have more than enough to care for the entire global human population. In fact, we have so much that food waste is a major contributor to climate change. We do not have a fundamental problem of abundance.

We have a fundamental problem of the heart.

But we do not have to stay stuck in that problem! The truth is our hearts were created from the beginning for community. For collective generosity. For a liturgy of reciprocity *in action!*

We just have to remember who we really are. And to whom we really belong. Not just to our Creator but to the rest of creation. Because if we remember who we really are and to whom we really belong, if we really open our hearts to the gift of abundant life for all, our liturgy of reciprocity cannot help but build blessing upon blessing and grace upon grace.

Which is what has been happening right here in our own small corner of the cosmos with the Shepherdstown Shares Food Pantry.

Our own Cari Simon will admit her selfish motives in getting the pantry off the ground: binge-watching Netflix was getting old and binge-watching CNN was getting harmful to her health. So she leapt at the chance to do something useful when offered the opportunity.

Since then, Cari's seemingly self-serving "yes" has led to moment after moment of surpassing grace in our community:

Refrigerator donations came in like crazy. One would suddenly go on the fritz and moments later another donation would arrive.

Daisy Scouts, those beautiful beloved young girls gathered in service to others, delighted in making bags filled with personal hygiene products.

The Covenant Church – with whom we have substantial theological and social disagreements immediately gifted 2 mornings per week of the leftover food distribution they already had secured from Martins grocery store.

And to top it all off, a Facebook Marketplace seller in Purcellville, VA, ended up donating the perfect Ikea cart to the Food Pantry ministry. When Cari went to pick it up, she found a large bag of food alongside the cart and a thank you note saying, "You're making a difference in this world. Love, Danielle."

You are making a difference in this world. Isn't that what we all want to hear? What we all NEED to hear?

The truth is, human heart *wants* to give! *Needs* to give! The human heart is *created* for generosity! But something has happened to us this side of Eden. And for some reason we still need Václav Havel and Cari Simon and the Apostle Paul to remind us that the job of the church has always been to generate thanksgiving – *eucharisto* – for this gift of life, this gift of grace, this gift of possibility.

The job of the church has always been *to generate thanksgiving* – within our walls and throughout the world – to generate *eucharisto* in our holy communion. Because, as Ann Voskamp reminds us, "thanksgiving always precedes the miracle of abundant life for all."

So come, friends. To the table of abundant life for all. Be thankful in our "Eucharisto" today. Be thankful in this covenant community that reminds us who we really are and to whom we really belong. Be thankful in this covenant community that vows to care for one another and support one another and yes, even provide for one another. In plenty AND in want. Not as an act of charity. But as a joyful journey along The Way of Jesus.

Friends, the table is ready!

Amen.