

Giving

II Samuel 1:17-27
II Corinthians 8:7-15

This is a sermon about giving. This is not a sermon about money.

Well, the back-story of our New Testament passage concerns money. The Apostle Paul had a complicated history with the Corinthian churches. Most scholars agree that while I Corinthians consists of one letter written at one time and sent once to the churches in Corinth, II Corinthians likely consists of fragments of four letters written over a period of time. Several chapters of what our Bibles call II Corinthians contain a critical, combative letter Paul wrote. Reports he had received from correspondence and personal, on-the-scene accounts about unchristian conduct frustrated him so deeply he sent a note before he could think better of doing so. Think of a time you have hit “send” too quickly. In other parts of II Corinthians he calls this first note his “painful letter”.

Singer Amy Grant told an interviewer for Christianity Today of a comparable experience she had. In the mid-1980's she, already on top of the Gospel charts, recorded Unguarded, an album aimed at “crossing over”, at selling to the entire pop music market. For it she scaled back the Christian content of her lyrics. She wore a leopard-skin print jacket for its cover. It was a modest look (by today's standards

especially) but still a departure from the Donna Reed-ish look of female Christian singers' wardrobes to that date. The reaction from Christians stunned her. She was called a prostitute. In writing. Meet-and-greet autograph sessions for her CDs became so contentious she canceled them. On the one hand, sales of Unguarded tripled her previous numbers. On the other, she, one of the first Christian singers widely recognized by the public, no longer felt free to go out in public.

Twenty-five years later, Grant told Christianity Today of the scars she still bore from the experience. “I felt like I had to justify my choice to make songs about the love of God that didn't talk openly about God. I thought my fellow Christians would see what I was doing. But a lot of them didn't.” (Side note: the song she wrote about the love of God in the midst of child sexual abuse, Ask Me How I Know, is one of the most powerful artistic witnesses to grace in the midst of affliction I have ever encountered.) The interviewer read comments Grant had made during a 1986 appearance on the Tonight Show. Johnny Carson had asked her about the push back she had gotten for her Unguarded album. She had called her critics “stupid” and “ignorant”. The Christianity Today interviewer asked if she regretted making these comments. “I regretted making them as I heard them come out of my mouth,” Grant answered. “I knew I had spoken too quickly and I asked the producers to edit that part out. They said they would but obviously they didn't. I spent the next concert tour opening every night with an apology.”

Paul faced the ticklish task of trying to promote something—giving money to the

church—that can already be touchy, in writing, from a distance, not knowing exactly how his words would be received after he had recently offended his audience. He opens with flattery. As they excel in everything, let them excel also in “this gracious work”. He tells them he is not presuming to command them to give, but encouraging them to prove the sincerity of their love. He uses Jesus as an example. He was rich—that is, Jesus as God existed eternally in glory. But for our sake he became poor—that is, he accepted birth as a human into humble circumstances. He even died so “that by his poverty you might become rich.” With his extreme self-sacrifice Jesus made us spiritually rich.

Paul continues with a reminder that a year has passed since he received a promise from the Corinthian churches that they would give money to support the churches in Jerusalem. He urges them to complete the job. He tactfully refers to their abundance. The implication is that the Corinthian Christians have more money than the Jerusalem Christians. He calls it equitable that they should give from their deeper pockets. Paul closes with a reference to the Lord's gift of manna to the Israelites escaping Egypt during the Exodus. Moses had said the Lord commanded them not to gather more than a day's worth. Of course some had ignored the command, only to find the manna spoiled overnight. Yet once the Israelites fell into compliance they found that somehow, miraculously every household had exactly as much manna as they needed, no more and no less.

Contrast Paul's tact and careful strategy in asking Christians for financial

support with the average appeal made by the leaders of the mega-churches on television today. Paul does not even roll out his usual theology of giving (that all we have and are comes as a gift from God, and our giving to God is but an act of grateful stewardship). No, the only theological component to his appeal in II Corinthians 8 is that bit about Jesus. He impoverished himself existentially in order to enrich us spiritually. Certainly we can supply the rest of the argument—even if Paul does not—that our giving comes as a reaction, a thanksgiving for Christ's generosity.

These two steps in Paul's theology of giving apply to every form of giving we can do. This is in fact not a sermon about money. It is a sermon about giving. And now, completely without warning or permission, I am going to use one particular Christian's giving over the course of many years as an example. Cheryl Moles, your twenty year career as Christian Educator has been a gift to Central Presbyterian Church and its members and friends. Human beings whose lives your work has blessed now live from coast to coast (and probably beyond) and range in age from infant to elderly. You have used your gifts to do ministry. Here are a couple of testimonials to the truth of this. (Isabelle and Al)

When David lamented over the death of King Saul and his son Jonathon, whom David considered a cherished friend, he lamented the loss of a leader. Yes, Saul and David had conducted a feud for years. It had gotten violent. David had spent years in flight from Saul's soldiers. Yet Saul **was** king. Israel had actually done rather better under his stewardship than it had in the years before having had any king at all.

Commentators almost unanimously agree David' sorrow and concern for the future were sincere. Cheryl Moles has conducted remarkably little warfare. She has not been slain as Saul had. Yet her retirement signifies a loss for this church. Her giving of her talents and her love have made significant contributions to many lives. Well done, good and faithful servant! Thank you for your generosity and your faithfulness.

May the rest of us use this occasion to reflect on what we have to give. Truly I can say to you that just this week one of you gave to this church by unclogging the disposal in the church kitchen. Three of you gave your time by sitting in the office, answering the phone and letting people in the building. Another one prepared and gave the Children's Moment. Still others planned and prepped for the lunch we will share in a few minutes. Many of you prayed for various of our folks. Two of you have given your time and equipment for over a year now to get our services up on the Internet. How has God made you rich that you might give? How has God gifted you? Elsewhere Paul made it clear that no gift outstrips any other in importance. We can add that the church needs every kind of gift given in order to continue to minister with the effectiveness that has characterized Central for so long. Echoing Paul, then, I ask that you continue in your good work of giving. And in another echo I will add my thanks to all of you for what you are already giving.