

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Theme: “Trust the Lord enough to – let go!”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Pastors and preachers have been guilty of seizing on this reading from Paul, and the reading that follows entitled, “A cheerful giver” as being an opportunity to preach on Christian giving in order to boost the congregational coffers. You know how the sermon goes, ‘God loves a cheerful giver so you really ought to give generously because God has done sooo much for you – you really owe it to him. And besides it’s halfway through the year and we are thousands of dollars behind in our budget...’ A friend mine who is a pastor describes this as the “Sermon on the amount”! Today I have no intention of preaching a sermon on giving money as an expression of Christian stewardship.

So if this sermon isn’t about giving, just what is its emphasis? It is on trust. Trusting God enough to let go of the control you think you may have over your life. It means trusting God enough to ask and to accept the help that is offered when you need God’s love and care for you.

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We try to keep in control

Very few people like the idea of ‘letting the side down’. Most people want to be known at least for being reliable and self-sufficient. We want to be in control of who we are, what we do and when we do it. Another way of describing this is that we want to be independent. We don’t want to be reliant on others and most people I know certainly don’t want to be a burden on others.

None of this is a bad thing. It is a good thing to be able to do things for yourself and there is usually a good feeling of achievement and even a sense of a ‘job well done’ when we get things done. The problem comes about when we push this too far and we become *proud* of not having to rely on anyone else. We can easily become slaves to the idea that without us nothing would get done, or at the very least, it wouldn’t get done to the standards ‘I expect!’

The other part to this equation are those people who either ignore the needs of others or those who seek to exploit the generosity of those willing to give. These are both expressions of the sinfulness of fallen humanity which is so often turned in upon itself, rather than turned towards God.

Let go and let God

At this point, I would like to engage in some ancient biblical speculation. You see Paul was encouraging the Christians in Corinth to give more to help other who were in need. We know that the Corinthians had already started to raise the necessary money, so now in this letter Paul is encouraging them to finish the job off.

Let us now consider for a moment who Paul was asking the Corinthians to raise money for. Individual people aren’t named but it is understood to be poor Christians who at this time were in Jerusalem. Regardless as to who the money was being raised for, it is worth considering *how* Paul became aware that there were particular people who were in need. How do you think he became aware of this need in the first place? Whether it was an individual or a group of people, someone had to stick their hand in the air and say, “We need help. We can’t do this on our own, will you help us?”

And so because someone asked for help, what do you think happened? Now here is the amazing thing; we don’t actually know. In spite of all Paul’s encouragement and persuasive arguments, we don’t have recorded how much was raised and whether this was enough to meet the needs of those who had asked for help. This issue is not whether these Corinthians came up to the mark or not, but that Christians ought to be able to ask for help and that other Christians ought to provide help if they are capable of it.

For us today, Paul’s encouragement is clearly two-fold. In the first instance, if we are in need, don’t be afraid to ask for help. No-one is so capable, is so bullet-proof that they are in perfect control all of the time. Asking for help or comfort is *not* a sign of weakness but rather a healthy acknowledgment that we all need and should draw on other for support. Even Jesus spent lots of time in prayer, asking God for strength and wisdom to serve according to his Father’s will.

The second part to Paul's encouragement is to be prepared to offer help or to provide help if asked. This shouldn't be the 'busy-body' type of help that seeks acknowledgement or gratitude. Instead it should be the selfless help that flows from Christian love as a response from that love of God who sent his only Son to die in our place, even while we were still sinners.

Being prepared to help

So if being prepared to ask for help is an important part of Christian living, and being prepared to offer help is the other half of this equation, let's look more closely at the example Paul gives us in today's epistle reading.

Paul begins by describing the many good qualities of the Corinthians – their faith, their speech, their knowledge and their earnestness. In all these areas the Corinthians do very well. So Paul encourages them to excel also in their giving, not as an obligation to satisfy an annual budget, but as an *act of grace*. You see, this is one of the ways God works in the world, through the work of people who are God's hands, and feet and lips to those in the world around us.

If the giving of the Corinthians was to be a grace gift, it must be freely given which is why Paul explains that all of his encouragement shouldn't be understood as a command. Instead, the giving of the Corinthians would serve to show others that their Christian love was genuine. Their support of others would be their witness – it would be one way they would practically shine the light of Christ into the time and place God had put them. And here we have the clear distinction of Christian giving over and against the Old Testament practice of tithing. For the Israelites the Mosaic Law dictated that a tenth of all the produce from their land was to be given to the temple as a sacrifice to the Lord. Even in this system there was a gracious reason for the sacrifice to be made. The Levites who were the temple servants weren't given any land when the Israelites took possession of the Promised Land so they had no way of growing their own food or passing on an inheritance to their children. So the offering was used by the Levites to live on as well as providing food and resources for the poor and the widows within the community. The tithe was to be used for the care of people – but it was also a command, something the Israelite were expected to provide as part of their religious obligations.

But now as Christians, we are children of the new covenant, sealed with the blood of Christ. No longer do we give to satisfy God's demands on us, but we give because "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Jesus emptied himself of all his divine glory so we might be found without fault in the eyes of God. This is the astonishing richness that has already been won for us. It is the gift, the inheritance that is already yours. Forget about a \$90 million lottery jackpot, this is the untold wealth of resting in God's arms and seeing him face to face. Living in God's presence, just as life was created for Adam and Eve.

This is the gift that Jesus has given to you and you pass this gift on to others as you shine this light of Christ into the lives of others. Whether you do this by a monetary offering, or the giving of your time, or the prayers of your hearts doesn't matter. What matters to God is that you freely give so what you offer is a gracious gift that is a perfect witness to your faith in him alone.

To which we return to my original thought for today's sermon. The most precious, most gracious gift you can offer to God is *yourself*. Paul writes in Romans 12, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship". Trust in God enough that you might be willing to lay aside your gifts and your talents, your abilities and your dreams and to simply trust him to carry you. It means trusting God enough to say sometimes, "It's not okay. I'm not alright."

So often in the Church we focus on giving, and again this is a good thing. The danger is that we turn it into giving of ourselves and we forget that we have been given God's own Son and now it is Jesus that we in turn give to others. And because we have first been given Jesus, I pray that we as the body of Christ don't forget to ask him for the help we need in our daily lives. I pray that you trust the Lord enough to let go and let him serve you.

And the may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.