

Title: Grace Inspired Giving
Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7
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Immanuel Baptist Church
Chuck Queen, Pastor

In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard opens one of her chapters with this story: “When I was six or seven years old, growing up in Pittsburgh, I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. It was a curious compulsion; sadly, I’ve never been seized by it since. For some reason I always ‘hid’ the penny along the same stretch of sidewalk up the street. I would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write, I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD or MONEY THIS WAY. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passerby who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe. But I never lurked about. I would go straight home and not give the matter another thought, until, some months later, I would be gripped again by the impulse to hide another penny.

Where does this impulse for giving, for being generous come from? In our text, in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians he describes a church, a community of faith that was gripped by this impulse. Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians deal with the collection that Paul was gathering for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul had agreed to raise it when he and Barnabus went to Jerusalem to discuss their preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul mentions it in some of his other letters and Luke actually tells of its delivery to the Jerusalem church in Acts. There was nothing unusual about this. The organized giving of money was a common Jewish practice. Collections were made for the upkeep of the temple, for the ministry of the local synagogue, and collections were raised for the poor.

In this part of Paul’s correspondence he is trying to motivate and inspire the Corinthians who had agreed to take up a collection for the poor in Jerusalem to follow through with their commitment and to be generous in their giving. They had pledged to do this and now he is telling them to see to it, to follow through with their pledge. He begins this conversation by talking about another group of Christians in Macedonia who gave abundantly, freely, and generously. We know of churches in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea all in the region of Macedonia and it’s interesting what Paul says about them here and the way he frames the discussion.

In v. 4 Paul describes the giving of the Macedonians as the privilege of sharing in the service or ministry to the Lord’s people. The word that is translated “service” in the text is the same word that is used in the Gospels to describe Jesus’ service or ministry to us. In

Mark's Gospel we read: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, to minister (that's the same Greek word used by Paul in our text today) and give his life as a means of liberation for many." To give money is service; it is ministry, according to Paul.

Paul says that the Macedonia Christians joyfully engaged in the ministry and service of giving money to the church in Jerusalem. What is fascinating, I think, is the way Paul describes their giving. They gave not out of their abundance, because they didn't have an abundance; they gave out of their poverty. Actually Paul says, "extreme poverty"—he may be exaggerating a little bit, but still, they didn't have much. They themselves were going through a severe trial, but still they gave generously with overflowing joy.

This is how Paul describes their ministry of giving: They gave as much as they were able; in fact, Paul says they gave beyond their ability. They gave entirely on their own. No one made them feel guilty or shamed them into giving; they were not coerced to give. They were not promised rewards in heaven or on earth if they gave—this is no prosperity gospel, no television evangelists had set up shop there. They pleaded with the missionaries to allow them to have part in the collection. One gets the impression that because of their impoverished condition the missionaries didn't stress the collection when they were among them, but they, on the other hand, pleaded with the missionaries for the opportunity to give. So they gave abundantly, generously, out of their own poverty with overflowing joy.

The Gospel story that comes to mind as I read Paul's description of the generosity of the Macedonian Christians is the story of the widow's offering. The Gospel of Luke says that while Jesus was teaching in the temple he looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury and then he saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. Then Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all the others, all these people gave their gifts out of their wealth, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." These Macedonian Christians were like this poor widow—they gave out of their scarcity, not their abundance—but here is the amazing thing that you and I don't understand. They gave out of their scarcity with overflowing joy. We don't understand that. We are trained in buying and consuming; it's what makes our economy go. We cannot imagine as American consumers how people can give out of their poverty with overflowing joy. I don't get it either; it makes no sense to us.

What could make a people do this? What prompted this kind of impulse? What inspired this kind of compulsion to give? And why is it we don't understand?

Paul says it's all about grace. This is how he frames and begins the discussion: "We want you (you Corinthians who are struggling to keep your pledge and commitment and are having difficulty following through with the collection) to know about the grace God has

given the Macedonian churches.” Paul calls this “grace”—this was God’s grace powerfully working in their hearts and lives and community.

The reason we don’t get it, the reason we don’t understand it is because we haven’t experienced grace like this. We may be materially well-off, but we are spiritually impoverished—we don’t know grace like the Macedonian Christians experienced. I doubt if any of us here have experienced the kind of grace and gratitude and thanksgiving that compels us to give with overflowing joy, not out of our abundance, but out of our scarcity.

We think we deserve all we have. We struggle to give out of our abundance, let alone give out of our scarcity. I’m not preaching at you; I’m exactly where you are. We’re all in the same boat. We have all been trained to think as consumers; we have all been taught to pursue the American dream. I don’t get it either. But I do know that what compelled the Macedonian Christians to give out of their poverty with overflowing joy had everything to do with grace.

Would you like to have that kind of freedom—to be able to give so freely, without worry or anxiety, without pressure or guilt, to give with overflowing joy and gratitude and thanksgiving pulsating through your heart? Wouldn’t you like to experience that kind of liberation, that kind of grace?

Luke tells another story in his Gospel about a man who experienced this kind of grace. You know the story—you use to sing about it in Sunday School when you were little: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in the sycamore-tree for the Lord he wanted to see.” You remember that don’t you? (When we traveled through Jericho on our pilgrimage this past summer our guide took us to the very tree that Zacchaeus climbed.)

You know the story. He was a tax collector, a Roman collaborator, greedy, wealthy—he would have worked on Wall Street if he lived today. Jesus went to his house for dinner and something happened to Zacchaeus. Luke doesn’t tell us about the conversation that took place in his house. Luke says that the people whispered, “Jesus has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” Think of that, Jesus eating with an unclean, wretched tax collector. And the next thing that Luke says is that Zacchaeus is standing up shouting, “Look Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything (and I’m sure he did his share of cheating) I will pay them back four times the amount.” Can you see the joy on his face? Can you see the love in his heart? Can you hear the excitement and the gratitude in his voice? What happened to him? Grace happened. He experienced grace. And according to Luke’s Gospel Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house.” He was set free, made whole, liberated from his greed and filled with grace.

Grace can work miracles. We are saved, we are set free, we are made whole by grace. Everything is grace. The air we breathe is grace. Friendship and love and creativity and work and play—it's all grace, all gift. Life is grace.

Life can be both beautiful and ugly. There are times when life can be very difficult: when we lose a life partner, when we lose a loved one or friend, when we lose our health or our finances or a dream dies, when we feel overwhelmed by life's circumstances we can do either of two things. We can shake our fist at God, we can curse God, we can question God's goodness, we can lose our faith (and if we do it probably wasn't the kind of faith that was worth hanging onto anyway). God can handle our anger and frustration and all the rest. That doesn't shake up God. But it's no way to live a healthy, abundant life. It does us no good, nor anyone else. We can get bogged down in self-pity: "Why did this happen? Why was he taken? How can I go on?" That's one response.

Or we can say, "Why did I deserve even a moment of love? Why did I deserve to have this person in my life at all? Why did I deserve to breathe another breath or enjoy another sunset or drink in the crisp morning air of another day? How is it that I have the capacity to think, to feel, to laugh and cry, to ponder the mysteries of life—it's all grace, it's all gift. There is nothing we deserve—it's all grace.

I love the closing monologue by Tom Hanks in the movie "Castaway." He's been rescued and has had to face the reality that the woman he loved, whose memory and picture kept him alive on the island; she has remarried and has a child. They have said their good-byes. He is reflecting; talking to his closest friend. He says, "We both had done the math. She knew she had to let me go. I added it up; I knew I had lost her, because I was never going to get off that island. I would die there, totally alone. I was going to get sick or going to get injured or something. The only choice I had, the only thing I could control was where and when and how that was going to happen. I made a rope and I went up to the summit to hang myself. I had to test it, of course, you know me. And the weight of the log snapped the limb so I couldn't even kill myself the way I wanted to. I had power over nothing. That's when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket. I knew somehow, that I had to stay alive. Somehow I had to keep breathing even though there was no reason to hope. My logic said I would never see this place again. So that's what I did. I stayed alive. I kept breathing and then one day that logic was proved all wrong because the tide came in and gave me a sail. And now, here I am back in Memphis talking to you. I have ice in my glass. And I've lost her all over again. I am so sad that I don't have Kelly, but I'm so grateful she was with me on that island. And I know what I have to do now. I've got to keep breathing because tomorrow the sun will rise and who knows what the tide can bring."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. said many years ago that his mother had taught him to give thanks to God for what is left. "Everything can go wrong," he said, "but if you are left with

air to breathe, be thankful.” Some years later, after he had lost two sons, and his own wife had been shot to death right before his eyes at the organ in Ebenezer church in Atlanta, Dr King was saying the same thing: “Thank God for what is left.”

That’s grace. That’s what saves us. That’s what keeps us. That’s what frees us from fear and anxiety. That’s what inspires us to give with overflowing joy.

Gracious God, most of us have to admit that we don’t know the kind of grace that filled the hearts of the Macedonian Christians that caused them to give with such joy and gratitude out of their need. But we do know that we need your grace in our lives—to keep us from being selfish and stingy and indifferent, to set us free from our worries, anxieties and fears, and to fill our hearts with the joy of giving. May the Spirit of Christ change our hearts for your kingdom’s sake, Amen.