

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 13
July 1, 2018
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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Apostolic Economics

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let me draw your attention to the lesson from Second Corinthians this morning. It will be clear to you that Paul is asking the church at Corinth here for money. It may not be so obvious what the circumstances are. So a little context is in order.

The mother church in Jerusalem was poor and in need. And Paul had taken it upon himself to shore up the center of Christianity at the time with offerings from the churches around the Mediterranean. And so, here in chapter eight, he begins his appeal to the people of Corinth, pressing his case hard—indeed, harder than most preachers and stewardship chairs would dare to press folks in congregations these days.

Paul uses guilt. I suppose you could call it a competitive spirit. But he tells the folks at Corinth, in the verses immediately preceding those in our passage this morning, how generous other congregations have been in this worthy effort, specifically the Macedonians. He speaks of this as “testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.” Subtle, huh?!

He then presses further using the example of Jesus. How could members in Corinth fail to give sacrificially when our Lord gave his all for the sake of their very souls! “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Again, nicely done, Paul! Using the metaphor of poverty and riches to speak of the manifold spiritual blessings provided by our Lord. It’s masterful laying on of guilt!

Paul reminds them of their own good history. “Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

He stresses the necessity of putting fine feeling into fine action. “A feeling which remains only a feeling, a pity which remains a pity only of the heart, a fine desire that never turns into a fine deed, is a sadly truncated and frustrated thing. The tragedy of life so often is, not that we have no high impulses, but that we fail to turn them into actions.” (William Barclay)

Finally, Paul reminds them that life has a strange way of evening things up. “It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written,

‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’”

“Far more often than not we find that it is measured to us with the same measure as we measure to others. Life has a way of repaying bounty with bounty, and the sparing spirit with the sparing spirit.” (also Barclay)

So here we are, standing under the multiple pressures of a fine orator and preacher from the first century, squirming along with the people of Corinth in guilt, knowing that they should give; in wheedled gratitude, knowing how Christ’s gift should inspire their giving; in ethical demand, knowing that belief without action calls belief into question; in love, knowing that God desires us to distributive justice; and in deep existential trust, knowing that God is at work in the world mysteriously and wisely to bring balance.

This whole thing brings to mind the conversations in the media, social and otherwise, about thoughts and prayers. Have you heard these comments? They often come after a mass shooting or some other tragic event when politicians and good-hearted folks offer the traditional reaction—thoughts and prayers. What has given thoughts and prayers so much trouble of late is that many people feel that they are not enough. Thoughts and prayers—in the case of gun violence—are hollow, so it is argued, without concrete action to alter significantly the public policies that could reduce the incidences of violence.

It’s one of the arguments that Paul uses here in Second Corinthians. He writes, “It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.”

“Don’t just talk about it,” Paul says. “Don’t just offer your thoughts and prayers, do something. Put your desires into action.”

Let me put a pin in that thought for a moment and move on to some more reflection on this text. I’ll be back. Don’t worry.

I came across an analysis of this text that I believe is relevant here. It deals with what I have chosen for the title of this sermon, “Apostolic Economics.”

"Apostolic Economics" (of course) [is] about the money...Preaching about money is challenging both because people have strong, often informed, economic views, and most people know they are about to be asked for contributions yet one more time.

“In a global economy where people's fears and hopes rise and fall with the market, (preachers) can help liberate their congregations to live in the abundant freedom of the Gospel by teaching a lesson in "Apostolic Economics." The Apostle Paul does not develop an economic theory. Rather, he invites people to understand the proper meaning and power of their money in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection...

“The last verse of our text (8:15) shows Paul himself working from scripture. God's distribution of the manna in the wilderness set the standard in Israel that "the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."...

“Paul...redirects the entitlements of "rights" to the wisdom of stewarding God's abundance..."

“Reading the first verses of our passage in the light of Paul's scriptural convictions, we begin to grasp how profoundly Apostolic Economics transforms the world of money.

“But before entering into the apostle's joy, remember that in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul hit hard against the "prosperity gospel" of his opponents, the "super-apostles" or "false apostles" (11:5-15). Late-night media evangelists and prosperity preachers in Africa and Latin America still pull out verse 9 for the soul of their messages: "For your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (8:9)....Preachers who bleed others financially in Jesus' name may be the lowest scum of all.

“This passage, however, is not a scold, but a joyful vision of God's abundant love and an invitation into our freedom to be generous.

“The logic tracks closely with the magnificent Christ hymn Paul recites in Philippians: "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself" (Philippians 2:6-7).

The Gospel of Apostolic Economics is still about "our Lord Jesus Christ:" "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9). This is the theology of the cross in economic language, leading not to human privilege to possess our wealth, but to Christian freedom to put the well-being of the neighbor ahead of our own interests...

“On the spreadsheets of Apostolic Economics, "the gift is acceptable" as those who have more are able to give more. No one is in a lofty position as a big donor, certainly not compared with the generosity of Christ. But everyone is encouraged to join in the divine drama of giving...It's about God's love, and the money is a powerful way to get in on the action. (David Tiede, Preaching This Week)

So Apostolic Economics reminds us of our richness by virtue of Christ's generosity and asks us to consider what that might mean for how we employ our riches of money, yes, but also of time and talent and commitment.

It is interesting that: “The Greek letter π (p) pops up twenty-four times in these verses. In eighteen instances, p is the first letter of a word...2 Corinthians 8:7-15, because of the frequency of p, ought not be read out loud by one person in close proximity to another, at least not within spitting distance, unless caution is exercised. The poor listener to all the p's streaming from the pronunciation of this Greek text would soon need a towel.

“Spit. Not a topic for polite society. Replacing spit with spittle might make this discussion slightly more decorous, and whatever word is used for...excess saliva..., this much must be said: 2 Corinthians 8:9 can't be understood without thinking spit. And not just thinking about spit but actually thinking spit in the same moment you take into your imagination the word poverty from the text. Why? Because ptocheia -- the Greek word standing behind poverty—was a spit word. (Think, “ptooley”)...

“Think of the tongue saying pt...from the hard palate in a fit of rage over the thought of being like that beggar sitting there in his own filth asking me for money...

“To say poor in Greek...you had to spit, or more accurately, the letter combination gave you, if you were not poor, the opportunity to degrade the poor by spitting and saying their name in the same breath. That opportunity...says a great deal about the disgust the poor person was held in by the rich...

“The (word)...communicated to ancient readers so much more than the idea of a lack of possessions or money: words with ptoch in them embody disgust...

“In Paul's view, Christ made others rich not in the way the rich normally help the poor, by giving out of their fullness. He enriched others...by giving out of the nothing he had to give (from a human point of view). He pulled off a real miracle, one that makes walking on water look like child's play. He made others rich by making himself a beggar, by being one of the disgusting have-nots, and by giving out of his nothingness like the poor widow of Mark 12. And this gift Paul calls grace (charis), the lovely sound of ch softly scratching against the soft palate, way back in the mouth, spitting on no one.”
(David E. Fredrickson, Working Preacher)

Apostolic Economics is about turning thoughts and prayers into actions, in the forms of giving ourselves for the sake of grace. These kingdom economics are grounded in the act of Christ for us, in the creative acts of God, and in the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit. God's economics call us to give, yes, of our money but also our feet, our hands, our voices, and all of the tools and gifts God has provided. So that there is no more spitting on the poor—real or metaphorical, but the lovely impact of charis, of grace, falling upon the ear and the eye. So that cash and charis—thoughts, prayers, and actions—blend together into a stew that feeds everyone, that has the carrots of compassionate public policy, the beans of health care for all, the potatoes of dignity for every person, the onions of an honored creation, and the broth of distributive justice. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.