

2 Corinthians 8:1-15, NRSV

1 We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; 2 for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, 4 begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints — 5 and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, 6 so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. 7 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. 8 I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 9 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. 10 And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something — 11 now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. 12 For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 13 I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14 your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. 15 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."

Sermon

Thank you, Bob, for reading. Our theme for today, as we close out our sermon series on Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, is generosity. Paul writes, "I want you to know about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches...for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." If now is not the time to talk about the generosity that can flow out of poverty and affliction, I don't know what is. Friends, I don't need to tell you what affliction and poverty exist in the world.

When I sat down to write this sermon, and really thought about generosity, all I could think was, "how in the world can we sit and *talk* about generosity, when it's something that must be given, shown, experienced to be able to be understood?" So today I'm choosing to share two stories of generosity with you. Stories that can show us all what generosity is. What it can look like, what feeling it can evoke.

Now when I think of generosity, my mind first goes to fiscal generosity. I don't need to tell you that the sharing of resources, is important. Whether it is supporting the church, to Laura Baker, the Community Action Center, or racial or environmental justice groups, funds are key. Generosity allows people to survive and even thrive. Fiscal generosity matters—we know it

does—especially in this time when so many are experiencing job loss and economic uncertainty.

Dr. Michael Osterholm, Director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the U of M, co-authored an article this past Friday for the New York Times with Neel Kashkari, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. Maybe you saw it. They wrote about the need for a 6-week national lockdown to control the spread of the virus. They also wrote about how unfair this pandemic has been to front line workers. “Millions of low wage, front line service workers,” they write, “have lost their jobs or been put in harm’s way.” Meanwhile, white collar workers have largely been spared from economic hardship. But it’s even more than that, they write, because those who have kept jobs and not been put in harm’s way are even saving money right now because they aren’t eating out, going to events or on vacations. These folks are actually saving money in this time.

This is where they say that those who have been spared and are saving can help those who are financially suffering. This is where they call upon the wide readership of the NY Times to entertain generosity as a nation. Though they don’t call it generosity, they are advocating for generosity of spirit—a willingness to sacrifice for a 6-week lockdown—and generosity of pocket to financially help neighbors. Why? Because if people can’t pay their bills, it will ripple through the economy and make the downturn much worse, they counsel, but also they declare, “it’s the right thing to do.” So that we can all get through this together.¹

Or as Paul puts it, “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you. It’s 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.” Osterholm and Kashkari entreat us to believe that generosity, in spirit and action, matters. That it matters right now—certainly economically, but also—to the degree that it may affect life and death. Generosity can affect how much we or our neighbors sink or stay afloat.

To give you an idea of the generosity that is needed in our own Northfield community, at the area [clergy] group meeting this past Wednesday, Community Action Center Executive Director Scott Wopata shared that the CAC is on track in 1 year to spend 17 years’ worth of what they usually spend in housing aid. If you need housing aid, you are not alone, and resources to help you. And if you and those in your home find yourselves in a place with more than enough, maybe this is the moment you are called to be generous.

There are many ways to be generous that don’t involve money, too. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis is in the neighborhood where George Floyd was murdered this past May. And when protests began following Floyd’s brutal murder, the congregation jumped

¹ Michael T. Osterholm and Neel Kashkari, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/07/opinion/coronavirus-lockdown-unemployment-death.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR30_QIO3U6tcZH0ENkC7qcX0m3QUEBNop3RJXRUHRIyhWQx5ES9nhF0658

out of quarantine and threw open their doors to hand out bottles of water to protestors, and to help “those who had been tear gassed by authorities.” News crews from around the globe flooded the church lawn and set up camp there. And as protests went on and fires burned, the church became a food and necessity distribution site for the neighborhood.

Ingrid Rasmussen is the Lead Pastor at Holy Trinity. She tells a story about the spirit of generosity that was present during one of those early times when they first became a food distribution site for the neighborhood. “We couldn’t have imagined,” she said, just weeks before, “that we would be feeding about 8,000 families each week...but that’s how revolutions, begin, isn’t it,” she said. “Sleepy people who have been inculcated by the empire, people tranquilized by the status quo are thrust into a new reality. Their imaginations are opened to new possibilities that seemed out of reach 10 days, 10 minutes, 10 seconds ago, now take up residence in hearts, and minds, and churches, and governments.” A generosity of spirit grows and something new is able to begin because of it, something that can change a community, a world.

Ingrid tells the story that as they prepared to begin Holy Trinity’s food distribution site, that first week, “there were hundreds of people in line. These were neighbors with real needs, and we could feel the energy of the crowd rising. You know the energy I’m talking about,” she said, “Competitive energy that tells us that there’s never enough. One of the English speaking volunteers jumped on a table to address the crowd. A Spanish speaking leader stood to his left and a Somali speaker stood to his right. The English speaker addressed the crowd yelling, “THERE IS ENOUGH. (repeated)” The Spanish speaker offered the same promise in Spanish and then the assurance was spoken in Somali. And then each of them said it again. There is enough! The crowd gathered began to repeat it back, each guest in their own language. It took on the form of this call and response.” Pastor Ingrid said that she could feel, “the competitive empire energy transforming to something new. Something that felt like community. Something that felt like the commonwealth of God.”

And that’s what a spirit of generosity can do. It’s easy, you see, for those with resources to help with some aid, and then go back to comfortable lives. But a spirit of generosity doesn’t stop with a moment. A spirit of generosity wants there to be no need for families to stand in line for hours to receive 1 bag of groceries. Or to have to appeal for housing aid. A spirit of generosity wants there to be a different way for people to live together in the world. Just as Jesus was about a completely different way of living in the world—a way that upset the empire, because empire thrives on scarcity.

A couple of weeks ago, I talked about author Rebecca Solnit. I’m going to quote her again. Solnit says, “the basic generosity and empathy of most ordinary people should be regarded as a treasure. A light. An energy source that can drive a better society if it is recognized and encouraged.” Generosity, Solnit says, offers a foreshadowing of what is possible, and necessary.² The power of generosity is in the sharing, in the giving, but even more so, it’s the kind of power that can shift societies into more equitable communities. The power

² I am indebted to Rev. Ingrid Rasmussen, and the work of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, which informed this sermon.

of generosity can keep people in their homes in this community, it can propel movements for justice, and it can fight for the possibility of an equitable future for the world. If we let it. We can choose it.

One *act* of generosity can occur without having a *spirit* of generosity. But a spirit of generosity leads to a lifetime committed to the promise that there really is enough. For each of us. For all of us. May we be caught up in a spirit of generosity, my friends, which is born out of the generosity we have received from God, because God is always in the business of giving love, grace, liberation and forgiveness freely. Any generosity that flows from us is simply an extension of God's generosity.

May these ancient words that Paul wrote so long ago: "We want you to know, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches...for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity"—be true of the church today, now, also. May it be so. Amen.