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**9:00 a.m. Christian Education**

**10:00 a.m. Worship**

**Children's Sunday School during Worship**



## **“From the Heart: A Life of Generosity (Part 2)”**

**Corinthians 8:16-9:5**

**October 17, 2010**

**Rev. Barbara Royle**



In our country we like to think of ourselves as generous people, and in many ways I think we are. Looking at our personal generosity, however, can sometimes not be as comfortable. In our sense of responsibility we seek to be self sufficient; not a bad thing. We don't want to be a burden on our children; also a good thing. We worry about our health, our finances, raising our children, staying employed and the transitions in our lives, pretty much unavoidable. We can easily get hooked into thinking we should limit or reduce our giving, just in case something happens. We forget that in scrutinizing our giving in that way, we are pinching our hearts; for giving is for the well-being of our heart, more than to what we support.

But it's not just about money. Our hearts are in jeopardy every time we spread rumors about another; or say we are too busy to help someone, or shun those whom we don't even know. Generous hearts care for the hearts of others. Generous giving involves not only our money but service to our church and community, offering our precious time to help others; lending a talent or ability for someone who needs it; or standing beside a person whose heart is breaking. All of us have our limits in giving, but all of us can give something. Generosity is the development of character; it is being honestly faithful to what we say we believe; it is making a decision to step away from giving what is left over or safe, to giving first to God. Generosity is about the protection of our hearts.

I came across a story this week that makes this point. Clare Boothe Luce was once our ambassador to Italy. While she was living in a beautiful 17th-century Italian villa, she began to notice that she was always tired. She lost weight, and seemed to have less and less energy. She sought medical care, and after a period of intense testing it was discovered that she was suffering from arsenic poisoning.

Everyone on her staff was given a security check, but it was soon established that none of her staff was trying to poison her. Which left the question: Where was the poisoning coming from? Finally, they found the cause: It was the ceiling of the bedroom. There were beautiful designs of roses, ornately done in plaster relief, and they were painted with an old paint that contained arsenic lead. A fine dust fell from the

roses, and Mrs. Luce was slowly being poisoned in her bed by the dust from the ornate roses. "Similarly," writes Bill Philippe, "we are in danger of being poisoned by the ornate culture and society in which we live. Our attitudes, concepts and values, can be eroded or poisoned by the materialistic values of those around us, without our ever becoming aware of it until it is too late."

That's where the value of our faith steps in. It teaches us a better way. It reminds us that God's way is the best way. The Bible is clear about what works best. It is to set aside a tithe first, and not give what is left over. A tithe is 10% of our income and even if all of us are not there, a 10% goal gives us a plan. If we are at 2% we can plan to increase to 3% the next year and so on until we reach our goal. It is in the invitation to step up each year that we are learning how to give first to God. It is in trusting God's plan that turns our fear into trusting hearts. It is not the amount that matters. It is the percentage that is important. In this way we are setting our priority, allowing God to take the lead with our hearts.

When we make a decision to give first and live on what's left over, our hearts become focused on generosity instead of ourselves. We are making a conscious decision to trust the One we worship. I don't mean blind careless trust that all will be well, but the daring to trust God's plan over ours. This time of the year gives us a way to think about the giving of our income.

It takes time to decide what we will give and why and there are several questions that might be helpful in clarifying how we think about our income. First, how do we distinguish between what we need and what we want? Without knowing the difference it can all look like needs, leaving nothing set aside for giving. Second, what is our motivation for giving? Is it begrudgingly? Or is it competition with others? Is it pride in how much we give? Is it being faithful without guarantees of the future? Or is it responding to an expectation? It helps to know what motivates us. Third, is our giving a matter of what we believe? Do we trust God enough to follow God's recommendations for us?

You and I know that we do not always have the strength of faith to set aside our previous ways and take up the ways of Christ. So how do we step up into trusting God versus trusting ourselves or others first? These are difficult stewardship questions. But to put off addressing them is to risk developing a generous heart.

Giving is about the care of our hearts in giving beyond ourselves. We have stories we read in the paper or see on TV. But the events of our lives have the greatest impact on us, for it is there that we get a glimpse of the Holy Spirit working within us. They are important stories for us to tell, for another's story can impact our lives as well.

I had a number of encounters in Israel that impacted my faith and I would like to share one with you this morning. Shortly after we arrived in East Jerusalem, at the college, our first assignment was to select a group of four that would become our "family" for the rest of our time in Israel. How do we select a family from those we have just met? I wondered. It reminded me of the Biblical standard of going two by two in a foreign land to share your faith, except this time it was about being taught about faith.

After we had selected our families, our assignment was to find our way to the Old City within walking distance of the college. It is considered the most important site in Israel. This wall, over two miles in length, encompasses some religious sites, its churches and temples and is over 400 years old. The area is divided into four quadrants: Jew, Christian, Muslim and Armenian, also Christian. Our family was assigned to the Muslim Quarter and we were to find and describe its borders, along with finding a high place and describing our impressions of what we saw. We were to identify the major religious shrine

within the quarter, any excavations underway and our impression of the people. We were to initiate a conversation with a resident, and not a tourist, to learn about their lives.

As the four of us huddled around a map looking like lost tourists, we had no idea where to start. Here we were, in the middle of Muslim territory, not speaking Arabic, and unsure of how to get started. The narrow streets were filled with shops, around which the people lived. The shopkeepers were loudly hawking their wares in competition. But one got my attention by calmly saying, "Please go and shop. I have watched you enter our quarter; please; familiarize yourselves and if I can help you find a particular shop I will. Please, enjoy your time in the Muslim Quarter. There is much for you to see." I was impressed and made a note to come back a bit later.

I was a pilgrim in a foreign land and I knew it. I felt called in strong ways to set aside any agenda and simply be present to the Spirit. One cannot plan for encounters with the living Lord, but I wanted to be present if it was to happen. What was God saying to me in this place and through these people? I knew it was not about me finding God in this holy place; rather it was more about being found.

Later, our "family" agreed to return to his olive wood shop of hand carved items. He and I engaged in a meaningful conversation of his life there. I decided to get some Christmas gifts for my family but when I went to pay, discovered I had only a third of what I owed in the only currency he accepted. I started to put them back. He put up his hands and said, "No, no, these are for you. Please, take them with you and you pay me later". I refused and he offered "My brother can come and pick up a check or you can come back, but either way take these with you now." I was stunned. Where in our country would a clerk say "Don't worry about paying now; just take your purchase home, I trust you. You can pay me later"?!

In the end, stunned and not wanting to insult his generosity and trust, I took the purchase and arranged to come back several days later. Here, 5,000 miles from home, God had chosen a Muslim shopkeeper to teach me about trust and generosity. It was an encounter that moved me deeply.

You see, God often chooses an unexpected time and place to speak to us, to get our attention, to teach us about generosity and trust, to touch our hearts. Such trust can change our hearts and those of others. Later when I returned I asked how could he trust a stranger from another country like that? His response to me was: "In trusting, you can get burned and I have, but I think one's heart is more important than their money, don't you?" I will never forget his gift; God's gift to me, with his action of generosity and trust. It was for me, an encounter with God.

We don't learn generosity on our own; we are not naturally generous. So when someone models a generous heart, it gets our attention. Sometimes it happens in our family or with a close friend. But sometimes God drops a total stranger in our midst that is meant as an encounter just for us. It can be the generosity of trust, or the generosity of forgiveness, or the generosity of our possessions, but in the end, it is about our heart. Too often we brush these encounters off by calling it coincidence, but mark my words: God's intervention with us is never a coincidence. It is God's loving hand of generosity reaching for our hearts, in order to save us from ourselves.

Such generosity was the case with the Macedonian Church in Greece; a church suffering through extreme poverty, who took up an offering, more than they could afford, to preserve the Jerusalem church, who needed them. Such generosity one would not expect from those in poverty. But it happened and is still an example for us today. Their giving was not in response to Paul's appeal. It was more their response to the sacrifice Jesus made for them that they might believe. It was their motive for giving, not the amount, that impressed Paul. Here were new Christians in a new area, supporting a new church, ready and willing to

help those far away, who had less. Their faith was strong; they knew that sharing was a faithful response to what they professed to believe.

On the one hand were the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, impoverished and dwindling. Paul is not simply seeking to reconcile the strange uncircumcised Gentile Christians of Corinth with the new Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is asking the church of Corinth to give generously to the impoverished church of Jerusalem because they are one church. They share the same faith and belong to the same family. They are both believers of the risen Christ. Unity and support of each other is what families do and we in the church are family, not just here in Lakewood, but with the Palestinian Christians of Israel; the Muslims, the Jews here and around the world.

In making this appeal, Paul too, was standing for what he believed to be right, even at personal risk to himself. He was the victim of vicious slander from those who thought there was a trust issue with him. So Paul brought others, Titus and perhaps Barnabas or even Luke along, as people who were known and trusted by the church. But despite the slander, Paul was forging ahead, even at great personal risk to himself, for he believed the church must be united and support one another. Despite the malicious slander, Paul believed that the goal was to build up the body of Christ, whether standing up for another, lending a helping hand, or sharing our resources.

We might conclude, as one commentator suggests, that Paul's intention could be seen as laying a guilt trip on the Corinthians to pressure them to give more, but the word he uses for the "gift" he wants them to give, is the same word for "blessing". His point is that God has blessed them so that they can bless others. It is likely that the Corinthian Christians were not stingy, but they were worried. What if they gave generously and then became impoverished themselves? Times were uncertain, and who knew what tomorrow would bring? But Paul reminds them that God is able to provide for them "every blessing in abundance" so they should give willingly, even cheerfully. In fact, they will be "enriched in every way" because of their generosity.

Long ago, I came across a helpful formula for managing our money. It is called the 10-10- 80 plan. The first 10% is for giving. The second 10% is given for savings and the remaining 80% is used for our living expenses. In this way we are being faithful to God, helping others, and taking care of ourselves, in that order. But this is not easy. We are not always conscious of what one author calls the "sins of comfort, self-justification and plain old-fashioned greed." We compare ourselves to the billionaires in our world, instead of the millions in poverty, thus insulating ourselves from recognizing our own wealth. We are not always clear about the difference between our needs and our wants. Perhaps our wants are less important than another's needs.

This story today of the early church of Macedonia is for us to take notice. In many ways each generation is an early church. We as members must learn about giving, be led by the faith, be taught about the church, to be learning not just what was, but what is. So each year we take up an offering of our gifts and pledges, guarded by those we trust, held secure by those we appoint. In this way we are honoring the Lord himself in our giving. This is more than a ritual; it is a provision of God that we might learn how to give not begrudgingly, but generously, joyfully, and faithfully, for it is the leading of God.

May it be so for you.

Amen