



“LIVING GRATITUDE”

2 Corinthians 9:5-15

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In the late winter of 2000, I travelled from the rural farming communities in southwest Wisconsin that I served to my alma mater, Adrian College, where I was scheduled to interview with the Detroit Conference Board of Ordained Ministry in preparation for commissioning later in the spring. Part of the process involved interviewing with small groups who examined me and the fruit of my ministry based on my practice of ministry, my theology, and my understanding and sense of calling to ordained ministry. Later in the afternoon, I interviewed with half of the Board, about twenty persons, who asked a variety of questions one after another while I sat in front of them in an orange seat from the '70s that looked and felt just like a “hot seat.”

At some point during the half-board interview, a layperson asked me, “What social issues are you addressing in your churches?” I paused for a moment as I framed my response. Up until that point, I had worried that someone might ask me about some hot button issue and wondered how I might respond. In no time, however, I told her that the “farming crisis” was an issue that I experienced and addressed the most in my local churches. At the time, the price of milk was declining along with some other commodities that affected the lives of the farmers in my churches.

After my brief response, one or two other people asked me a couple more questions. Before long, however, the layperson that had asked me about social issues was raising her hand again. The vice-chair of the board called upon her and she asked, “Do you really think that the farming crisis that you’ve mentioned is a social issue?” I thought for a moment and then sat on the edge of my seat as I addressed her and the rest of the half-board that day. I don’t remember too many of my responses that day or the questions that were asked of me, but I remember that question and my response to this very day.

I said, “Right now, I have hog farmers in my communities that are taking their hogs to market and they receive 15 to 19 cents per pound for their hogs. When I step into the grocery store, I pay \$2.99 to \$3.99 per pound for pork chops. There is a great disparity there. Who gets all of that money? It surely isn’t my farmers. I believe that’s a social issue.”

I went on to say, “I also have a family in one of my churches that milks three hundred cows three times a day. They have five children in their family. Their oldest daughter is 16. This summer, they are taking a vacation together as a family for the first time in her life. They happen to be

going to Disney World. While they are gone, they still have to hire plenty of hands to do their work so they can take that vacation. I don't know about you, but I get more than a week's vacation each year to spend with my family. I think there might be a social issue there."

I'll never forget a colleague, who soon became one of my favorites in the room, clapped and said "Amen" as I spoke. It was the most memorable moment of that interview for me. I think what made it so memorable was not simply that I had the opportunity to speak about an issue that had developed some passion in me, but also that the passion came from a deep sense of gratitude for those farmers.

Before I lived in southwest Wisconsin, I'm not so sure that I fully understood the real value of a gallon of milk, a pound of butter, a couple of pork chops, or a side of bacon. Once I met the farmers who helped to put those things on my table and learned more about their lives, however, a deep sense of gratitude for their work and efforts welled up within me whenever I remembered their sacrifices that make my life possible. How do we thank our farmers? How do we thank those whose life and work benefits us in so many ways that can be all too easy for us to overlook?

In our scripture lesson, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth yet again. His message seems to be one of the first generosity campaigns in the history of the early church. For almost a year now, Paul has been boasting to others about a gift from the Corinthians for the saints in Jerusalem which will help to care for the poor there. In confidence of that gift, Paul sends a team ahead to Corinth to help them arrange for this "voluntary" gift before he arrives.

Paul encourages the Corinthians that their gift is important to the work that the body of Christ is doing. It's not just a request for money, but an investment in a future harvest that God will bring about. He says, "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."¹ Does this sound familiar? Our theme for this season of generosity at Birmingham and Berkley First is from Paul's letter to the Galatians 6:7, "You will always harvest what you plant."

From the earliest of times in the life of the church, Paul and other leaders in the body of Christ proclaimed that generosity is about investing in the harvest of transformed lives that God is bringing to the world. Paul reminds the Corinthians that it's God's grace that first transformed their lives and now invites their response of gratitude. Grace flows from God and the response is thanksgiving, or gratitude, which then inspires generosity that is lived out as these followers of the way plant more of God's grace in the lives of others. As grace transforms their lives and they respond with thanksgiving and generosity to that grace, it overflows into the lives of others.

Paul puts it this way, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God."²

In her book, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, author Diana Butler Bass says that gratitude is both an emotion that we feel in response to receiving gifts as well as an ethic that is lived out in actions in response to receiving gifts.³ She goes on to say, “Gratitude begins with a profound awareness of abundance and builds communities of well-being and generosity. Gratitude opens toward grace.”⁴

Paul said, “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”⁵ In other words, grace experienced in God’s abundance throughout the community of faith brings about thanksgiving and gratitude which inspires generosity that is lived out in actions that witness more grace in the world. God’s grace produces a cycle of gratitude and generosity that continues to implant the world with more grace. As members together in the body of Christ, we participate in this cycle of gratitude as recipients of God’s grace, those whose hearts are filled with gratitude, and then become generous, or “cheerful” givers that infect our world with more of God’s grace. We receive and pass on grace upon grace.

How do we thank the “farmers” in our faith journey? We do so by living gratefully. How do we live gratefully? Whenever we choose to live with the same generosity that we have first experienced in Jesus Christ, we live gratitude as a witness in our lives. God promises that when we do that, there will always be “enough.”

Last week, I mentioned the many people who generously sowed seeds for a harvest that they might not see, or at least not for a number of years, almost 21 years ago when you first heard the challenge to plant more than you harvest in a stewardship campaign. At the time, many faithful people invested, planted, and dreamed of the growth that we’ve seen here at Birmingham First throughout these past 21 years. We sit in a sanctuary and experience music that is even more beautiful today as a result of an organ and sanctuary renovation project.

Throughout these 21 years, our children, family, and youth ministry programs have been able to grow as a result of our Christian Life Center. Membership grew to over 3,000 because of the generosity and vision of those who came before us.

I’m curious about the farmers of dreams that are in our midst this morning. If you’ve been a part of this church since you were a child, would you please stand up. If you were a part of planting seeds to help us grow to 3001 members by 2001, would you please stand up. If you were here before the Christian Life Center was built, would you please stand up. If you were here before the sanctuary and organ renovation project, would you please stand up. If you can remember the “Penny Project” that our youth led to bring relief in Africa. If you were here when we expanded our entrance off the parking lot to be more welcoming, please stand up. If you were here before we built a church in Costa Rica, please stand up. If you were here before Berkley First or served on one of the teams that envisioned multi-site ministry, please stand up.

Take a look around you, friends. From all of us who weren’t here at those times, I want to say “Thank you.” Thank you for your generosity that has graced our lives and the lives of others throughout our world-wide connections. We gather in these sacred spaces this morning because you had the dream to plant some seeds over the years of your time here at Birmingham First.

Just look at the harvest that God has reaped over the years here and continues to reap in our midst today.

This Sunday, our children and youth have gone outside here at Birmingham as well as at our Berkley campus. They are planting daffodil bulbs around our grounds. These bulbs go into the ground in the fall, yet they don't bloom right away, do they? Unlike annuals, perennial bulbs will go through a winter dormancy when it looks like nothing is happening. In the spring, however, they begin to peek through the ground. Sometimes, the ground is still covered with melting snow as they do. When they bloom, however, their beauty will grace our lives again. Bulbs don't grow overnight. They take time, care, and even the winter season to produce a beautiful flower. Today, our children are learning about planting generously because you have planted generously in the ministries that bloom forth in their lives.

In this season of harvests, we pause not only to give thanks for the harvest we enjoy, but to consider what we, too, might plant for the future. Before we were here, someone was planting for the harvest that we now enjoy. How do we thank the farmers that have helped to make for this harvest in our lives? In this season where we reap the harvest that comes from the generosity of generations before us, we pause with gratitude to plant for the generations that will follow after us. How many bulbs will they see blooming in their spring because we've chose to plant in this harvest season? How much will they reap in the harvests that come 21 years from now?

“You will always harvest what you plant.” “The one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” Grace begets gratitude. Gratitude begets generosity. Generosity begets grace. This morning as we think about what it means for us to live with gratitude in our lives, I want to turn your attention to the cards that are on the ends of your pews. Take a moment to look at them. On the back of the card, you'll find a question, “What are you grateful for?” Think about how you might answer that. Find a pen in your pew and write it on that card.

How might you plant that gratitude in your heart today so that it might bloom forth in generosity in your life like the bulbs that are on the front of the card or those being placed in the ground around us will bloom forth in the months and years ahead?

The promise remains, “You will always harvest what you plant.”

¹ 2 Corinthians 9:6, NRSV.

² 2 Corinthians 9:10-12, NRSV.

³ Bass, Diana Butler. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. New York: Harper Collins, 2018. xxiv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 9:8, NRSV.