

It is no secret that preaching about money makes both the pastor and the congregants uncomfortable. In the case of Calvary, pastors are preaching to the choir when it comes to giving. We all have been generous and that is the reason that Calvary is able not only to take care of its church financial needs, but we also reach out to those in need in the community. I am speaking for myself and Pastor Lynell in thanking each of you for the ongoing support of Calvary. As a best case for Stewardship, we may be doing well partly because we do not sidestep the issue.

You may recall this bit of humor that Pastor Lynell shared last year. It is so humorous and true to life that I felt it was worth enjoying again.

There once was a strongman at a circus sideshow who demonstrated his power before large audiences every night.

Toward the end of one performance, he squeezed the juice from a lemon between his hands. He said to the onlookers, "I will offer \$200 to anyone here who can squeeze another drop from this lemon.

A thin older lady hobbled up the stage. She picked up the lemon and clamped it between her two frail, boney hands. She squeezed. And out came a teaspoon of lemon juice.

The strongman was amazed. He paid the woman \$200 but privately asked her, "What is the secret of your strength?"

"Practice," the woman answered. "I have been treasurer of my church for forty-two years!"

If you would like to gain the essence of this message and skip the rest, consider the very meaningful words of our song "Give Thanks." Give thanks with a grateful heart; Give thanks to the Holy One, Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ His son. And now let the weak say, I am strong! Let the poor say "I am rich because of what the Lord has done for us. Give thanks. Give Thanks.

Like you, I have sung this song every Sunday for a long time. I think it can become rote, just another part of our liturgy. But it is packed with the truth of the Gospel and of our place in God's economy. Each of us are recipients, the beneficiaries of God's graciousness. I thought about what Christ went through on our behalf. He

gave up what we consider our most precious possession: life. Not many of us would step up and offer our lives for others, at least not the way Christ suffered and died. Our response “to give thanks” is more than appropriate; it is essential. For it is in giving that we receive. That is the basic message of our scripture lesson for today.

Paul starts off this passage with an example of sacrificial giving. Prior to the time of this writing in Corinthians, Macedonia had been a prosperous area and was famous for its timber and precious metals. Life was good there. But by the time Paul visited, the churches in Macedonia were in dire straits. They had been left in a condition of extreme poverty. In fact, the translations describe the situation as being “down-to -the depth” poverty and in another translation, “rock bottom” poverty. However, the persecution they endured and the poverty did not diminish their joy or their ability to be generous. In the text, it reads “for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means, ...”

It is interesting to note that in countries where people are very poor, one finds many generous spirits. Those who have been on mission trips can attest to this. I noticed this generous attitude in Africa and in my recent trip to the southern border states. It is almost as if surviving in tough circumstances fosters gratitude when things get even incrementally better. This makes Paul’s story about the Macedonians a bit easier to understand. In contrast, when life is good or easy, it seems people can become grasping and only satisfied with more and more. For the Macedonians this offering was not just a fund raiser, it was a means of spiritual revival.

In the second half of this scripture reading, there is a shift in the approach that Paul uses when he directs his comments to the Corinthians. He reminds the Corinthians that it is time for them to finish what they had begun the year before. He urges them to “finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.” To my mind there is no getting around it; Paul was being pushy and cajoling. That would be a turn off then and now.

Some background information may help make Paul’s approach easier to understand. Paul had visited Corinth on a missionary journey prior to this. Then for some reason he did not return to them as he had stated he would. Instead he

had written them a letter which we do not have preserved. References to the letter indicate that the letter exacerbated tensions between the Corinthians and Paul. So, Paul's task in this section of the scripture is twofold: first to let them know of his genuine affection for them and second to encourage them to complete the offering for the Jerusalem church.

The significance of this collection by the Corinthians is the ecumenical nature of this offering. The Corinthians were gentiles and this offering then represents a combined offering from the Jewish (Macedonians) and Gentile Christians (Corinthians.) This was a big deal. It demonstrated what gracious giving can accomplish. We return to the basic truth that runs through this Scripture: It is God's activity and graciousness that enables us to accomplish things that we could not do on our own.

So, as we move along in our own stewardship, consider again the song we sing. Let the weak say I am strong, and the poor say I am rich, because of what the Lord has done. There is the key: it is what the Lord has done that empowers us. Let's expect that God will empower us to take risks we have not yet thought of. We may be pushed in directions we never thought we would go. With that in mind, stewardship takes on a much bigger dimension than just our pledges. It gives us the ability to demonstrate our generosity in reciprocal relationships with others and for purposes much larger than we have imagined.