

“It’s All Yours, God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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2 Corinthians 8: 7-15

So, did anything new happen to YOU this week? (reference to my hair).

The most interesting thing for me after getting my hair done on Monday has been to absorb people’s reactions. Those have included shock, admiration, distaste, laughter, ambivalence. It’s made people step away from me, and it’s made people step toward me, and want to touch my hair. All the while, I simply watch and listen and observe!

This experience has reminded me about a couple of things. One is how much we as human beings make judgments about others based on outward appearances. We see someone and within a couple of seconds, we believe we know everything about that person. And the judgments we make can vary widely from one person to another. I’ve certainly experienced that this week!

I’ve also been reminded about how we place value on certain things in life, and the resources we are willing to spend on what we consider priorities. When I got the bill for my new “do”, it was at least five times as much as I usually spend on a haircut. That was a bit of a shock to my system, but that wouldn’t be a shock to someone else for whom that is a priority. And what might be important for me to spend money on might not have the same importance for that person who spends more on their hair than I do. Those differences reflect the ways we are each unique as children of God.

And yet, despite our differences, there is one thing which unites us. What we have, what we own, what we spend – it all comes from God. As Christians, we hold to this essential tenet of stewardship, and we are called by God to live our lives as a thank offering for all God has given us. We are always in “reminder” mode for this tenet, because it runs counter to our American culture of “we’ve earned all that we have.” But it is central to our understanding of where our lives are grounded, and how we are to respond in gratitude as the Body of Christ.

Peter Hawkins writes: *Getting a congregation to dig deep into its pockets is a task as old as Christianity itself. Paul faced the task squarely in 2 Corinthians 8-9 with a double-barreled effort to raise money from well-to-do people not eager to part with what they had. Because the Jerusalem “mother church” was poor, Paul urged the more prosperous Corinthians to do the right thing. The irony, of course, is that the Jerusalem church, dominated by Peter and James, was not immediately (or perhaps ever) taken with the apostle who, by his own admission, was “untimely born” (1 Corinthians 15:8). After all, he had never known Jesus in the flesh, had been a persecutor of Christians, and was also in the vanguard of those who wanted to allow Gentiles into the community without having them first become Jews.*

It says much for Paul that despite his antagonism to the Jerusalem-based “Hebraizers”, he took the suffering in Jerusalem to heart. His mission in 2 Corinthians was to get the more prosperous new churches in Greece and Asia Minor to provide economic assistance for fellow followers of Christ, even though he was working on behalf of people who did not approve of him and making his plea with largely Gentile congregations with little natural affinity for Jerusalem. Paul had his work cut out for him (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, Westminster/John Knox Press).

Now, if you were in that position and were faced with such a task, what would you do? Would you get out the large thermometer and tell the Corinthians how they needed to reach their goal? Would you get the PowerPoint slides out and show graphs and charts which illustrated how their offerings are a part of the overall fundraising strategy?

Those might be strategies we would take today. But Paul had a choice to make in how he would approach the Corinthians. And how he chose to address the Corinthians about their generosity speaks deeply to our understanding of stewardship.

Paul was careful not to threaten or coerce the Corinthians. He did not say that their failure to participate in this collection indicated that they had no part in Christ. He did not say that his words were a commandment, or that the people were required to give in order to be included in the body of Christ and be saved.

Paul did not manipulate them or threaten them. He never said they had to pay their fair share, or that they owed him something for all he had done for them. He didn't sell the naming rights to the new fellowship hall in Jerusalem, or offer them a plaque on the communion table or a baptismal font in memory of a grandmother.

That's not stewardship. That's not why we contribute to the work of the saints and the life of the body of Christ. Paul is certain about that.

What Paul does is tell the story. He tells them about Jesus. He rehearses the gospel. He reminds the Corinthians who they are and grounds their generosity in the incarnation. "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." You remember, don't you, says Paul, that Jesus gave up the power and riches of heavenly glory in order to take on human flesh to set you free, to ransom you from sin and death, to redeem your lives from slavery to the flesh, to make this abundant and blessed and hopeful new life possible for you. Christ left the palace to live with you in the village; he emptied himself of the treasure that was his at the right hand of God in order to make the treasure of his spirit available for all people, even you Gentiles.

*For Paul and for us, generosity is not a choice we make, not a calculation in which we weigh what we are giving up against what we gain in order make ourselves available to the work of God's kingdom. It is a mark of our identity in Christ. When we are baptized into the one who is self-emptying we take on that self-emptying generosity for ourselves. It becomes who we are, not what we do. The people of this God, known to us in this self-emptying Christ, are self-emptying people. It is a mark of our union to Christ, who himself laid down his divine glory and became poor for us so that we might know God's love and grace and redemption (Douglass Key, *Christian Century*, June 19, 2012).*

How are we called, as Paul called the Corinthians, to know that God has made us rich through the poverty of Christ? I believe it begins by recognizing that it is not how much you give; it is why you give. When we become eager givers – people who yearn to give for we have first received so much – then we begin to honor God and grow into the mature, healthy disciples Christ wants us to be.

God has been sacrificially gracious to us through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. May our response to that gift be, "It's all yours, God" – all of our hearts, all of our possessions, all of our lives – belong to our living, loving God, now and forever. Amen.