

Sermon 11-15-20
Giving “during a severe ordeal of affliction” – Rev. Markus Wegenast

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us...

1)

Wasn't that a super puppet show earlier? "It's all in God's control." When it's hard to trust that God's got this all, I guess we just have to hear it from puppets!

"God's got this" it's the slogan we've put up around our church since April this year – now it even greets 1000s of passersby from our shiny new digital church sign. Did you know that 5600 vehicles pass our church on the corner of Franklin and Drew each day? (over 2 million a year)

Picture of sign

Some of us struggle with the slogan, because there is so much that seems out of control these days. Others love it because it gives them hope and anchorage.

What about you? Is it helpful for you to trust that God's in control? Would you like to but you struggle believing it? Do you find it's not even the right question?

I personally find much comfort in trusting God's almightiness. At the same time I have to say: I rarely experience God in spectacularly supernatural ways. The other day I read the story of Elijah and the 450 Baal priests, where God rained fire from heaven to ignite a stack of soaking wet fire wood, a bull and the stones around it (1 Kings 18:40-20) – I wish I had these kind of God encounters but I usually don't.

But hear this: It was the same Elijah who one chapter later experiences God not in mighty earthquake or fire, but "in the sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12b). Isn't that interesting?

I think God invites all of us to watch for him in both the spectacular and the seemingly mundane - because the way God shows control can take on a variety of different ways.

When I get stuck in thinking that God is in control means only one thing – I easily lose sight of his power in my life – and I lose my joy!

2)

Today we heard a passage in the Bible that is often used in stewardship campaigns like ours right now. It is a rich passage about giving and being generous.

There is one small little key word in there that makes all the difference: **Joy!**

Here's the situation: The Apostle Paul shares about the mind-blowing actions of some small Christian churches in the area of Macedonia, north of modern-day Greece. The unique thing that they did was that they gave generously to an offering he collected, even though they were poor and under a "severe ordeal of affliction."

We don't know what the affliction was – who knows, maybe there was an epidemic in Macedonia right now, or a transition of government, or problems with racism, or polarization, or an economic crisis – who knows?!

But they had joy. They trusted in a God who was in control of their lives. They had never heard of this God until a few years ago when Paul brought them the good news of Jesus – and now they see God everywhere. It made them so joy filled that they couldn't help but be generous when their Pastor Paul asked them to share some money in order to help impoverished Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem.

“...they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means,”

It even says they begged to give. They were *unreasonably* generous!

Doesn't it give you shivers when you hear that? They begged to give beyond their means to help others monetarily.

Paul shares what the Macedonian churches in order to encourage another congregation (Corinth) to be generous too.

I don't think he is passive aggressive about it or manipulative. Sometimes it can go really wrong when you point out someone else's generosity – it can come across accusatory. Imagine I go to be the guest preacher in one of the Neenah Methodist churches that is struggling financially and I tell them the entire time how generous the people of First Church Appleton are compared to his church! – Wouldn't be that wise, would it?

That's not what I get from Paul here at all – and that's not how I would talk about our church's generosity. But I do share stories of generosity because I believe it is encouraging.

Many of us are hard pressed right now, and yes, some of us can't be generous monetarily right now. But others can and together we put all our gifts, the money, the prayers, the talents,... all we've got in and up to God.

We trust that God will do something good with it and that it gives us joy to do it and to see it.

3)

What is the level of your trust and joy in God these days? **What are you generous about these days?** We live in scary times, we have our own “severe ordeal of affliction.” It is easy to be stingy and I would never blame **anyone** for it. I rather want to ask in a positive way:

What makes you generous these days? What are you generous with?

Are you generous with your time?

> Carolyn Bube, one of our newer members, gave 7 hours of her time to drive one of our Congolese families to apply for their Greencard in Milwaukee.

Are you generous with your talents?

> Kim, Brad, Kate and Alex Fahrenkrug; Bob Steffen; Brian & Matthew Wepfer; Maggie Janousek; Paul, Robert, and Norm Ladewig, they give of their talents to work in our children's puppet ministry.

Are you generous with your toys?

> My 5 year old son Owen wanted to give a complete set of his newest Bakugan toys away to a neighbor boy.

Why, I ask. “Because he's my friend!”

Are you generous with your money?

> 85 people have already turned in their 85 pledge cards, we've never gotten this many so quickly.

I could mention many more names and many more stories of generosity. What are you generous about these days? What gives you joy in giving? How do you feel God is in control in your life?

4)

The Apostle Paul experienced God's control in both spectacular and very subtle ways. He pointed out some churches in Macedonia that did the same and expressed their joy in overflowing generosity. They cared for the gift he was collecting for a good purpose.

Being generous and caring is the slogan of our church's stewardship campaign this year. It's original, we came up with it in a meeting when we read the story of the Macedonian churches and we feel that it fits to our situation this year.

May God encounter you in your generosity in all the aspects of your life.

Amen.

Unused:

I came across an intriguing question in a youth Bible study recently. I was first thinking it's too edgy to ask in a sermon but I'm gonna do it!

If you had to evaluate your trust and zeal for God through your checkbook, what grade would you give yourself?