

The ELCA Macedonia Project: Your Table is Ready
Bible Study Transcript from II Corinthians 8
By Rev. Stephen Paul Bouman

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; 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, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.” 2 Corinthians 8: 1-7

“The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And 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.” 2 Corinthians 9: 6-8

“They gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God to us...” With that simple sentence depicting the offering of the Macedonian Christians we get to the heart of what is at stake in the mission support and stewardship of our church and each of its disciples. Money, mission support, the offering of the Macedonian Christians is a referendum on relationships. Priorities are clarified. It is a spiritual issue.

Let’s begin our thinking about Paul’s vision for stewardship in Second Corinthians with the last verse of chapter 7 because it starts this way: ***“I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.”*** Then comes our text: *“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; 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, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.*

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 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. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

And as a coda I'd like to add verse 13 in Chapter 9. *Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others.*

So Paul's great teaching on stewardship and mutual mission begins with joy and confidence in the Body of Christ in mission, and ends with stewardship as a way to make a common confession of faith. These stirring echoes from scripture are meant for us today: God is confident in us. By God's grace we are able! This offering and its embedded relationships to the Lord and one another evokes joy. And we are never better as a church than when our mutual generosity becomes our public confession of faith.

As we begin to dig into the context of this text I would note several things. The first is that various Greek words are used to describe this offering.” The Greek words “diakonia” and “leiturgeia” are both used to describe this offering for the poor in Jerusalem. “This ministry,” “this service,” both referring to the offering are translations of “diakonia” and “leiturgeia” at various times. I like those two roots, for it connects service and worship together in this offering. When we give we serve. When we serve we worship. When we worship we give. Diakonia, leiturgeia are facets of the same diamond of a life serving and following Jesus in mission.

As we consider the background of this offering we begin to see that this is a text for a time such as ours. Paul is in conflict with the church in Corinth. In fact, relations had soured between Paul and the church in Corinth after his first letter to the Corinthians. He was accused of being too bold in his letters, but too weak in his person. Things had deteriorated to the point where Paul decides to cancel a planned visit (so as not to stoke the controversy) but instead to send a letter. In chapter 2 of second Corinthians Paul refers to this letter as a “letter of tears” (probably sent between 1 and 2 Corinthians).

Painful visits. Letters of tears. Conflict. Lousy economy and the suffering poor. My friends, does this sound at all like a similar time? And at a time like this, when they are at each others' throats and the church everywhere is suffering, at exactly this auspicious time, Paul decides to take an offering! It reminds us of the prophet Jeremiah buying a house in Jerusalem just as the Babylonians are at the gates. Yet in the midst of conflict and fear, it is always God's time. The time is now. *"Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem."* (1 Corinthians 16: 1-3)

Paul takes a humble approach to this offering and the relationships it will require. In **chapter 4** of 2 Corinthians Paul calls our ministry to each other in the Gospel *treasure in clay jars*. He's not making this appeal over and against people. He's coming from a stance of humility. Living by faith is important and he moves towards talking about the resurrection in his run up to our Macedonian text. We carry the death and resurrection of Jesus in our bodies. Even if the earthly tent in which we live is destroyed, we have an eternal dwelling with God. The whole idea that the resurrection has changed everything looms over this offering by and for the saints.

This offering also comes out of an unvarnished appeal to unity. In **chapter 5** the love of God urges us on. Christ died that we may no longer live for ourselves and we see each other through Christ. If any is in Christ, there is a new creation. So Christ permeates this appeal. It is a message of reconciliation entrusted to us. In fact, we're called ambassadors for Christ. I want you to think about that term, "being an ambassador for Christ," and being an agent of reconciliation as really being very closely connected to this offering.

Chapter 6: Paul lists his sufferings and then he finally just begs the Corinthians as children, "Open your heart wide".

Chapter 7: he says often I boast of you. Again, he says I have great pride in you. And then he says he is filled with consolation when he thinks of them. So, this isn't a hectoring, guilt inducing appeal which frames the offering. He's not saying "you need to measure up". He is saying we can do this because I have pride in you; I have great confidence in you. And, in fact, you give me consolation. And then he says, yes, we've had some hard times. But, you know what? You allowed it to bring you to repentance. And because of this repentance, because we've all gotten on our knees before the Lord, he says, I rejoice because I have complete confidence in you.

It is so important that we see clearly the context to the appeal, its spiritual framework. They're fighting, in conflict. Paul is not shy about that. So are we. But, we are still ambassadors. We still have this ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us. The resurrection changes everything. And, so, because of our renewed relationships through forgiveness and repentance, we rejoice. Our mutual patience and endurance in Christ gives us complete confidence in one another by the grace of God. Paul has confidence in the Corinthians. God has confidence in us. His confidence becomes our own.

This mutual confidence, this experience of repentance and reconciliation, this remembrance of the resurrection, this renewal of relationships engenders hope and abundance. See how different that is from an aura of scarcity engendered by confidence\lack of confidence in the market, or in the gurus, or in the latest techniques for church survival, or our own willful independence. Our confidence comes out of this process, this spiritual process, of conflict, of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of the resurrection of Jesus, of lives permeated with the presence of Christ. That is our confidence. In that confidence our relationships are renewed and strengthened for mission.

So, God has done this for a purpose. What's the purpose? Now our text comes into view. In 2 Corinthians 8 we notice that Paul begins with the grace of God again. The grace of God is the only reason we talk about stewardship. The Greek word for grace, "charis" is used four times in this text. The Macedonian's **opportunity** to give, and their **willingness** to give are all described as "charis," grace. What God has done, what God continues to do in us, sets the mission table.

Look at the juxtaposition of **abundant joy...extreme poverty**. God seems to be saying something to us here. Almost like the poorer the people, the more generous. Or maybe the most forgiven, the most reconciled, the most generous. That has been my experience. When there was the worst famine in Africa, Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx, like the Macedonians a congregation of and for the poor, gave the most to the Hunger Appeal of any congregation in the synod I served as bishop. Those of you who have been on mission trips have seen that in the places of the deepest poverty, the people almost stumble over themselves to give a lavish welcome. At a welcome banquet feast, the humble and joyful hosts share poetry prayer, and songs and dances composed for the occasion. **Extreme poverty...abundant joy**. And notice these words and phrases from the text: **wealth of generosity, voluntarily, beyond their means, privilege of sharing**. The joy and grace jump off the page. These descriptors paint a contour of the life of a disciple and the shape of mission. And there's accountability here. You made a beginning; complete the work. Do what you said you would do. This stewardship takes in all of us. By that I mean, everything that we are; in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in eagerness, in love.

After praising the Macedonians Paul gets to motivation for the Corinthians in verse 8. Paul says blatantly, this is not a command. But I think that Paul is being a little disingenuous here. It's sort of like Paul saying to a Philemon, I can't tell you to take your runaway slave Onesimus back as an equal at your table, but get the guest suite ready, because I'm going to come and see what you decide. You don't get not to decide, but I'm not commanding you. It is an iron fist of accountability in a velvet glove of grace, reconciliation and the joy of renewed relationship. Actually, Paul is commanding the Corinthians by pointing to Jesus Christ. First the Macedonians gave themselves to God. In a similar way Paul commands the Corinthians by pointing to example of Jesus Christ; who, though he was rich, yet became poor for our sake. So Jesus Christ embodies abundant joy and extreme poverty, a wealth of generosity, voluntarily, beyond their means, the privilege of sharing. It is an imitation of Christ that is evoked in this offering. Be accountable to that!

In verse 13, we get little lecture on ancient economics. Paul is trying to create here unity in economic diversity through a just distribution of wealth. The far flung churches involved in this offering are geographically diverse, like the ELCA. They are diverse in terms of wealth and poverty. And, Paul is actually trying to say here, that, the way in which we share our wealth captures how we see our relationships. It's a new economics. It mirrors Acts 2:42. They shared what they had as they were tending to the prayers, the meal and the teaching of the apostles. Each, as they were able, gave so that none was in want among them. Ernst Troeltsch has called this the "religious communism of love." I'm not suggesting that here, but I am suggesting that there is something about relationships that is really critical here in how Paul (and Jesus) understood how money works.

Paul was invoking the patronage system in Hellenic and Roman culture. In that "oikoumene" (household) system in the "polis" (city) in those times giving money bestowed power, status and honor. Charity or patronizing the arts built power for the giver. As Paul said, some give because they can, and some receive because they must. That is a heartless equation, so Paul begins with the gifts of the poor, not the neediness of the poor. And, Paul begins with seeking to protect the collection by stressing equality and reciprocity. You know, this is really an image of an interdependent church. And, of course, these relationships are cued right at the beginning of the Macedonian offerings. For first they gave themselves to the Lord. They did that by repenting after they were fighting with each other. And then, by the will of God- God wants this-they gave themselves to us. They were part of the church. Our stewardship rests on relationships. But, they express not only the individual relationships, but the point I was making with the patronage system and everything, they also express our communal relationships; what it means to be interdependent; what it means to live from others.

Jesus actually referred to this patronage system when confronting the status ambitions of Peter and John. Remember, each wanted to sit at the side of Jesus in power and status. Jesus reminded them that in the patronage system of the Gentiles the rich and prominent lord it over those below them. Jesus said to Peter and John, “it shall not be so among you.” In the way of Jesus the power ladder is inverted. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. That is the spirit of the Macedonian offering, linked to Jesus’ comments about the economy of the Gentiles, the polis.

A transformed patronage system has something to say about the church’s radical call to relationship and inclusion to community with and among the poor. For some that is a personal call, but not for all. The church bears this call collectively, and some will be called to that radical discipleship, as was Jesus and the twelve (“foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”) And some are called to radical patronage... a Jesus kind of patronage that says that God has blessed us to be a blessing. So there will be those who would host and support ministries of the poor. There is a place for the Macedonians and the Corinthians in this call to radical discipleship and Jesus style patronage.

I see our offerings and mission support in that way; that somehow those who have a lot share what they have and those don’t have quite as much, receive what they need, so that they can be part of the sharing. And, I also believe with all my heart, that when the church turns its face towards those without the Gospel, the stranger, and those who are poor, it’s always being renewed. So that’s why this offering is such a powerful sign of hope.

Paul invites the Corinthians and the ELCA to see ourselves as Macedonians. In other words, at exactly that point where a spirit of conflict or fear or scarcity is the most powerful-when we look for what reduction in spending will help us survive given the economy and all the other pressures-that gift to the wider church, to the synod, or to churchwide becomes the Macedonian offering. In fact we are called to rejoice in this poverty and to embrace the radical joy that comes from, nevertheless, totally and wholly, and also with this world’s goods, give ourselves to God, and to each other because God wills that. By the will of God they gave themselves to us.

And, also, then to remember with joyful and grateful hearts that the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. As Jaroslav Pelikan has said: “If Christ is risen then nothing else matters; and if Christ isn’t risen, then nothing else matters. As Paul said in another place, “If Christ is not risen then we’re the most to be pitied.” But in fact, he asserts Christ is risen. Alleluia!

And, then, in **Chapter 9:13**, Paul links this offering to our common confession of faith. Through the testing of this “ministry”, and the word here is “leiturgia,” (he’s referring to the offering) you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And, then, appropriately this wonderful little text ends with the doxology, at the end of Chapter 9. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift! And after that, there’s nothing more to be said.

So those are some thoughts. So, using a Macedonian frame, if you will, for what we’re going to do in our synods, invites us to ask some questions through this Bible study. One of them is: This came out of conflict and it came out of repentance. It came to the point where they can say I have full confidence in you. What are some of your signs of hope that you see pointing towards repentance and full confidence in your life, your synod, our church, your community?

Second: Because it is about relationships, what are ways that we first give ourselves to God? What does that mean for you?

Maybe another question would be: Because it’s also communal, because God wills us to give ourselves to each other, what are some specific ways in which God blesses that, when we give ourselves to each other? This is an opportunity for mission interpretation. Because of us, what are you able to do? Because of us, what are you a part of that you couldn’t be if you hadn’t given yourself to the Lord and to us?

I think the last thing to say is that the offering to Jerusalem, which came out of the Council of Jerusalem, was, in many ways, a political act. And, I don’t mean politics; I mean politics like Aristotle means it: the ability to be a part of the that shape your life. Because what the Council of Jerusalem enabled was Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. Mission never happens without a church body authorizing it. There are not self aggrandizing evangelists. God’s mission has a church, not individuals. And, the offering to Jerusalem could be seen by some as, OK, you get the franchise of the Gentiles, but we get the offering. But let’s not forget the fact that for Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, and, for Paul, poverty was also literal. It wasn’t a metaphor. That it was an act of solidarity with the poor. Jerusalem was the place that was sending missionaries around the world because Jerusalem was the place where people were getting beaten up for their faith; martyred for their faith; where they were in hiding, where they were under persecution, and, yet, were authorizing its mission. In fact, it was their martyrdom that spurred the Messianic movement in Judaism. It had to spread out.

For Further Development

I also want to include a section concerning building the Mission Support and Stewardship Table and a cadre of stewardship leaders around the part of the pericopy where Titus and his team receive and deliver the offering.

Rev. Stephen Paul Bouman

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