

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Being Faithful in the Backyard | 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

I was reading about a British magazine, back when they had magazines that would come out once a month or so, and this magazine had a regular feature that was called “Scenes You Don’t Often See.” Scenes you don’t often see, and they’d have picture, obviously, of the two-headed wolf or whatever it was. Scenes you don’t often see. But, just as often, it would show scenes from contemporary society that you don’t often see. So, for instance, we’re all used to seeing homeless folks trying to sell newspapers—that’s not the unusual thing—or, the unusual thing is not you throwing a dollar and keep going on. The unusual thing they talked about was when that same person came back and bought the whole stack of newspapers. That’s a thing you don’t often see. We often see black and white together in the United States, but often, these days, in a confrontational or different place. We don’t often see black and white working together. It’s a scene you don’t often see, and when it does, you want to pay attention to it. There is not one person in this room over 30 who doesn’t realize that teens play music way too loud. It’s just a law of nature. The scene you don’t often see is when she comes onto the bus, sits next to you, turns it way down, and says, “I’m sorry if I was interrupting you.” Scenes you don’t often see. Another scene you don’t often see is a church at the end of an offering, having the pastor get up and say, “There’s something wrong with this offering! You know what’s wrong with this offering? There’s too much in it!” Don’t often see it. Won’t see it today, by the way. Let’s just make clear about that! But, if it did happen, that’s what you’d want to focus on. You’d want to learn, “Really?”

In God’s story, before the time of Jesus, they talked about how God rescued Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt and took them to the Promised Land, and on the journey, they have to take an offering. This is what happens. In Exodus 36 it says:

2 “Then, Moses summoned every skill person who was willing to work on the sanctuary. 3 They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing this portable sanctuary. And the people continued to give free will offerings morning after morning. (It’s what happens next that’s interesting. It says), after a time, 4 the workers left what they were doing and said to Moses, 5 “The people are bringing more than enough for all the work the Lord commanded.” 6 So, Moses had to give an order to the whole camp: No man or woman is to make any more offerings for the sanctuary. And the people were restrained from giving more, 7 because they’d already given more than enough to do all the work.” [Exodus 36:2-7]

Scenes you don’t often see. You don’t even often see it in the Bible. Usually, with a project—whether it’s NPR’s every-other-week fundraiser, or it is something at school or at church—almost always something gets started and then the leader has to ask for

more or has to encourage people to finish a job well started. That's the tone, frankly, of much of the teaching in the Bible about serving and giving. Finish well.

So, by now, if you're here for the first time, you figured out *he's going to talk about money*. And you're going, "Ugh." Even worse, you know what's worse than that? If you're a visitor. It's the person who invited you sitting there saying, *I brought a visitor finally, and he's going to talk about money*. Yeah, sorry. Stinks to be you. But . . . No, no, no. What I'd like to do is surprise you a little and not make this a typical stewardship sermon. You know a typical stewardship sermon? I caught one when I first started going back to church. I went to this little Presbyterian church in Chicago, and the elder in charge of the stewardship committee would always give the stewardship talk, and he'd had polio as a kid, so he would clomp up into the pulpit, boom, boom, boom, boom. And he was this Scotsman with a thick brogue, and he would stand up behind the podium and he would lean over and say, "I've come today to talk to you about money. You've got it. We want it." I thought he could have stopped right there, but he never did. I don't want to do that.

I think you have to talk about money, for a couple reasons. I think the first reason is that if you never talked about money, you wouldn't be sitting here. Could I just remind you that it is because of the radical generosity of people that came before us that we sit here? And they learned how to give and they gave with joy, and they had rope burn. They held onto the rope for their time. Rope burn is why we sit here. And so, if we want to see that continue, we need to talk about why it's important. But we have to do it a different way. One of the top two or three things that the Bible talks about is money. Especially in the New Testament. If I were to ask you what are the three, four biggest lessons the New Testament teaches, you would probably, most of you, you'd come out with the idea that, well, God loves us and he wants us to love others. Right. You would probably also say, well, we don't pray very well because we don't hear God, so Jesus teaches us how to pray. Right. You might even talk about the idea of grace. Jesus is all about giving us grace that sets us free. Right. Those are probably the three big themes of the New Testament, but right there with them, and often connected with them, is this idea of money and its power. You have to talk about money, because all the stories that Jesus tells about judgment and salvation, they're about service and money. We also have to talk about money because we're in the middle of this remodeling project, and I believe that great projects can unite people. This gives us a sense of energy. But I also believe, whenever money is involved, it draws forward the power of the evil one to thwart us and to divide us. So, I thought, how could we talk differently about money? And I went back and I looked at the very first time that a preacher ever had to talk about money in the New Church. It was about a mission offering.

What happened is the Church—remember, the Church starts in Jerusalem, then it goes all around the Roman Empire, and then, probably 15 years after it starts, a huge depression and economic calamity hits the whole Roman Empire. We can see that, in part, because of the taxes that the Romans collected. Huge downturn. Tons of people hurt all over the empire, particularly in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is hardest hit. And particularly in Jerusalem, the widows and the children are hardest hit. The apostle Paul

sees this and feels God telling him that this new group of Jesus follows scattered all over the empire should help the Jerusalem church. And, for two years in a row, he goes around collecting money and giving it to the poor of Jerusalem. He wants to show we care. He also wants to show all these other non-Jews, called Gentiles, that this Messiah changes lives. So, how does he talk about receiving that mission offering? This is the way he does it to the Church in Greece, in Corinth. Second Corinthians Chapter 8 says this:

¹ “And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace God has given the Macedonian churches.” (Now, the Macedonian churches would be the letter to the Philippians and the letter to the Thessalonians. Okay, those are the Macedonian churches.) ² “In the midst of a very severe trial,” —that same depression, “their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty . . .” (Odd to put those together, their joy and their poverty). ³ “Welled up in rich generosity. I saw for myself, they gave as much as they could and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they begged us for the privilege of sharing in the service to God’s people. ⁵ They exceeded our expectations. They gave themselves first to God, and then by the will of God, they gave themselves to us.”
[2 Corinthians 8:1-5]

So, here’s the part that is peculiar to the Corinthian church, because the Corinthians are the Edina Church of the 1st century. The Edina Church has a lot, thinks well of themselves. The Corinthians thought that they were the smartest, the most sophisticated, the most godly church, and Paul has been telling them for two letters, *get over yourselves*. But now he turns the table and he says, “If you think you’re so good,” he starts this way, “since you excel in everything, since you think you’re the best, since you excel at everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in devotion, and in the love we’ve kindled in you, since you excel, see that you also excel in the grace of giving. I’m not commanding you. I just want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. You know about the grace of Jesus. He was rich. For your sake, he became poor, so that through his poverty, you might become rich.” A whole different kind of “Give me the money” talk. You’d hardly recognize it. And for me, the first thing that was striking about this was that he phrases his whole request for money by not talking about money. For him, money isn’t about money. Money is about grace. Grace.

So, we need to say, do you feel like you have felt the grace of God? Grace is a generous gift without anybody earning anything. Grace is what God does for us. Grace flowed all over the Macedonians, and then it flowed out of the Macedonians. Their generosity, it says, begins when they offered themselves to the grace of God. And then that grace went to the followers of Jesus, and then that grace went to the poor. It’s not about money. It’s about grace. NPR’s got a lot different task. They have to keep the station on the air, and so they ask until they get enough. We’re talking about grace. We believe here that you cannot live generously. You can get the five and the ten and the twenty and the thirty, but you can’t live generously without seeing that you’ve received

grace and being reminded of grace and sharing it. And I have to tell you, I think in the same way, you cannot receive grace for very long without sharing it. You can't receive grace for long without sharing it. We just baptized those four beautiful little babies, right? And we put them in the water of grace. We wiped it on them. We gave them grace that came from God. It strikes me that it's like this. It's like this. Life, a person's life, is a sponge. They get soaked in the water of grace. That's a baptism for you. And then the idea is that, as they soak it, they squeeze it out and share that grace with other people. We get grace, we share grace, but what happens if you get grace and then you just set it aside? What happens to the sponge, that wonderful sponge, then? Well, it seems to me that a couple things happen. It starts to tighten up, curl up, get a little ugly. There's nothing to squeeze out of it because it hasn't been graced. But, even more than getting stiff, it starts to smell. It starts to smell like the old stuff. It doesn't smell like grace. If you get grace, you have to squeeze it out or the grace goes away. So, I guess my question for you is, have you received the grace of God recently? Not *When I was eight years old, I went to camp and I prayed the prayer*, but have you felt the grace of God for you and have you squeezed it out at all lately?

First, Paul says it's about grace, and then second, when Paul talks about money he doesn't talk about money. He talks about grace and he talks about joy. That's the weird thing for me. He doesn't talk about *you gotta build the church*, he talks about joy. It says, "In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty met, and they welled up in generosity." There ought to be something about the way that you give now because of grace that brings joy.

Rich Stearns was here last week because there are 50 or 60 million refugees around the world who are waiting for somebody to save their life, and we want to be part of that. But that can be like this: "Come on. Give, give, give! You got so much! Give!" Or, it can be: "Do you need joy?" One of the things we talked about in the boardroom at World Vision was we give because joy travels in both directions. I love that phrase. We give because we see the look on their faces, and it comes back to us. But we also give because when we give, we have joy that we've been blessed and we get to bless other people. We give because joy travels both directions. The thing that makes us happiest are also the things that make the world a better place, and giving to others makes us happier, more joy-filled, than just spending on ourselves. When you think about your money, what's your first reaction? Are you like most of us—fearful? "I don't know if I have enough. How am I going to take care of the kids? How am I going to take care of retirement?" Are you fearful? Or are you prideful that you've worked hard, you've saved well, you've got a lot? Fear or pride. How many would say that when I think of what God has entrusted with me, I feel joy, because I get to share it? I feel joy, because no matter how much or how little I have, I get to give it away.

I got a visual example of this during this Invited campaign. We had people who gave a million bucks. God bless them. We have people who gave 50 bucks. God bless them. We had one little boy and his brother who gave \$113 and this is what it looks like. This is what joy that goes both directions looks like. He counted every single dollar for me

three times. No, it was great! This is what giving with joy looks like. I want this for you. Don't get cheated out of this.

So, first, Paul tells people that we are generous because we've been given grace to share; second, because when we give generously, we receive joy that goes both ways. And then Paul says, "All right. Now I'm through. Give me the money." No, no, no! What Paul says is: *I want to give you an example of somebody else who's learning this lesson, not to shame them, but to inspire them. One measuring stick of grace and joy and generosity is these poor people—literally poor people—in Philippi and Thessalonica. Another example is Jesus. He's rich; He gives himself away. God is in the life-changing, heart-transplanting business. He wants to take your fearful heart and your prideful heart and He wants to fill it with joy, not to shame you or guilt you, but inspire you.*

John Ortberg is a friend of ours. He's a pastor out in California in this new denomination. He and I were talking one day about how do we get young people, these guys' age, how do we get young leaders to join us? And we were talking about opportunities for them and education. Ortberg said, "No, no, no. What we have to do is we have to create something in ECO that is doing something so that kids say, *I gotta be part of that.* We have to lift up stories that are unusual so that young leaders say, *I want to do that, too.* That's what Paul is doing here. I want to be part of that. I want a piece of that.

So, looking at this idea of what would that look like today, I wanted to end close to home. We have spent much of the month of October talking about our missions, the stuff we give around the world. The mission of the month is for Zambia to build the school. Don't forget to write the check. But this is also a time where Rich Stearns came and talked about the refugees. That's great. But can I tell you? That's what tends in this place to get most of the publicity because it's way over there. But what is closer to the heart of this church is the stuff that we do in the Twin Cities. Over 50% of our giving for missions stays in the Twin Cities. Over 93% of all the people who volunteer and cross cultures, 93%-plus of our people do it right here in the cities.

So, I started to scratch out what that looks like. Literally, yesterday morning I was just, in my impeccable penmanship, writing down the first organizations that I thought of that show how our people get involved. And then I realized, you might have just a smidge of trouble reading my writing, so I thought, well, maybe I can go through it with you. I'll go through it with you. Here we go.

First, we support the Banyan after school program for low-income kids; Urban Young Life because our kids need Jesus' love and so do city kids; the Source, we go to combat local sex trafficking; Urban Ventures, for over 25 years, a Christian community development association. The last thing we did is we went and did some tutoring, but we also bought a piece of land where they could grow organic food and sell it in their neighborhood and sell it here. It's great! We support the Lighthouse. This morning, there is a worship service up on the far north side that Dee McIntosh is leading. That's the

focus of this year's Christmas offering. There are a couple dozen of our folks who are doing that. Gethsemane Lutheran, another north side church, a small one—we provide for their food shelf and we work in their daycare center. VEAP—a bunch of our folks are involved in VEAP because we need to combat suburban hunger and poverty. It's much harder to see. PCYC—you don't know it by that name, but for our Christmas offering every year, we get seven or eight thousand kids' gifts, and then about 300 of us go and set up a little store for inner-city kids to "buy" gifts for their sisters and their parents. YoungLives sprang out of YoungLife. It's supporting single young moms. Urban Homeworks—20 years of working in low-income housing. This next Saturday, a bunch of us are just going to go and work on a house. Calvary Church—we partner with this city church, tutoring or whatever they need. TreeHouse—that's a local ministry here, because there are at-risk kids all around the city, and our people don't just write checks; they go and cook food for these kids. I could go on and on. I stopped at twelve because I ran out of paper, and I had people after each service come up and say to me: "I can't believe you didn't mention my ministry." Ooh. Okay, what a great problem to have! Did you know that, though? You probably thought, where could I get involved? Here are some places that we can get involved because behind every single one of those "projects" are checks. But more than that, there are people. They are at both ends of the rope. I'd like you to hear from them how they've gotten joy. It's about four minutes long, and some of us talk about the grace of giving.

<https://vimeo.com/188724893>

Don't you want to be that kind of church where your kids grow up to be like that young woman, where the grandparents live that out? As I walked in today, I looked right, and I don't know if you saw it, near the bookstore there's a whole two, three, four tables of knitted goods that women in our church have knitted so that they could send them out. It's a way to give. We receive grace and we share it so it doesn't spoil. We receive the joy of a little boy's face when he thinks he's done something special, and we hold on to the rope, the rope that was our lifeline, and remember we said that the rope is personal and prayerful and painful. If you don't have rope burns, are you really holding the rope or are you just tipping to get them off your back? For God's sake, don't tip. Grab the rope.

Lord, may the grace of Jesus fill us in a fresh way today. May people feel that You love them to the roots of their being. May these babies that we baptized be a sign to us of how we need to live and give like children. May Your joy fill us as we hear the stories of people just like us, who stretched the rope out a little and saw lives being changed. Bless us because You love us. In Your great name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.