

November 21, 2021
2 Corinthians 8: 1-7
Abundant Gratitude

Join me in prayer: We are waiting, O God, to hear your Word, for in your Word is our hope. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we hear your voice and be attentive to what you will say to us today. In the name of Christ, we ask this and all things. Amen.

Our scripture reading this morning is from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. In this section of the letter Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to give funds for the church in Jerusalem. This collection was intended to not only address the economic needs of the Jerusalem church, but also to help foster unity between the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and the Gentile Christians in Corinth. Paul is presumed to have written this letter, or at least this portion of the letter, from the Greek region of Macedonia and he begins by commending the Macedonian church for their generosity before inviting the church of Corinth to do likewise. Hear now these words from 2 Cor 8:1-7 – an encouragement to be generous.

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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The Apostle Paul knows how to make a pitch, doesn't he. Don Draper and all the Mad Men could learn a thing or two from him... First he tells the church in Corinth how generous the church in Macedonia is, bragging about them and holding them up as paragons of giving. And then he directs his comment to the Corinthians... "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. If there had been gold stars back then, Paul would

have been passing them out with abandon. I get it. Paul had told the church previously to use the spiritual gifts God had given them. And they are using them. And Paul is grateful – maybe a little hyperbolic – but I get his gratitude. I look around this church, and like Paul, I see so much many places where PCO is excelling and I want to give you all gold stars. You are certainly excelling in making Brian and I feel welcomed and loved. Excelling in being a voice and arms of welcome for evacuees and refugees from all over the world. Excelling in praising God through music that glorifies God, excelling in faith formation across the age spectrum. And excelling in faithful responding to God’s love through your tithes, offerings, and gifts.

During the pandemic and time of significant transition, you have continued to support the ministry of this church with faithful stewardship, completing the Roots and Wings campaign and giving of your time and talents in creative ways, especially this fall. And as Paul says to the church in Corinth, I am likewise saying to you, “so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking” of stewardship for 2022.

The stewardship team, headed up by Doug Paterson, chose *gratitude* as this year’s theme. You have heard from the team and from church members about how they are grateful to God and grateful for this congregation, for this family of faith here at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos. And each of us has been asked to express our gratitude by giving back a portion of what God had so richly blessed us with by making a pledge to give of our financial resources, our time, and our talents. And it is my hope and prayer that you will embrace this year’s stewardship with a heart not just of gratitude, but with one of abundant gratitude.

OT scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the power of the future lies not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity, but of those who trust God’s abundance. God’s abundant love, God’s abundant faithfulness, God’s abundant care, God’s abundant grace. And God’s abundant provisions for us.

What does it mean it to live as a people with a mindset of abundance as opposed to a mindset of scarcity? I think to back to experiences Brian and I had a number of years ago when we were visiting some newly discovered relatives in northern Italy. They cooked feast after feast for us, pairing wines from the village for each course. And because their English was only a little more extensive than our Italian, we found ourselves challenged when they would keep filling our plates after we had finished. I couldn’t remember the word for “enough”

in Italian, but I remembered my college Spanish, so I gave that a try – and when I said “basta pasta,” they laughed and understood. We later learned that clearing the plate meant we wanted more, so we needed to leave something on the plate when we were done. But since that time “basta pasta” has become a shorthand for Brian and I when we have had enough – and not just enough food – but when we have hammered a discussion beyond any meaningful resolution, or when I need to escape from frenzied work and need some down time– whenever we have the recognition that we are full – we are over full and we are going to burst unless we stop, the “basta pasta” comes out.

And more than that, “basta pasta” is a reminder to me of what abundant hospitality feels like, of the way God continually fills my plate with forgiveness and grace, as I fall short in following Christ. It is a reminder to me of God’s abundant love and care for all, even those who society has pushed to the side and are forgotten or rejected. It is a reminder of God’s abundant justice and mercy, a justice that seeks to right the wrongs perpetuated by oppression and privilege, and a mercy that can only come from our Sovereign Lord.

In addition to being Commitment Sunday, today we also celebrate Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the liturgical or church year – next Sunday Advent begins. This is a Sunday when we give thanks and praise for the sovereignty of Christ, who is Lord of all creation and is coming again to reign in glory. We give thanks that as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Christ is the ruler of all history, the judge of all people. Our final hymn today, *All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name* - a hymn we often associate with Easter – reminds us that we ascribe Christ as Lord of all. In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In Christ and through Christ, we have a tangible reminder that mercy and justice, grace and forgiveness, and most especially love flow with abundance from God. Christ gave us the church to be his body – his hands of healing; his feet walking alongside the needy; his voice calling out acts of injustice; his arms embracing the lost and lonely. Christ loved with abundance, and the church - his body on earth must do likewise.

And yet sometimes, sometimes it hard for us to trust in this abundant love and respond in gratitude. I think part of the reason is that we live in a world that promotes zero-sum thinking. In zero sum thinking there are winners and there are losers, because there is a finite amount of resources. If you get a bigger piece of the pie, then my piece must get smaller. When you add the pieces together – the sum of all of changes is zero – the smaller pieces balance out

the larger pieces. However this is not the world God calls us to. God calls us to live in a world where abundance, not scarcity is the mindset; where your piece of the pie will get bigger along with mine, because we will work together to make more pie. Because the God who provides bread for today will also provide bread for tomorrow.

But when the rubber hits the road, we know that our anxieties and fears and self-doubts can stand in the way of trust. For me at least one of the challenges in trusting God is the recognition of the control I need to release. If I am trusting God – then it is not – cannot all be about me. And that can be hard place to go. Sometimes we are forced into trusting God by a tough situation – a health or work or personal crisis, where our only option is to put our faith in God, and abandon any pretense of controlling our own destiny. Hopefully these situations are few and far between. The more likelier scenario for me is that I do have some control over the options – like how I respond in gratitude – how much of my resources I will give. While I do leave room for the Holy Spirit to act, too often I am trying to move the Holy Spirit's direction a little more in line with my compass, overlooking that all my gifts come from God and I am returning to God a portion of what God has given to me.

This is an important point to underscore. Our reformed theology teaches us that our giving is a response for all God has done, and it is not to earn a better seat at the table, not to get a bigger piece of the pie, not to earn or keep our salvation, but to recognize the abundance of God's love, the abundance of God's grace, the abundance God's care for each of us. To recognize that there is enough and that we have the assurance that God will provide because we see the ways God has provided throughout history.

In a few minutes each of us will be invited to come forth with our pledge cards and our time and talent sheets. The ushers have extras if you need one. I invite you to commit to putting your trust in God – trusting that God will provide for our next chapter. I invite you to respond with a heart of abundance rather than scarcity, remembering the abundant love of Christ. I invite you to respond with gratitude for that God has done in your life, the life of this faith community, and the world in we live. There is much work left to do, and God has called us as a people to continue Christ's mission. May it be so.

Join me in prayer.... Together the gifts of our financial resources, time and talents will be greater than the sum of the parts.... Amen

I invite you to join me in the Affirmation of Faith from a Brief Statement of Faith, a statement that reminds us that we are a people who respond in gratitude to Christ – the one who reigns in power and glory. Join me...

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"