

They Gave Themselves First to Christ

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 *...they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us...*

Paul wrote several letters to the Christian community in Corinth, two of which have survived in our New Testament. His relationship with that church was challenging and at times very strained. Paul kept reminding them of his own and God's love in Christ. He also kept challenging them to keep growing into spiritual maturity. To me that is the basic path of the Christian life: receiving God's unconditional love for us as we are (grace), and striving to let that love shape us from the inside out (discipleship).

For all its problems, the Corinthian community was dear to Paul's heart. There were divisions in the community caused by strong personalities projecting their own ego needs into the community. The First Letter to the Corinthians is an attempt to get the community to come together around Christ, not personalities, and to respect the diversity of gifts and ministries God had given them.

The Second Letter comes after the conflicts have subsided somewhat. There has apparently been some reconciliation. Some folks had become aware of their responsibility in all the mess. Paul calls this awareness "godly grief" in the chapter preceding our reading for today. It is awareness of our own damaging behavior and a humble readiness to renew ourselves in our commitment to live out of Christ and his love, not out of our ego needs. This capacity for humble self-awareness is essential for a spiritual community.

Paul is writing for another purpose. The Jerusalem church has fallen on hard times. A relief offering is being collected from other Christian communities to help. Paul wants the Corinthians to take their rightful part. He wants to challenge them to generous giving in spite of the frailty of their internal life. My sense is that Paul, while sensitive to the community's frailty, still holds them accountable for their devotion to Christ and the very meaning of his life. No matter how broken, wounded, or fragmented we are, accountability remains a crucial part of our life as a Christian community. That accountability can be part of our healing. It gets

us beyond ourselves. It calls us into greater spiritual maturity. It keeps us reminded of why we exist as a community in the first place.

Paul tells them about the churches of Macedonia that have already participated in the offering, even though they had suffered a "severe ordeal of affliction." We don't know exactly the nature of it, but probably it had to do with Rome's exploitation of resources and general oppressiveness. Those churches were poor and struggling. They didn't have much, if anything, to give to this collection. If anyone needed help, they did!

However, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that these impoverished and beleaguered churches have had an outpouring of generosity that goes way beyond their means. How did this happen? It is simple, says Paul: First, they gave themselves to Christ. They were clear about their faith commitment. They understood that their life flowed from God's own generosity in Christ, who poured out his own life so that we might be spiritually rich. As Paul wrote in the Letter to the Philippians, Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." He went down the ladder, not up. His was a life of overcoming the smaller self, the ego, for the sake of the true self of love.

Paul wasn't trying to "guilt" the Corinthians into generosity. But he was challenging them. Apparently they were in better shape to give than the Macedonians. Yet they were dragging their feet on this offering. Paul was trying to walk a line between making people give out of guilt and letting them off the hook completely. He did this by reminding the church in Corinth that while God's love is unconditional gift, there is also accountability that comes when we receive that love and become followers of the one who embodied it, Jesus Christ. If we are giving ourselves to Christ, then giving generously of our material resources will flow naturally and freely.

Paul was looking for "eagerness"—that's the word he uses—on the part of the community in Corinth. Here again he points to the poor Macedonian churches. Their eagerness to participate in the offering was such that they couldn't wait to give. They begged "earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints (v. 4)." Eagerness isn't something you can force in people. You have to call upon it, seek to awaken it. But it has to come from within each of us as we stay in touch with Jesus, as we continue to give ourselves first to him. If we are keeping ourselves centered in Christ, then we WANT to mature in love, we WANT to give generously, not just materially but in every way. When we are

giving in this way, out of this spirit, we really know what life is about. We really LIVE.

When Kaye and I traveled in southern Africa in 2000, we met many people who were very poor compared to most of us. And yet in so many of them we experienced a generosity of spirit and material things that we seldom saw in churches back home. The meals we shared in simple homes, lovingly prepared and happily shared. A woman we met at the orphanage she started in Durban, taking in children who were abandoned, many of them due to HIV/AIDS. She had been a middle class person but moved more and more in the direction of giving all that she had for the sake of the children. There was the openness and joy of the children themselves as they sang for us and took our hands. Such friendliness, hospitality and generosity existed in spite of the continuing effects of European colonialism, HIV/AIDS, corrupt and oppressive governments, and poverty. It causes me to wonder and to feel great hope that people who are the most impoverished and oppressed often manifest the greatest generosity. Eagerness to live generously comes from a source beyond ourselves and our social and cultural situations. It comes to us when we are centered in God, in Christ.

Paul finishes this section of the letter with a call to fairness and balance. He doesn't want to put undue pressure on anyone. He doesn't want the Corinthian Christians to put themselves in dire straights. But he does call for perspective and fairness. God means for us to live in ways that assure that everyone has enough of what they need. He quotes from the story of God's providing manna to the people of Israel during their wilderness wanderings (Ex. 16). They gathered it each day and it worked out that those who gathered much did not have too much and those who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had enough. This points us toward definite economic implications, both personally and as a society and world. When measured against the principle of fairness and balance, we in this country do not come out anywhere near where we need to be. We need to work with this in our own lives as we practice the spiritual discipline of material giving, asking ourselves about what we truly need and whether we have more than enough while others have not enough. If we were all working seriously at this, then we would have all we need for our life and ministries as a community of faith. And as a nation we would create ways to share equitably the abundant resources that are ours so that no one goes without food, housing, medical care, and education. God has provided everything

needed for life; it is the work of our spiritual life to see that it is shared for the needs of all. The problem is not resources; the problem is us.

It all comes back to what Paul said about the Macedonian communities. They gave themselves first to God through Christ. That's the key. If we are doing that, working with our spiritual lives so that we are more and more centered in Christ, in God, then generosity of giving, whether financial, material, or spiritual, begins to be liberated in us. And when each and all of us are living out of the generosity that flows from God's love in Christ, then we need not have to worry about having too much or too little.

I think this portion of Paul's letter sheds light on the importance of our inward journey, the ways we work daily to stay close to Jesus and to God. This is the practical way we "give ourselves first to the Lord," as Paul said. Staying in touch with God's love for us in Christ through the inward journey of prayer, study, reflection, and inward silence, we touch that flow of love that issues in an outward journey, a life of generosity. When each of us and all of us are working with "giving ourselves first to Christ," then we also put ourselves as a community on the surest of footings. The storms and stresses, the conflicts and divisions that inevitably are part of any community are overcome and healed as we know ourselves always called toward greater spiritual maturity. We come back again and again to touch the ground of our lives, the love of God for each and all, and the accountability inherent in receiving that love, the call to be always growing into the new, truer self we have in Christ.