

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...*

The Christian community in Corinth had become very self-absorbed because of its inner turmoil. In his First Letter, Paul called the community to re-center itself in Christ and drop the alliances and personal loyalties that were dividing the community. By the time Paul wrote the Second Letter, the situation had improved. Just prior to today's reading, Paul talks about the "godly grief" that enabled the community to begin healing. Some had become aware that their own behavior had contributed to the situation. This capacity for humble self-awareness is essential for a spiritual community.

Paul had another purpose in writing this Second Letter. The Jerusalem church had fallen on hard times. A relief offering was being collected from other Christian communities, including Gentile ones. Here is a beautiful irony. The Jerusalem church had resisted sharing the Gospel with the non-Jewish world. Paul undertook that work anyway. And now the Gentile communities were coming to the aid of the parent community in Jerusalem!

The Corinthian community started collecting its offering, but bogged down, maybe because it was so preoccupied with its own conflicts. Paul now challenges them to complete the offering and to do so with eager generosity. Paul knew the community's frailty, yet he still held them accountable for their commitment to Christ. No matter how broken, wounded, or fragmented we are or become, accountability remains a crucial part of our life as a Christian community. It can be part of our healing, getting us beyond ourselves. It calls us into greater spiritual maturity, reminding us that the community of Jesus does not exist for its own sake.

Let me tell you about the churches of Macedonia, says Paul. They have suffered a "severe ordeal of affliction." These churches are poor and struggling. If anyone needs help, they do! However, "their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity." How can that be? How can joy and poverty result in overflowing generosity? Simple, says Paul: First, they gave themselves to Christ. They knew who they were as a community of Jesus and were clear about their faith commitment. They understood that their life flowed from God's own generosity in Christ, the pouring out of divine love so that we can be spiritually rich.

Paul wasn't trying to "guilt" the Corinthians into generosity, but he did not hesitate to challenge them. They were better able to give materially than the Macedonians. Yet they were dragging their feet on this offering. It was time to finish what they had started and to find within themselves a desire and eagerness that come from their relationship with Christ. When we are giving ourselves to Christ in whom God's love is lavished upon us, then the life of generosity begins to flow from it.

Paul believed that the Corinthian Christians could be as "eager" as their poorer brothers and sisters in Macedonia. The Macedonians couldn't wait to give. They begged Paul for a chance to contribute to help others (v. 4). Eagerness isn't something you can force. You have to awaken it. You have to touch it within yourself. It is something that wells up within us as we stay in touch with Jesus, as we continue to give ourselves first to him. Then, like the Macedonian Christians, we can't wait to give whatever we can to contribute to life.

Kaye and I spent three weeks in southern Africa in 2000, when we attended the International AIDS Convention in Durban, SA. We met some very poor people who had a generosity of spirit and material things that we seldom saw in churches or our society back home. A young seminarian invited us to his home in one of the Durban townships. His mother graciously served us a simple, yet plentiful meal. To our discomfort, she sat in the tiny kitchen foregoing her own meal while we had ours. There was Cynthia, a woman who had laid down her middle class life to start an orphanage in Durban for abandoned children, in many cases due to HIV/AIDS. There was the openness and joy of the children themselves as they sang for us and took our hands. Such generosity of spirit existed in spite of the effects of European colonialism, HIV/AIDS, corrupt government, and poverty. It is the most powerful and enduring force in the world.

Paul finishes 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. However, he calls for perspective and fairness. God means for us to live so 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 had much did not have too much and those had little did not have too

little. The nature of life as God created it is that if we are all giving generously from what we have, be it little or much, everyone has enough. This is true for us as individuals, as a faith community, as a nation, as a world. Pursuing our self-interest doesn't work. Protecting our assets doesn't work. Only eager generosity arising from divine love works.

If we were all working seriously with this, then we would have all we need for our life and ministries as a community of faith. 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 and in God's love for us, then generosity of giving, whether 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 as we experience it in Christ, then we need not have to worry about having too much or too little.

Paul was not talking about economic theories or political ideas. He was talking about a reality he had seen happen in the lives of faithful people. As I reflected on Paul's words about how these things come together -- poverty, generosity of spirit, eagerness to give, everyone having enough--I remembered with deep joy something we saw on our Africa trip. We spent the first week in the tiny country of Lesotho, which is surrounded by South Africa. We stayed in the capital Maseru with David and Roxi Owen and their children. The Owens were then UCC/Disciples mission partners living and working in Lesotho. One day they took us on a trip up into the mountains. These were barren, desert mountains full of rugged beauty. High in the mountains, we came to the village of Semongkong, then on a short distance to a nearby smaller village. There we visited its tiny school building that could not hold all the children. We enjoyed some time with the children, and afterwards the head teacher took us outside. She pointed to where they hoped to build a new school where all the children could study. There were several piles of stones lying around. We learned that the people of the village had been collecting stones in the hope of one day using them to build their school. I asked David Owen what it would cost for the people to be able to complete their school. About \$12,000, he said. When we returned to Indiana, I talked with the congregation about this project and asked if we could not raise enough money for the people to build the school for their children. We started collecting our own stones. In the church hallway we put a large painting of the Lesotho mountains done by an artist in the church, and in front of it a large box. For each \$25 contribution we place a stone in the box. It was not long before we had collected \$15,000 worth of stones. The village of Phororong now has its school. The spirit of eager, hopeful generosity in that poor village showed us the way, helped us touch an eager generosity in ourselves. We remembered to first give ourselves to Christ and then to one another.

Paul's words helped me look at the importance of our inward journey as the way we work each day with staying close to Jesus and to God's love for us. It is the way we practice "giving ourselves first to the Lord," as Paul said. As we touch God's love for us in Christ through the inward journey of prayer, study, reflection, and inward silence, we open in ourselves the life of eager generosity. That's the wealth Paul is really talking about. Spiritual wealth. The poor Macedonian churches had an abundance of this wealth. The Corinthian church had more material wealth but had lost touch with the spiritual wealth that comes from God's spirit. Paul was not talking about material balance and fairness brought by economic theories. There is something deeper, a spiritual power that can be unleashed in us and through us. It is the generosity and love that are at the heart of life itself. When we are touching that power, that spirit, we will find many opportunities to live each day with eager generosity so that those who have much do not have too much and those who have little do not have too little.