

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Loving God, you are the source of all that is good. You are the source of the world around us, the creator of the trees, the crafter of the sunlight, the maker of the air, the breeze, and the goodness that fills our hearts. You have given us much in this world, and to those whom much is given, much is also required. These are our things to enjoy, and these are the things for all people to enjoy. God, we forget in our own complacency that not everyone is free to enjoy the good gifts of creation while encumbered by great weights, great responsibilities that we often can't even see. God, for the pains in the world that are obvious and for the pains that are hidden, help us to be your hands of healing and care. Let our hearts and hands be focused on the needs of our neighbors instead of our own temporary needs. Ultimately, God, let us give with all of our love, all of our might, and all of our focus. No matter what we have to offer, let us give freely and with "the fullness of love," whether it be giving time, talents, financially, or with the voice of goodness, for so much in our world amounts to the abundance that we have and the needs of others. Help us, in our abundance, to fulfill the needs of others where ever they may reside and whatever needs they have, so that you may be glorified in the balance. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of gifts, abundance, and the courage to use them in a confusing world, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people, in "the genuineness of love" ...

SERMON

If you want to talk about one of my heroes of ministry, it was a popular Atlanta-based pastor who told his large and very rich congregation that God told him he needed to buy a plane. He needed to buy a plane to, as he said, "share the Gospel of Jesus Christ around the world." But he couldn't do with any plane; he needed a \$65 Million Dollar, top-

of-the-line, because if we're gonna preach the Gospel, we have to do it in absolute comfort and in style. Well, he asked his congregation to each give generously, about \$300 apiece, to this important part of ministry. And they heard his message that the more you give, the better you are in God's eyes that they dove right in. And boy, he got his plane so he could preach the Gospel of Christ. Now, isn't that a picture of good giving and faithfulness?

Well, in truth, he's not one of my heroes, and there are much better ways to spend \$65 Million Dollars for God's Kingdom. This story reflects a sad state of affairs in the faith: gifts and faithfulness mean one thing. When talking about gifts, we talk about finances. That is the way our world quantifies what we can offer. Do you want to bring your offerings in 20's, 50's, or 100's, cash or check, perhaps credit card? But we are more than what we earn; we are more than our bank account balance. When we come to God's house, we talk about our hands, our hearts, our passions, and our voices. We talk about what to do with them, our calling, which we have as a body of Christians and individually. We realize that when we assemble in Christ's name, we are more than the sum of our giving; indeed, we are more than the sum of each individual person. We carry a greater calling as the Body of Christ known as Faith United Methodist and even more as the worldwide Body of Christ. The bible does not define faithfulness in dollars; it defines it as faithfully loving. This passage in particular from 2 Corinthians is a calling to give of ourselves in the "genuineness of love," from finances to everything else we contribute. No matter how, what, and how much we give, we must do it in the "genuineness of love." Let us discuss the premise that underlies it all, and from there, be able to discuss what and how we can give.

Let's call this passage from 2 Corinthians what it is simply and bluntly: this is Paul's appeal to raise funds. This would be his way of running a telethon, a stewardship

campaign, or a flier campaign in his day. And who doesn't love a good stewardship campaign or pledge drive? It's almost the calling to feel guilty about what you give and how you should give more. Like any good fundraiser, he has to dredge up a little guilt in his tactics, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary. On the one hand, he is lifting up the generosity of the Macedonian congregation as a frank but loving prod to the Corinthian congregation. It's almost that guilt trip we feel during a stewardship campaign. It would be like comparing our giving rates to that of Grace or Frontier or First United Methodist. "Hey, look at Grace Church! They are doing great with such limited resources!" Verses 1-7, which we didn't read this morning, are a long humble brag about what they have done with what they have. Out of their difficulties and poverty, this congregation has given extravagantly, and Paul just happens to bring in their generosity to nudge the Corinthians. You have to have a lot of trust involved in order to do something like that.

On the other hand, while he may not be using the friendliest method, it is a call to accountability. This is an honest appeal to the congregation to utilize the gifts they have to God's glory and for the benefit of their Christian sisters and brothers. As such, Paul framed it very particularly "I do not say this as a command," said Paul, "but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others." The congregation in Macedonia was earnest and fulfilling in their faithfulness; now it is time for you to be. Paul is not calling them to accountability based on what he thinks they should do; he is calling them to accountability based on what they have already committed to do and what they know they should do. It's a lot more than fulfilling a pledge; it's a way of life.

That accountability is rooted in one central idea: "the genuineness of love." What does genuineness mean to you? It goes against all that is false. You know what a cubic

zirconia is? It's a faux diamond. It's not what it appears to be. When we talk about "the genuineness of love," in other words, this is the congruence, how things line up among what we give, how we give, how much we give, and what's really going on in our hearts. It's about everything when we give. It's in church, and beyond the walls of the church. It's about how you write a check and how you volunteer your time. It's about God and everyone around you. It's how you treat yourself and treat your neighbors. It shapes your attitude; it shapes your mentality. It shapes who we are as peoples, and it is rooted in our central calling. The calling of Christ is much more than finding a place in Christ's presence after we pass. It is a calling to live to the fullest now and to share the fullness Christ gives us. With those things in mind, this passage is an opportunity to sit down and do some soul searching about what it means to give of anything that we do. Friends, how do you give? Do you give out of fear? Do you give out of obligation? Do you give out of necessity? Or do we give out of love for what we are doing? The faithful way is through genuine love.

The comparisons abound as you go through the text, but the main one is the Lord Jesus Christ. "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Easy to draw a lot of assumptions from this, but let's step back. Paul's usage here is more about prestige than it is about tangible riches. "Poor" and "rich" were much more about status and honor than they were about having a lot of things in that age, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary. After all, serving God is not about how we can have more in our bank accounts or the vehicles we want. It's about doing the right thing by the one who created us and loved us from the beginning. It's about us growing into the best people we can be, the people we were created to be, and with that

comes responsibility. If the image of Christ here says nothing else, it is that his giving up of his great place to preach to and among us reflects the absolute of “the genuineness of love.”

And so, we are called to sacrifice just as Christ sacrificed in “the genuineness of love.” When Christ became poor, he came to show us a new way. He gave of himself that we could “be rich” in him. We don’t do that to sound our own horn; we do it so that Christ may be glorified. We trust in his sacrifice, in his “becoming poor,” and as we learned last week, trust requires not just a mental recognition but the movement to do and be. Today, that has a particular definition: giving. So, what do we give? We give freely of our finances, because after all, everything is God’s. We give of our time because God has freely given us life. And we give in other ways, ways that fulfill what we do best.

One of the things that stands in our way is complacency, when we are caught up in how “everything is fine.” We easily forget our place when we are complacent. We forget God when all is well, but then when things suddenly look dark, we appeal to God, as if God can be the “Get out of Jail Free Card.” Complacency is the enemy of Christianity because God’s work goes by the wayside, but God’s work constantly goes on. It’s an easy thing to do when all is going well or as normal we forget the struggles and pains of others who may not be going through the same thing. When we claim the title “Christian,” we do not just claim our lives belonging to God; we take responsibility for all those around the world who do the same. Indeed, this is a calling to use the gifts we have when they are called for with “the genuineness of love” as the guide. As Paul said, “I do not mean that there should be a relief on others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need...” We do this because we have gifts that others need, and others give their gifts for our benefit. As one

wise pastor once said, “No one, no one, no one, no one, no one, no one is a Christian alone.”

That doesn't just mean we gather together as the Body of Christ; we are responsible for one another's well being as the Body of Christ. And so, we must work in times of goodness and sadness for our brothers and sisters by giving the gifts we have to share.

You might be saying that you are limited in what you can do. But we can't let what we cannot do overwhelm what we can do. We can easily look at our bank accounts and other abilities, compare them to another, and say that what we have is worthless, but the point of the passage is not amount but affect. A wise person once said that we can look at the problems of the world and be absolutely overwhelmed. Being overwhelmed can then freeze us and our efforts. We don't know what to do, so we are paralyzed into doing and saying nothing. But what we can do we should do. What sticks deeply in my heart is the recent shooting of nine of God's children at an AME church in Charleston, South Carolina. We can be so overwhelmed by this shooting that we can easily label it as “unspeakable” and leave it there. However, when we live in “the genuineness of love,” we have to put a voice to the difficulty here, offsetting our abundance with a need. Wherever there is pain and struggle, wherever there is injustice, we need to be Christ's people. There is so much we cannot do, but that does not mean we can do nothing. We can nevertheless state the problem and where we need to go from here: this was a racist attack, and the Body of Christ suffers because of it. Racism is not what it was, but it still exists in big and small forms. Even if we cannot solve it, even if we cannot change what happened, we still can give something. We can, at the very least, lend our voices to those who suffer because of this and call it what it is. This was an attack on God's children who suffered only because they had a different color skin, those who had more melanin in their skins than the

attacker. And that attacker was tainted by that sin of racism that taught him that some people are more important than others, and he did something he can never take back. It's not a political issue; it's a human issue. When all else fails, when we are powerless to do nothing else, we can at least lend our voices to truth and care for those needing support.

As Christian peoples, we recognize that all that we have, all that we've had, all that we will ever have, is God's and should be used to the betterment of God's people and God's creation. It starts with finances, in faithfully giving to the places where it can abound with God's love. But it's much more than that. As Christian peoples, we have made a commitment now and always to the growth of God's ministry, and it requires that we give of more than our pocketbooks. We lend our time, our talents, our voices to where they are most needed, to where our abundance can fill needs. It can be small, it can be big, but whatever it is, it must not be given out of sheer obligation or with a grumpy heart. It must always be given with the "genuineness of love" that comes from a life devoted to God. Let us give, not recklessly or impulsively, but with the fullness of love that springs from a life rooted in the goodness of God. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.