

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Text: I Cor. 8:1-12

11/15/09

Introduction

It's hard to keep first things, first. A woman bought a parrot one day to keep her company, but returned it the next day. "The bird doesn't talk," she told the owner.

"Does he have a mirror in the cage?" he asked. "Parrots love mirrors. They see their reflection and they start a conversation." So the woman bought the mirror and left.

The next day she returned; the bird still wasn't talking. "How about a ladder? Parrots love ladders. And a happy parrot is a talkative parrot." The woman bought a ladder and left.

The next day she was back. "Does your parrot have a swing? No? Well, that's the problem. Once he starts swinging, he'll talk up a storm." The woman reluctantly bought the swing and left.

When she walked into the store the next day, she had a tragic look about her. "The parrot died," she said. The pet store owner was shocked.

"I'm so sorry. Tell me, did he ever say a word?" he asked.

"Yes right before he died," the woman replied. "He looked up at me with his little birdie eyes and in a weak voice asked me, "Don't they sell anything to eat at that pet store?"

Sometimes we forget what comes first. And on this Lord's Day, when we come to offer ourselves and our possessions to the service of God, we need to be sure that we've remembered the first thing when it comes to giving.

Do we need ladders, mirrors, or swings to motivate our giving or is there something else that should come first?

1. Please notice right away that our text doesn't say anything about how to run an annual fundraising campaign. No, it's all about seizing a mission opportunity, and facing up to a mission challenge.

The mission opportunity was the impoverished Jewish Christian churches in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Through famine, and perhaps persecution, the churches of those who had given the gospel to these non-Jewish Corinthians were suffering.

So Paul sees an opportunity to address real human need. Hungry, homeless brothers and sisters were in need of the basics. Nothing could be more obvious or necessary.

But beyond this Paul sees a chance to make a witness to one of his deepest convictions: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)*

Through faith in Christ Jesus there is only one church and now was the time not only to talk the talk, but to walk the walk. It was time to witness to the church and to the watching world that God had done something really amazing through Jesus Christ, and nothing was more important than a tangible “dollars and cents” demonstration of that miracle. The gospel was on the line.

But the mission opportunity had run up against a mission challenge: *Last year you were the first not only to give but to have the desire to do so. (I Cor. 8:10)* That was last year. For some reason the Corinthian compassion had cooled.

Honestly, Paul himself may have been part of the reason. If you read First Corinthians you'll discover that Christianity's most famous apostle had managed to offend part of the church. Maybe they quit underwriting Paul's project. That never happens, does it?

Or maybe it was something else. Things change. The business climate in Corinth may have had a downturn. Or maybe other thing simply became higher priorities. That never happens, does it?

Whatever the case mission opportunity meets mission challenge. The church in Jerusalem didn't need the good wishes of the church in Corinth. They needed their money. Just how was that going to happen?

2. Paul has a suggestion. Pay attention to some sharp Macedonian churches. *Out of their most severe trial, their overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (vs. 2)*

The Macedonians were living through something far less than optimal circumstances, and yet, says Paul; they found a way to participate generously in the collection for the churches of Jerusalem.

“But how?” we might wonder. Times were tough. The taste of fear had to be at least on the back of their tongues. Where did they find the wherewithal to contribute to an offering for a people they had most likely never met? Well let’s listen closely because there are some principles here that are as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago.

First things, first. *And they did not do as we expected, but they have themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.*

The first thing the Macedonians did was to see their giving in connection to their relationship with Christ. Their first consideration in giving was not Paul and his requests but God and his mercy.

That’s why we don’t say here’s Westminster’s budget for 2010, please fund it. Yes we have a detailed budget that covers everything from dinner napkins to foreign mission support. We’ll be sure to show it to you in the near future. And we could simply divide it by the number of giving units in the church and suggest an appropriate contribution. But that’s not putting first things first. That’s leaving out the most vital step of sitting before our God and asking, “How is my giving a reflection of my relationship with you?” I hope you can see in the way we’ve approached stewardship in the last few years that we are seeking to make stewardship the spiritual question that it really is. It’s no accident that today, the day when we talk most forthrightly about money, is called Consecration Sunday, when means the act of giving ourselves to God.

And then Paul says, *“They gave themselves to us.”* They trusted that their leaders would spend their funds in a faithful God honoring way. I can assure you that your Elders are faithfully struggling with right budget for 2010. We are attempting to be faithful and frugal; to establish priorities and not simply do what we did last year, just because it’s easier that way. Your Elders are mindful of the challenges of the present day. They are equally mindful of the mission of this congregation, the reason we exist. Pray for your leaders that we will exhibit the right proportion of practicality and risk as we seek God’s guidance for the year ahead.

These past few weeks we've heard from a few sharp Macedonians who I've asked to stand before this congregation and share something of the joy and struggle of giving to the mission of God. I'm grateful for their witness. They encourage me as I hope they have encouraged you. ...*they gave themselves first to the Lord, and then to us...* What a simple and profound way to understand what Christian giving is all about.

3. Let's look a little more at this "first things first" principle for giving. How does it work? How does it become operative in my life?

We need to do something more than simply copy the Macedonians. A good example will only get you so far. We need to grab hold of what they had obviously taken hold of so firmly. Paul writes of this deeper motivation:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich (vs.9).

Generous giving springs from the experience of having received generous gifts ourselves. The Christ whom we worship is above all a giver. To even be a Christian we have to receive his gift to us. And that gift is nothing less than the "grace of God." Just how valuable, how costly, is that grace? It is poured out upon us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It comes through a God who emptied himself the glory of heaven by taking on our human flesh and sharing the pain and trials of our life so that we could one day share in the glory of his.

Grace is the gift that allows God's story to become the story of our lives. And it is through receiving God's grace, that God's giving becomes the pattern for our giving. Paul can write in verse 1 of our text:

And now brothers, we want you to know about the grace God has given the Macedonian churches.

Not simply the forgiveness of their sins, or the promise of eternal life, but the grace that made the giving of God the story of *their* lives. It can do the same for us. We become the conduits of God's grace-giving in this life. To be loved by Jesus is to discover that money and mercy are more closely related than most folks think they are.

If you would be generous, love God. More importantly be absolutely convinced that you are loved by him.

4. So what shall we do? First things first. Let's hold tightly to God's love for us in this present day regardless of our circumstances. And then let's make known our intention to give.

Grace overflows! Look at what happened to those Macedonians who kept first things first. Paul writes:

"Entirely on their own they pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." (vs. 4) It wasn't coercion. It wasn't guilt. It was people who had been given a gift absolutely insisting that they be allowed to give one. No one was going to leave *them* out of the collection.

Some of Paul's most freeing words in Scripture belong right here:

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. (vs.12)

If you are giving yourself to Christ first and consistently, you will give the church what you need to give, you will find joy in it, and it will be acceptable in God's sight.

The answer to the question of how much money Westminster Presbyterian Church needs is first and foremost what the grace of God has put in the hands and hearts of its people to give.

A few years a Christian scholar was in Nanjing, China for a meeting of the China Christian Council. On Sunday they visited various churches in the city, and an older Chinese woman from Los Angeles chose to visit a poor church across the river from the city, made up of about 900 farmers.

They wanted to hear a word from their sister from the states so Mrs. Chang brought greetings. She told how the Lord had added many to their church and how they were building a large addition. She offered them a word of blessing and then took her seat.

At the close of worship she was called back to the front. The pastor said her words had thrilled their hearts. They wanted her to have the morning offering which amounted to about \$140.

The American church didn't need the money. But poor church needed to give it. *...their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*

And so it is with people who keep first things, first.

Conclusion

At this time I'd like to invite our ushers to come forward and distribute the Estimate of Giving cards for 2010. Each household giving unit needs one.

Let me make a few comments while they are doing this. First, if you are visitor please don't be afraid. This is something our congregation does once a year. You're welcome to stay and share in the picnic which will immediately follow this service.

If you are a member and don't want complete a card, we don't want you to feel pressured to do so. I hope you'll consider it, but it's voluntary.

When we leave the sanctuary, we'll go directly to the Fellowship Center for our Fall Celebration Picnic. The food is being prepared right now so please don't wait to be served and to begin eating. We'll ask a blessing in just a moment for the meal.

Please take out your card and look at it with me for just a moment. (read card)

The card is designed to help us "step up in our giving".....Also would you help us by printing your full address on the card?

After we pray together take whatever time you need to meditate and complete your card. When you are done please move quietly to the front of the church and place it on the communion table as your act of dedication.

We usually close our worship services with an "Amen." Today you are saying silently as you place your card on the table as an act of consecration.

When you are done please leave silently and head over to the Fellowship Center for the picnic.

Let us pray...