

SERMON SERIES: "20/20 Vision"
SERMON TITLE: "The Vision of Generosity"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 3, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin my sermon today by saying "Thank you" again to all of you who made worship happen last Sunday when I was away. Special thanks to David Barron who is so willing and able to fulfill the role of worship host. It's a bit risky for a pastor to be gone in the middle of a stewardship campaign. But I understand that stewardship speaker Lucki Latimer motivated you with an impressive magic trick last Sunday. And I heard that guest preacher Rev. Olga Hard capably carried on our "20/20 Vision" stewardship theme by speaking about "The Vision of Commitment."

You may recall that, in the weeks prior, we had talked about "The Vision of a Faithful Past," "The Vision of a Strong Present," and "The Vision of Future Possibilities." But all those visions aren't worth much unless we're committed to keeping the vision alive. And thus, today, we have come to "The Vision of Generosity." My hope and prayer is that you have already applied a great deal of generosity in filling out your 20/20 pledge cards and all that's left is placing them in the basket up here. But, just in case you are still wavering or need a little more assurance that your generosity is important, I invite you to consider our scripture reading from Second Corinthians. Let's see what the Apostle Paul wrote about the vision of generosity.

1—GOD'S GENEROSITY TO US

In these verses, we see first of all that our generosity is motivated by God's generosity to us. In verse one, Paul refers to "the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia." Then in verse nine, Paul mentions "the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for [our] sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty [we] might become rich."

This sentiment is echoed throughout scripture. In John 10:10, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” In First John 4:19, we are told that “we love because [God] first loved us.” And we all know John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Over and over again the Bible tells us that our love, our kindness, and our generosity is made possible because God first reached out to us in merciful love and abundant blessings. Just as God was the first being from whom all other creatures were generated, and Jesus was the Son through whom salvation was offered to the whole world, so God continues century after century, and day after day, to meet our needs and bless our spirits with God’s generosity to us.

2—THE GENEROSITY OF OTHERS BEFORE US

Of course, God isn’t the only one who has been generous to us and before us. The historical context of Paul’s letter was that God had laid on Paul’s heart a generous vision to raise money for the Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering from famine and poverty. Thus, in 2 Corinthians, chapter eight, we see Paul writing about the Macedonian churches which had already generously and voluntarily begged for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints, even though they, themselves, were suffering too. Paul indicates that the Macedonian Christians gave according to their means and sometimes even beyond their means, so great was their generosity.

Likewise, today, we know that others have been generous to us and before us. This lovely church wouldn’t stand here today if it weren’t for a long history of generous Methodists who supported ministry in downtown Ogden for 138 years and raised money to construct this house of God, where we’ve worshiped for another 11 years. But I’m not referring only to those generous local contributors who once sat in our pews. I’m also thinking of those people in the mid-1800s who lived back east, who not only supported their own churches there, but gave extra and sacrificially so that a Methodist mission might be established in Utah. If those easterners had cared only about their own families or their most

immediate spiritual community, our congregation might never have been established. But because of their profound generosity to missions, funds were gathered to advance the gospel and the cause of Christ around the country, around the world, and right here in Ogden. We are spiritual beneficiaries of their example of generosity before us.

And each one of us could name many others who have been generous to us and others in inspiring ways. They've fed, clothed, and housed us. They've provided for our health and education. They've mentored us in jobs. In some cases, they've even provided for us in their wills at the time of their deaths. With great frequency, we see generous people giving their time, talents, and treasure to make the world a better place. The vision of their generosity inspires us.

3—THE CALL FOR OUR GENEROSITY

Where this is all leading, of course, is to the call for us to join in this vision of generosity. As Paul wrote this eighth chapter of 2 Corinthians, he didn't just tell about the generosity of the Macedonian churches. He called on the Christians at Corinth to step up to that challenge as well. In verse seven, Paul praised the Corinthians for excelling "in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, [and] in utmost eagerness." But now it was time for them to excel in one more thing: in this "generous undertaking."

Apparently, there had been talk about this offering before. In verse 10, Paul mentions that "last year" some of the Corinthians had started to do something, or at least they had desired to do something for this cause. But they hadn't yet followed through. So now was the time to move from good thoughts to good action.

Of course, for the Corinthians—just like for us—that's where the rubber hits the road, right? When you actually do something, that's when you have to work out the details. That's when you start to feel the pressure. And isn't that when even our best intentions start to get squeamish? If you read

between the lines of verses 12 through 15, you can see Paul trying to respond to some of those concerns that might have been rising among the Corinthian Christians.

Someone was wondering, “Why is he asking us to give *so much*?” And Paul was responding, “Look, I’m not asking you to give what you don’t have. I’m asking you to give eagerly according to what you do have—for that’s when the gift is acceptable.”

Someone else was wondering, “Why is Paul asking us to give *to those people* so far away in Jerusalem? Doesn’t he realize we have our own expenses right here in Corinth?” And Paul was responding, “I don’t mean that things should get out of balance. What I mean is that the Christians in Jerusalem are starving, and you have abundant resources right now. Someday that situation may turn around, and they will be able to help you.”

As Paul had written to the Corinthians in his first letter, chapter 12, we’re all parts of the same body of Christ. And every part is important. Every part has gifts and graces and talents and treasures with which it needs to be generous, in order for the whole body of Christ to function and thrive. That’s what it means to be in community. That’s what it means to be a church. When we each cheerfully and graciously do our part, that’s when we fulfill the vision of generosity.

CONCLUSION

Because talk about money and giving to the church can feel stressful, I thought it might be good for us to laugh a little. So here are a couple jokes I found.

This one is for those of you who think you don’t have much money to give:

A burglar entered a house in the middle of the night. He was interrupted when the owner awoke. Drawing his gun, the burglar said, “Don’t move or I’ll shoot. I’m hunting for your money.”

“Let me turn on the light,” replied the victim, “and I’ll hunt with you.”¹

And this one is for those of you who are well-acquainted with the financing of a church:

The strongman at a circus sideshow demonstrated his power before a large audience. Toward the end, he squeezed the juice from a lemon between his hands. He

then said to the audience, "I will offer \$200 to anyone in the audience who can squeeze another drop from this lemon."

A slight, [elderly] man came forward, picked up the lemon, strained hard, and [actually] managed to get a drop. The strongman, amazed, paid the man [the \$200] and asked, "[What's] the secret of your strength?"

"Practice. I was the treasurer of the [United] Methodist Church for thirty-two years."²

Well, I can verify that our Finance Committee and other church leaders do squeeze every penny that comes through our offerings. We do our very best to be frugal and trustworthy stewards of your contributions. So, whether you need to employ a burglar (or a program like Financial Peace University) to help you find and free up money you didn't know you had, or you have an abundant supply in your bank accounts, we all can be sure that our investments in the ministries of the church are very needed and well used.

That leaves us with today's question. "Will we now rise to the challenge?" "Will we share in the ministry?" "Will we recognize and be inspired by the generosity already demonstrated by God and others before us?" "Will we, too, eagerly give from our abundance of blessings?" As 2020 approaches, I pray that we will all see ourselves participating in the vision of generosity.

¹Eric W. Johnson, ed., *A Treasury of Humor* (Ivy Books: New York, 1989), p. 189.

²Johnson, pp. 192f.