

“Boasts Made About You”**Scripture****2 Corinthians 8:1-24** (*The Message*)

¹Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province. ²Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. ³I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could - far more than they could afford! - ⁴pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians. ⁵This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives. ⁶That's what prompted us to ask Titus to bring the relief offering to your attention, so that what was so well begun could be finished up.

⁷You do so well in so many things - you trust God, you're articulate, you're insightful, you're passionate, you love us - now, do your best in this, too. ⁸I'm not trying to order you around against your will. But by bringing in the Macedonians' enthusiasm as a stimulus to your love, I am hoping to bring the best out of you. ⁹You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us - in one stroke he became poor and we became rich. ¹⁰So here's what I think: The best thing you can do right now is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale. ¹¹Your heart's been in the right place all along. You've got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it. ¹²Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can't. The heart regulates the hands. ¹³This isn't so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you're shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, ¹⁴your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end you come out even. ¹⁵As it is written, Nothing left over to the one with the most, Nothing lacking to the one with the least.

¹⁶I thank God for giving Titus the same devoted concern for you that I have. ¹⁷He was most considerate of how we felt, but his eagerness to go to you and help out with this relief offering is his own idea. ¹⁸We're sending a companion along with him, someone very popular in the churches for his preaching of the Message. ¹⁹But there's far more to him than popularity. He's rock-solid trustworthy. The churches handpicked him to go with us as we travel about doing this work of sharing God's gifts to honor God as well as we can, ²⁰taking every precaution against scandal. ²¹We're being as careful in our reputation with the public as in our reputation with God. ²²That's why we're sending another trusted friend along. He's proved his dependability many times over, and carries on as energetically as the

day he started. He's heard much about you, and liked what he's heard - so much so that he can't wait to get there. ²³I don't need to say anything further about Titus. We've been close associates in this work of serving you for a long time. The brothers who travel with him are delegates from churches, a real credit to Christ. ²⁴Show them what you're made of, the love I've been talking up in the churches. Let them see it for themselves!

Scripture

2 Corinthians 8:1-24 (NRSV)

¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.

⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. ⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

¹⁶But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have. ¹⁷For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord. ¹⁸With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news; ¹⁹and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill. ²⁰We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, ²¹for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others. ²²And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in

you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. ²⁴Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you

Scripture

Matthew 5:8 (NRSV)

"Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.

Wise old professor and Christian writer, Martin Marty wrote recently that he thinks the word, "generosity," needs to have a place in our theological dictionaries. It would fit right between "Generation Eternal" and "Genevan Catechism," this man who knows both such terms all too well. Surprising, up until now, it is illogically missing.

The word "stewardship" is in the theological dictionary. We've heard that defined again and again –usually in the fall and from the pastor and our minute for mission speakers. If you don't remember what it is, it goes something like this. At a school function, one man said to another: "I've been racking my brain, but I can't quite place you. You look very much like somebody I have seen a lot - and for some reason I get the feeling you're somebody I don't LIKE - but I can't remember why. Isn't that strange?" "There's nothing strange about it," said the other man. "For the last two years I've passed you the collection plate in church!"

Generosity is a better word for the theological dictionary, says Martin Marty. Stewardship is a fine word when it's not used so predictably at church. When a business person uses the word, it has a nobility to it: "We are stewards of our stock holders' investments." If a politician uses it, it is an expansive word: "We must regain a stewardship of our environment in order to pass along a robust planet to the generations who will follow us." I even like the word, stewardship used in church, but in a way like this: "we are stewards of our Christian tradition, the truth and practices of generations of Christians still have much to pass along to the benefit of we are new to the faith."

Stewardship as fundraising seems like an alumni association letter in the mail or the public radio fall campaign, which leaves me turning the dial to music so I don't have to listen to how many more callers are still needed to meet the hour's goal. But generosity sounds inviting, wholesome, right and good. What was it that Robert Fulgham reminded us about learning all that we needed in kindergarten? "Don't hit people. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Take a nap every afternoon. Share." That's what generosity is about. We can and we ought to teach generosity to our kids. Stewardship – does it seem a bit contrived?

Our beatitude, our blessing for the day gets right at generosity, I think: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." In the ancient world, the eye wasn't understood to reflect light, but to be a window for it, a source of it, even. A little later in his Sermon on the Mount, which the beatitudes begin, Jesus says that "if your eye is sound then your whole body will be full of light." His intention there is to speak of an integrity between soul and action. If who you are matches what you do in a way that is whole and good, then you have well-being, your

whole self is full of light. This is what Jesus is getting at in the earlier beatitude, that if we have a pure heart the promise is to see God.

And God is wonderful. Psalm 24 is behind Jesus' reference to having a pure heart. It starts by saying that "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it, for God has founded it on the seas and established on the rivers." In other words, the Psalm begins with a description of the abundant, full, beautiful and ever-giving earth as reflecting the character of the God we worship. Then appropriately, the Psalm then moves us to picture a sanctuary. It is atop a holy hill. And the Psalmist asks in humility, who can ascend into God's holy place? "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts." They are blessed to worship God and to give a witness of a God who is exuberantly generous. The integrity within us matches and is a gift of the God who made us and who loves us.

This is the theme also in our long reading from 2 Corinthians. Paul is taking up a collection in the several churches he began in Greece, so that they may aid the poorer Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He reminds them that Jesus was poor, which is actually the only reference to Jesus' poverty in the Bible, with the exception being Luke's description of the holy family at the manger in Bethlehem. "By his poverty, you became rich," Paul writes in soliciting a generous offering from the Christians in Corinth.

Yet, Paul is not only writing about Jesus being poor. He is describing the Jewish believers in Jerusalem as being poor in things, but having extended their rich faith to the Greeks in Corinth. "You owe them," Paul is saying. "They were the ones who preserved and gave the good news about Jesus and his life to the Christians in the world way beyond Israel."

I know how this is. The times I have felt most generous and when my body was as full of light as my eyes were bright, have come in two manners. In the first, when I feel secure and sense that all is right with the world, it is easy to celebrate that by sharing it back. But the second instance is more interesting.

In a mission trip to Honduras, I stayed in a village called Las Lajas, where a group of us were helping rebuild homes following the devastation of Hurricane Mitch. We worked side-by-side with the people there. They were actually amazingly generous with us, surprised and delighted that we would come all that way to stay with them and lend a hand.

I made friends with a man named Pablo, with whom I worked setting foundations and laying concrete block. My elementary Spanish and willingness to initiate a conversation with him and some of the other men of the village allowed me to begin a fledgling friendship. And as we built his one room house for his family of five, he asked me about my home in the United States. My house at the time had a value of a bit under \$200,000, not extravagant by our standards, to be sure, but by comparison with Pablo's home, it was a palace. The difference between the two made it impossible for me to even begin to tell him, so I changed the subject. But by the time I left, as did every other member of our party, we gave everything we had, returning to our homes without money or anything left in our suitcases. And we did it not because we felt sorry for these new friends, but because we felt a kindred connection with them. They were

giving to us, everything they could. Our way of sharing in that exuberant generosity was to begin to do the same.

So, it's stewardship time in the church. The pledge cards have been mailed out to our homes, we are encouraging one another to support the ministry of this church through minutes for mission, and we have set a date to return our pledge cards remembering our calls from God to tithe, to give with cheerfulness and so that the Session can set a budget for the coming year. Well and good. But more important than that, I encourage you to add the word generosity to your theological dictionary. Slide it in between pages with words defined like faithful and forgiven before it and grace and gregariousness following it. Let your eye be sound so that your whole body can be full of light. Let yourself be blessed as one who is pure in heart, coming to worship an exuberantly generous God, who invites us to see his divine glory as we share generously with one another. Amen.