

I don't know how other people go about the process of selecting texts for preaching. Even when I use the Lectionary there is usually more good material than I can cover within the space of your patience. So what I typically do is to read the potential texts, several times, and let the Holy Spirit decide for me what the message for a particular day should be. When I first started using this technique it took a bit of faith to trust that the spirit would point me to a message, any message. But the more I've experienced that moment of Ah-Hah, that moment when the text and the message are suddenly obvious; the more I've come to anticipate it, even look forward to it.

So it was that I began to prepare for this morning by looking through a whole week's worth of Year-of-the-Bible readings trying to find that one passage that would speak to me, and through me to you.

Those of you who have been keeping up with your Y-o-t-B readings this week have read some very interesting texts. You've had more than an adequate allowance of King David stories. And you've suffered along with the church at Corinth as Paul's writing sounded more like a parent than an apostle. (What were those people doing that caused Paul to be so, well, stern?) Almost any selection from this week's readings would have made for great preaching. So I was more than a little surprised to find myself focusing on this text from the eighth chapter of Second Corinthians. I didn't intend to write a "Stewardship Sermon." I was hoping I'd get to admonish you to stop bathing on your rooftops. I was hoping I'd get to talk about David dancing before the Ark to as it was brought into Jerusalem or the conflict that marked every step of his troubled and blessed reign. I even thought about Paul's call to holiness in Second Corinthians chapter 6. No, I didn't intend to write a "Stewardship Sermon." The spirit had other ideas. So here we are, in the eighth chapter of Second Corinthians as Paul takes a break from being a parent and spends a few verses being the chair of the Finance committee. But before we can talk about money we need to spend some time thinking about what it is that's driving Paul in this chapter.

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Here are a few thoughts:

☩ First, It's about practical Christianity

- It's important to remember that Paul never sat down to "write theology". He didn't think about the high and lofty ideals of religion, and then write books about his conclusions. His theology was very practical. He answered questions. He responded to news he had received. He gave practical advice on living a Christ centered, Christ filled life.
  - This is a model for us. Yes, we need to be concerned about worship and outreach and education – those things that make us "church". But we can't ignore the practical matters as well. Whether it's painting or roofing or mowing the lawn, growing pumpkins or supporting mission work around the world and in our back yard, it is the practical side of our church that makes us an effective witness to Christ's love and grace. We're pretty good at both sides of the coin. We worship well and have a strong education program. We take care of our facility and support the mission and outreach efforts of the church, both near and far. But what more can we do?
  - One of the great things about standing here, in the pulpit, is that I don't have to actually come up with answers. If I can make you think, maybe pique your interest, get you talking – that's enough. So talk among yourselves. I'll give you a topic. "How can be a better, more effective witness to our valley and to the world?" Not now, wait till coffee hour.
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- ✦ Next, it's about Paul's love for us, all of us, then and now.
- Paul isn't my favorite Biblical writer. He's hard to read. It's often difficult to follow what he is saying. He can be more than a little cantankerous. But when he hits one out of the park, you sit up and take notice. So it is with our text for today. In his call to participate in the raising of funds for the church in Jerusalem he presents an argument that speaks both to their need to receive and to our need to give. He is speaking not only to the church in Corinth. He is also speaking directly to us.
  - Because the truth of the matter is this; We get what we give. In all of life, both in here and out there, it is only when we are fully participating, fully aware, fully engaged that we enjoy the benefits of all that life has to offer. Our mission committee is seeking to identify all the areas where we are engaged – even outside of Southminster – in helping others and improving life in our community. I'm sure that as they talk to us and gather this information they will hear over and over again comments like; 'I thought I was doing this to help someone else, but what I discovered was that I was much more blessed by them.' That's the way of it. It is through giving that we receive. It is through sharing the love of God that we receive God's love ten-fold. Paul knows this. In the very next chapter he will write; "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." It's a theme we will see time and again this year, as we read his letters to other first century churches; or are they letters to us?
- ✦ Finally, it's about Paul's love of church
- As we read through Paul's letters this year, one thing that will be evident is his great concern for all the churches he planted, and for all of his colleagues riding the circuit around the ancient near east. There is no doubt that their accomplishments were his accomplishments; their sufferings were his sufferings; their shortcomings were his shortcomings.
  - So it is that we see quite a bit of pain in Second Corinthians. Paul doesn't pull any punches. He is upset and disappointed with what he has seen and heard. But, like a parent, he won't even think about giving up on this fledgling church in the middle of cosmopolitan Greece. He understands, and he calls us to understand, that even though we are human, even though we do church as humans – subject to all the foibles you'd expect whenever two or more of us get together, we are still Christ's church. When we remember to ask; the Spirit is there, ready to help us, guide us, challenge us, give us confidence, strength and assurance in our work.
  - Paul's love of Church is also evident in his concern for the Jerusalem church. This year we will often see Paul pressing his correspondents to donate to "the saints in Jerusalem". Even at this early stage in the development of Christianity Paul knew that a strong central authority was critical to the successful growth and administration of the church. We know this too. Sometimes we don't like it. Paul certainly had his episodes of conflict with the Jerusalem elders. But he, and we, will usually admit that a central authority is important; and that supporting that organization is part of our calling as members of this community of faith.
  - So Paul never neglected the opportunity to remind the members of an individual church of their commitment to the work of the larger body; supporting– James, Peter, John and the other church leaders who labored in Louisville. What do you suppose the money was used for? Did they have a facility, a sanctuary, offices, a Cana room to support? Not likely. Did they have outside employment to support them in their church work? Also not likely. What other financial needs did they have? Paul often makes it sound like they are in desperate straits. We aren't given the details, but we are assured, often, that
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the support was very much needed, even expected. For Paul, that was an important part of being church.

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So, too, it is for us today. So we, like Paul ask for money. We remind each other that the work here needs our support, the church needs our support, God needs our support.

Don't get me wrong. God's will will be done with or without us. What God needs is for us to experience the joy of participating in God's work. So ultimately this isn't about God; it's about us, and how much we will be blessed by supporting the mission and ministry of God's church.

At its heart that was the message from Paul to the church at Corinth. It is also the message for us.

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Having said all that, there's something you need to understand about me. I don't ask people for money. It's not something that I am able to do. Whenever I have tried, it has been a source of great anxiety and stress. Whenever I have tried I have failed, consistently, miserably. I know people who can do it, and do it well – Clasp your right hand warmly while extracting one more "Jefferson" from your wallet. I have great respect for these people, all the more because they can do something I can't.

Maybe Paul had the same problem. Chapter 10 of Second Corinthians notwithstanding, I like to think he did. Maybe the only way he could ask for money was through a letter. Maybe I should take the lead from Paul.

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Randy, a lowly CLP and servant of the Lord, to the church in Boise called Southminster. Grace and peace to you in the name of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am, in all ways, encouraged by the work the spirit is doing through you and in your midst. You are a warm and welcoming community of faith, greeting friend and newcomer alike, helping those in need with food and fuel and bundles of school supplies and this year, even pumpkins. You meet your neighbors and visit those in your midst who are shut-in. Your joy at gathering together for meals is always in evidence and you are careful to make sure that nobody every goes away hungry. You take great joy in studying the Holy Scriptures and you take great pride in your facility and its outward appearance. In short, you are a healthy and vibrant community of faith seeking to be God's people, seeking to follow where the spirit leads.

In this I commend you

I commend you also for the many ways you work as individuals to make your city a better place to live, helping through many and varied organizations to improve the lives and the futures of those around you.

We would remind you, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that is in evidence throughout the world, in places like Haiti and the Philippines. In Africa and Parma, in China and

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Meridian, the spirit is doing amazing work calling new brothers and sisters to faith. And as the spirit is calling, those who are called to salvation are responding. With joy they offer praises to God and with equal joy they offer such gifts as they can, even out of their extreme poverty. For as the internet will testify, they voluntarily give according to their means, even beyond their means, glad for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of Christ.

Now 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 just such a generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For 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. And in this matter I am giving my advice: It is for you to follow his example, pouring out yourselves; so that by enriching others you may also become ever more blessed receiving not only rewards innumerable in this life, but also in the life to come.

For He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

So I charge you, therefore, be generous in your pledge, that the blessings of the Lord may be abundant in your life.

And in all things, support each other, lift each other up, challenge each other to keep to the task set before us all – that we may show forth the love and the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen

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