

**THE ENGINE OF THE EARLY CHURCH; 2 CORINTHIANS 8:7-15; JUNE 28, 2015;
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I had planned to talk today about the purpose of Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth – raising money for mission. But in light of the Supreme Court's historic decisions last week on health care and same-sex marriage as well as the funeral services held for those killed in the Charleston church shooting these issues have more urgency and call for our attention as a faith community.

In fact, Paul's letter is well suited to serve as a lens through which we can see the events of the past week *and* consider what we are called to do.

Today's text solicits the financial commitment from the church in Corinth for the poor and suffering in Jerusalem. Paul's appeal hinges on the Corinthians' experience of God's abundance expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The apostle is saying since God gave so much to the Christians in Corinth through his son, who was willing to become poor so that they might become rich, they, then are called to follow through with what they have already said is the desire of their hearts – to likewise be generous to those in need.

It is a simple argument: giving begets giving. But God's giving is not just ordinary giving. God's giving to us, in Jesus, is the ultimate giving of a life. This is not just a gift for those who deserve it. It is the ultimate gift for those who do not deserve it: including the disciples who ran from supporting their teacher, the religious leaders who prosecuted the charges against him, the fair weather friends and by-standers who did nothing to intervene – except one. God's gift in the person of Jesus would eventually prove to be a gift even to the state whose only argument against him, as Pilate said, was based on the fear of losing the allegiance of the people.

God's giving in Jesus has inspired the same, brave, heroic giving of Jesus' followers: giving with abandon, giving motivated by profound gratitude, giving marked by the desire to pass along this undeserved, unsolicited grace.

It is this un-restrained, un-conditional giving that was the engine of the early church and has propelled it in every generation.

There would be no way to count or inventory all of the gifts that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has inspired over the centuries, but there are the well-known moments of history that mark the sacrifice of his followers:

the early martyrs who gave their brave witness to Christ rather than deny their allegiance to him and worship Caesar; the first outposts of mission for orphans, widows, travelers, the sick, and outcast; and the first hospitals and schools founded in Europe centuries ago, then across this nation.

We should also add to the list, the gift of justice; the centers and movements for justice from the early church through the middle ages and into our own time. In fact, I am not sure we can separate things like health care, education, food, shelter and clothing from justice which Webster defines as: what is "fair" or "right" and, since the rise of democracy, has been widened to include human rights.

When Paul was raising money for the poor and suffering of Jerusalem it was a question of fairness – he was asking the Corinthians who were rich to alleviate the poverty of others; but he was also saying this would enable the Corinthians to “find balance” in their lives, not by starving themselves, but by sharing their wealth.

In the ancient world, giving was considered a sign of one’s beneficence or character; a sign of the spiritual integrity and health of one’s soul. Yet, later in history, when giving became “charitable,” the emphasis shifted from the giver to the recipient. The objective of charitable giving was less to become a better person than to be helpful to others in need. More recently, “charity” has been replaced by “professional philanthropy,” which is not so much about individual redemption, as it was in the ancient world, but social reconstruction. The goal is not to deepen personal character or help the needy as much as it is to make a society where failure is minimized and good is maximized as much as possible.

The evolution of giving has been from a personal exercise of individual virtue to an impersonal expression of public concern. Of course, *all of this giving*, in its various cultural meanings, has been for the good. But we may, nevertheless, have lost some of the original intent and purpose and, therefore, reason for pursuing a generous life.

For a faith community considering a first century text asking for money it is important to understand these cultural nuances, for when we do, we see how relevant Paul’s words are for a twenty-first century church. Not only is his appeal for financial gifts widened to include work for justice but it also expands the impact of giving to include the spiritual health and well being and of the givers.

Paul’s argument is that giving begets giving and God’s unconditional giving begets our giving in kind. It is interesting that Paul does not *command* the Corinthians to make their gift, as he could have done given his status as “apostle,” rather he acknowledges that they have already expressed their desire to make a gift which he now encourages them to follow through on.

It is a compelling appeal Paul makes because we are born with a moral compass, we know when we have balance in our lives and when we don’t; we know when we are generous and when we aren’t.

While Paul makes his appeal for giving money, my point this morning is that his argument can be used for an appeal to work for justice.

When there is injustice that affects others but not us there is imbalance. Just as Paul was saying to the Corinthians, ‘you have everything you need, the poor in Jerusalem have very little of what they need; show that the generosity of God is alive in you by sharing with them’, we can easily imagine him saying the same thing for those who suffer injustice.

Whether we are talking about the need for material necessities or fair treatment for people denied basic rights makes little difference to Paul’s logic. The message today is this: give to others as we have been given to by God in Jesus; thus helping someone else and preserving our own character and integrity.

Since Dylann Roof slayed eight members of a black church participating with their pastor in a bible study a week ago, many across the land have been awakening again to the systemic imbalance that exists for black Americans and disadvantages people because of the color of their skin and/or their socio-economic status.

A good place to start eliminating this imbalance is with the Confederate battle flag that flies over the city where the black pastor and church members were slain; the flag also appears as an official emblem from license plates to municipal and school seals in many southern states.

All attempts to date have failed to bring down the flag that stood for the fight to preserve slavery. But there are also streets and highways, monuments and buildings named after the generals who waged that battle. These too must be removed as legitimate landmarks throughout the south and relegated to a dark chapter of our past.

Those flags, street names and monuments are largely symbolic, yet they perpetuate a culture of racial hatred and violence that along with white supremacist and anti-government ideology and easy access to guns spawns hate crimes and terrorism.

Other, real obstacles stand in the way of black Americans and those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. *Things like* affordable health care – only last week exonerated and finally established after repeated attempts to be dismantled; *things like* a living wage which is still denied by minimum wage standards that keep persons in poverty or just above poverty while many corporate executives take home wealth disproportionate to anything previously known; *things like* broken school systems which trap children in a cycle of dropping out and under achievement often leading to incarceration. Taken together these issues represent institutional barriers to opportunity for poor, black Americans that are, for most, insurmountable.

Yet it feels like there is a shift taking place, like the shift that took place regarding equal rights for LGBTQ people culminating in the landmark Supreme Court ruling last week.

While the 1960s represented a time when vast social change occurred with highly visible leaders and justice movements, since then, the pendulum for social action and social justice has swung the other way –

Religious leaders and activists who were on vanguard of change in the 1960s have been absent from the national scene; many of the issues of equal rights for women, blacks, LGBTQ people have been put on hold – until recently.

Something is stirring in the national psyche; the collective conscience is calling for justice once again. The trend of disproportionate wealth and a disappearing middle class combined with a mean-spirited political agenda has created a social/political tinderbox ripe for change. The response to the shooting in Charleston last week and the Supreme Court victories for health care and same sex marriage have given a sense of immediacy, urgency and positive momentum that has been lacking.

Paul's appeal to alleviate the needs of those who suffer comes at a good time. I have little doubt that were he among us today he would be writing to the Mainline and Presbyterian churches of North America; calling upon us, as he called upon the Corinthians, to step in and step up our giving, calling upon us to increase our efforts to correct the social, political and economic imbalances that cause so much suffering in this nation.

It is an ideal moment for the church to speak to a self-absorbed culture with a short memory; it is an ideal time to call for sacrifice from those who have much for those who have little.

What Christians bring to the table is the experience of a God who has given to them with abandon; a God whose son was the embodiment of divine grace and generosity. The legacy and witness of our spiritual ancestors expects nothing less from us.

The aim of the perpetrator in Charleston was to start a new Civil War, it is ironic as the President and everyone else has pointed out that the opposite has happened; his act has been the catalyst for a new movement of social justice to eradicate the culture of hatred and violence that obsessed him.

Sending young people to the northern most reaches of Appalachian poverty, baptizing Helena in the name of the God of generosity and justice, and engaging new opportunities, here in one of the most segregated cities of America, to tear down the walls that divide the human family is exactly what we are called to do. Amen.