

July 1, 2018
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
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“What We Have”

Good morning! Those of you who taught or prepared for Bible School the week before last may be able to recall the memory verse for Day 1: that all scripture is given by inspiration of God. That means, of course, that everything in the Bible is a gift. But sometimes, at least for me, that gift is especially well-timed and welcome, as was the case with our text this morning from 2 Corinthians. It's about encouragement and abundance and generosity, which are pretty good things to talk about any time, but things I especially wanted to talk about today. I was delighted to discover that this was one of the lectionary texts for this Sunday.

This morning I want to spend some time considering the haves and the have nots. I don't know which of these you identify with most often: for me, and I suspect for many of you, it depends on what we're talking about. If it's vintage cars, I'm a have not; if it's books, I'm definitely a have -- as in have lots and could use more bookshelf storage. Something I think we could all agree on is that you can't give what you don't have. If you come to me wanting a vintage car -- or even the tiniest little part of a vintage car, or even advice about a vintage car -- you'll be out of luck, because I don't have it. The other thing I think we could agree on is that nobody has everything. Why would you even want that? As comedian Steven Wright said, “you can't have everything: where would you put it?”

But somehow I don't think the Apostle Paul is talking about *stuff* in 2 Corinthians 8. And I hope you would also agree that some of the most important stuff we have is not stuff at all. The central verse of this passage for me is verse 12 which says, “For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has -- not according to what one does not have.” What Paul seems to be saying

is that the eagerness to give is a gift in itself; that our willingness to share is in fact determines whether we are the haves or the have nots.

Some of you may be furtively checking the time right now and thinking, Oh no, is this going to be a *stewardship* sermon? Are we going to hear about the church budget in a few minutes? I thought that usually started in September. Fear not: this is not a stewardship sermon, it's a gratitude sermon; but here's the spoiler alert: they're the same thing. This is good news, because what we have to give is what we already have; but we need to be awakened to what we already have, and find a way to recognize and celebrate the things we have which aren't *things*. Additional good news is there is a way to take this inventory -- there are many ways, actually, but there is a method which we're going to practice as a group during the Table Talk following worship. Have I already mentioned that we'd like as many of you as possible to participate? Because without your participation, we might not find out what you have.

I'll say more in the Table Talk, but here's the short version: one of the goals of our Community Ministry Grant is develop relationships in our community. We're going to do that by starting with the relationships we already have -- not to invite your friends to church, I know all your friends already go to church--but to see how the relationships we already have can lead us into mutual ministry with people we don't yet know. Maybe you are already serving someplace Creekside ought to be. We want to know where that is.

The biblical accounts of Paul's missionary journeys -- that's all community ministry. Go into a new town, find out where the synagogue is, see who is hanging out by the river, strike up a conversation, find out what strengths this community has and where the gaps are. Say that shortfall is caring for the widows and orphans - work together with local leaders to create a system of support and care. Of course it takes resources to do that; it begins with resources of willingness -- Paul's word is eagerness -- to assess what you have and acknowledge what other people have and to decide together that it's enough to make a difference.

Now, make no mistake, this passage from 2 Corinthians 8 is a fundraising letter from Paul on behalf of the newly planted churches

in Macedonia. Those churches have experienced the surprising combination of extreme poverty and abundant joy. How does that work? Maybe we need to ask our brothers and sisters in Nigeria and other parts of the developing world who have grown the church from what they have instead of becoming bitter about what they have not. Paul is not trying to conceal giving in a message about Christ; Christ's message was demonstrated in giving -- giving up a place in heaven with God to become human, and then giving up that human life for our sakes. Verse 9 says, "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." Christ did not give us *things* that we didn't earn and don't deserve, Christ gave us grace that we didn't earn and don't deserve. If we cannot share that generosity and grace with others who need it, it's because we can't give what we don't have.

I have had the opportunity to visit with some of you in the past few weeks, to hear what's going on in your lives and to share about ministry at Creekside. I am so grateful for your participation in those conversations: first, because I always learn more about you and your families and things about your involvement at Elkhart City/Creekside which I didn't know -- even after attending church with you for more than 20 years. Second, I am struck by the wealth of history and memory which many of you have: friendships which have lasted for decades or more, activities within and outside of this church which have enriched your lives and shaped your families. And finally, the richness of your care and your prayers for me; it is both humbling and heartening. My mother and brother were here visiting last Sunday, and as we were driving home from church, rather than critiquing my sermon -- a favorite Eller post-game activity -- they both commented on how many of you came up to them said that you really appreciate me being your pastor. They seemed a little surprised by that. I assured them that not only are you a pretty positive group generally, that the people who are unhappy would be unlikely to seek them out.

I want to remind you again of what Paul writes in verse 12, and the words which he uses a couple times in verse 14. Verse 12 says "If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has -- not according to what one does not have." In verse 14, he talks about

the balance between our abundance and their need, and their abundance and our need. We don't have to have it all--all the financial resources, all the strategies, all the answers, all the authority -- in order to minister in our community. If we had an abundance of finances and answers, it wouldn't balance with our community's needs, because we don't yet know those needs are. Maybe our community has an abundance of something we have yet to discover, something which will meet our needs. Community ministry doesn't begin with us trying to scrape together a pot of money so the Church Board can meet and decide what to do with it. Community ministry begins with an eagerness to discover and use what we have; community ministry begins with curiosity about what our neighbors need, and what they have to share with us. We have a wealth of relationships and experience which we have already developed, we need to tell each other what they are and celebrate them. This is not just a clever church program, giving through relationship is the message of Jesus Christ: it is the way we live into our calling to be like Christ and let the message of Christ shine in our lives. That is what we have: the eagerness to let the generosity of Christ shine in all we do. Amen.