**GIVE FREELY**

**Loving Generously Series**

October 30, 2016

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Being United with Christ one to another to show God’s love

Matthew 7:1-12

**Deuteronomy 15:1-10**

Proverbs 11:24-25

Matthew 6:1-4

Mark 12:35-44

**Luke 6:27-38**

Romans 12:4-8

**2 Corinthians 9:6-12**

James 2:14-18

**Lectionary Passages**

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:104

Psalm 119:137-144

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 19:1-10

**Reformation Day Texts**

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

Be Grateful ◆ Work Hard ◆ Believe in God ◆ Enjoy Life ◆ Keep Your Promises ◆ Give Freely

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nce again we have our store-bought sign, and we employ our eisegesis approach to scripture by opening the Bible and searching to see what passages in the word of God might have to say to us on the theme for this week. This Sunday we have come to “Give Freely.” Here are some verses that seem to address that theme:

**Proverbs 11:24-25**

*24Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.
25A generous person will be enriched,
and one who gives water will get water.*

or

**Mark 12:43-44**

*43Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”*

or

**Deuteronomy 15:10-11**

*10Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 11Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”*

or

**2 Corinthians 9:6-12**

*6The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

or a verse from Luke 6 which several cultural watchers tell us is now the most quoted verse from the Bible in the United States, surpassing John 3:16 over the past 15 years or so. Well, it is not actually the whole verse, just the 1st part that has become the most quoted. It is from Luke 6. The first phrase up to the semi-colon is this: “*Do not judge, and you will not be judged*;” The whole couplet reads this way:

**Luke 6:37-38**

*37“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”*

We tend to remind one another of the first portion of this section from the Bible as if to say, “You better not question or criticize what I plan to do or say. For if you make a judgment about what I intend to do, you should expect me and others to criticize you – so zip it and keep your opinion to yourself.

Of course, these scattered verses are not a complete picture of the Bible, but they do give some indication that giving freely is something that Christians ought to consider. We might even say that this is God’s intention for us.

Has it ever seemed to you that although in comparison to so many places in the world, the United States is a place of prosperity, and yet people are tending to feel worse and less comfortable or that we have forgotten that money doesn’t buy happiness, but generosity itself tends to breed more positive attitudes?

Really, some of us never had it better ... and we’ve never felt worse about it. That’s the surprising in our society today, as we discover that cash cannot create contentment and possessions don’t provide us with a sense of peace. Sure, we may gawk at the extravagant shopping sprees of Hollywood’s best-paid superstars, but we know that many of these same folks and celebrities are just a few steps away from having a meltdown and ending up in rehab.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What grandma always said is true: Money can’t buy happiness.

Still, most of us expect that improvements in quality of life are going to make us feel better. But they don’t — at least not by themselves. In his book *The Progress Paradox*, Gregg Easterbrook makes the point that life is generally getting better all the time: Our houses are bigger, our health care has improved, and the environment is becoming cleaner. Despite the hand-wringing and problems in some places, we have generally seen a drop in crime rates, and decreases in certain areas such as divorce, teen pregnancy, drug use and abortion.

So why isn’t all this good news making us jump for joy? Easterbrook has some intriguing ideas about why we feel rotten in the middle of our nation’s great riches, and how we can be simultaneously healthy and unhappy. He makes the case that:

*Bad news sells*. If it doesn’t bleed, it doesn’t lead. It’s always a disaster of some kind that draws us to television news reports, and bad news is what keeps us glued to the tube through many commercial breaks. During a snowstorm in Washington, D.C., the local NBC affiliate changed the name of the weather segment from WeatherCenter to StormCenter. Well, guess what? They never changed it back, not even for sunny days. Bad news sells.

*We don’t sleep enough*. Americans sleep an hour less every night than they did a generation ago. And if that’s not bad enough, we sleep about two or three hours less per night than people did a century ago. With such sleep deprivation, no wonder we feel cranky!

*We are full of envy*. Awards shows, feature films, celebrity Internet sites, *People* magazine are constantly bombarding us with information about how fortunate members of society live, and this is bound to make us feel envy — even if our lifestyle is quite comfortable.

*The solution to one problem creates another*. Easterbrook describes this phenomenon as “the unsettled character of progress,” and his insight makes sense, when you think about it. We invent an anthrax vaccine, and then we fear that it has terrible side effects. We create a nationwide network of cell phones, and then we live in terror that some distracted driver is going to run us down in his SUV. We develop miraculous cures for diseases, and then worry that we will not be able to afford them. The unsettled character of progress often leaves us feeling very anxious about the future.

For these reasons, and others, we’re going through a progress paradox — we’re feeling bad while living well. But there’s also a spiritual component to this problem, one that’s addressed quite clearly by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians. Writing to Christians in the wealthy Greek city of Corinth, Paul reminds them of their promise to give him a “bountiful gift” for the poor Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:5). Although he describes this as a completely voluntary gift, he expects the Corinthians to be generous in their support, and he promises many rewards for their giving.

For Paul, true happiness is found in what you give ... not in what you receive. “God loves a cheerful giver,” he tells them, ramping up the very first Christian stewardship campaign (v. 7).

Do you want to be enriched in every way? Then let’s see some “great generosity” (v. 11).

Are you interested in glorifying God? Then show your brothers and sisters “the generosity of your sharing” (v. 13).

Are you looking for God to provide you “with every blessing in abundance”? Then don’t hold tight to a miserly attitude — instead, “share abundantly in every good work” (v. 8).

The apostle is laying out for us another paradox — what we might call “The Stewardship Paradox.” In any true paradox, you are faced with a statement that seems to be inherently contradictory, but turns out to be true. In Paul’s words to the Corinthians, he is saying that personal enrichment comes from great generosity, and that blessings in abundance come from sharing abundantly with others. His point is that you receive the most by giving the most.

So how does this work? “The point is this,” says Paul, using an agricultural image: “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (v. 6). Whether you are growing melons or mission projects, Paul is right — you cannot expect significant results without making a significant investment. There will be no great harvest of pumpkins in the fields, or people in the pews, unless forward-thinking men and women are willing to sow bountifully by making significant investments of time and talent and treasure.

In *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (Touchstone, 2002), biographer Evan Thomas notes that Kennedy, a child of wealth and privilege, rarely carried cash, relying instead upon various members of his entourage to pick up his tabs.

One day Kennedy, a devout Catholic, attended a church service with a friend, who dutifully placed a dollar on the collection plate on his behalf — only to hear the muttered protest: “Don’t you think I’d be more generous than that?”

Which raises the question: If your neighbor was going to put in for you, how much would that neighbor put in?!

Next Sunday we will bring this fall series to a conclusion as we add one more command line to our sign. It will be “Love Generously.” It will have us rounding the corner with this theme and emphasis which does have our stewardship in mind. By the way, lots of places have fund raising campaigns, even in the church. We did that when the fire of 2004 ravaged our sanctuary. But what keeps churches on the mission move is not so much fund raising as it is stewardship, a life of gratitude and an attitude that reflects on God’s gifts and how we should live and manage God’s creation. We’ve been thinking about this during the fall of 2016.

It appears Paul’s words ring as true for me as they did for the people of Corinth and I struggle a bit with the paradox he proposes - how does generous giving lead to contentment? The connection between sowing and reaping makes good logical sense, but the link between giving and happiness is a bit harder to grasp. It is not immediately clear how good stewardship can make us happier in our rich but rotten-feeling world today.

Patrick Johnson found a link one day when he wrote a check for an air-conditioner. Johnson is a vice president at BancorpSouth Investment Services, so he is doing well for himself, financially, but he has discovered that his greatest joy is not to be found in managing fixed-income portfolios.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Instead, his joy comes from giving, and it’s a joy that borders on hilarity. As he was writing a check to help purchase a central air-conditioning unit for a local homeless shelter, he started praying and thinking about the immense joy that God was feeling as he gave to this worthy cause. He started thinking about the joy that would be felt by the homeless men as they slept in an air-conditioned room in the sweltering Mississippi heat. He then started thinking about the joy these men could feel when they gave their hearts to Jesus Christ and felt God’s love, maybe for the very first time.

And what welled up in Patrick Johnson, as he prayed, was laughter. He was so overwhelmed with joy that he laughed. It was a spontaneous response, born out of the joy that was being experienced by God, by the homeless men, and by Johnson himself, due to one small gift.

When Paul writes that “God loves a cheerful giver” (v. 7), what he says in the original Greek is that God loves a giver who is *hilaros* — the root of our English word “hilarious.” What God loves is a *hilarious* giver, a person who gives with spontaneous joy and laughter.

According to *Bartlett’s Anecdotes*, industrialist Henry Ford was on vacation in Dublin, Ireland, when he was asked to contribute toward the building of a new orphanage. He promptly wrote a check for 2,000 pounds.

When he picked up a newspaper the next day, his generosity was in the headlines, but the paper had gotten the amount of the gift wrong — instead of 2,000 pounds, readers were told Mr. Ford had given 20,000.

The director of the orphanage apologized and offered to phone the newspaper’s editor and correct the error.

“There’s no need for that,” Ford said. “I’ll give you a check for the remaining 18,000 pounds, but only on one condition. When the new building opens, I want this Biblical inscription on it from Matthew 25:35 – “I was a stranger, and you took me in.” They both laughed and Henry Ford wrote the check with joy.

So, when was the last time that you laughed as you sat down to write a check to the church or used an online connection or tucked something special into an envelope? Or to the Red Cross? Or to World Vision? Or to the Pittsford Food Cupboard? Maybe you’re not giving at the level that will tip you over into hilarity or focusing enough on the joy that is God’s or that other people feel because of your generosity.

Giving freely with hilarity! That’s the solution to the Progress Paradox with which we are living, the antidote to the unhappiness we sense as we spend our days in the middle of our self-obsessed and increasingly secular society. In fact, author Gregg Easterbrook himself believes that we would all be better off if we were more grateful, more forgiving, and more spiritual, and he challenges us to move beyond materialistic obsessions to reclaim “a mostly hopeful view of the human prospect.”

We can capture a more hopeful view, but only by learning to give with joy and laughter. As we commit ourselves to Christian stewardship, both inside and outside the church, we will discover that God is truly able to provide us with every blessing in abundance (v. 8). As we share our resources with people in need, we will find that we will be enriched in every way for our great generosity, and we will find ourselves filled with the “surpassing grace of God” (vv. 11-14). As we make sacrifices for others, we will come to see that money cannot buy happiness, but generosity can.

We waved goodbye to Dan Traina, Beverly and Jenna as they left the parking lot of the Lake Murray Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC yesterday morning. It was about 5:00am as Dan’s van left the parking lot and drove home to Pittsford. Here he is, one of our greeters this morning with his wife, Debbie.

The Lake Murray church let us use their facilities as we linked with the St. Bernard’s Project and Ameri-corps folks to continue the work of rehabilitating homes ravaged by flooding last fall. Nearly 40,000 homes in the greater Columbia area had been damaged. The home owners for whom we worked were so grateful for our visit with them. Some of them had been waiting almost a year to have work done on their homes, they greeted us with donuts and coolers full of cold drinks. Our spirits were buoyed by the smiles and attitudes of the young Ameri-corps workers.

On Thursday, a handful of us went to Nichols, South Carolina. 230 of the 260 homes in Nichols suffered severe damage because of hurricane Matthew. We carted out portions of the interior of Ryan and Courtney’s home along with some Baptist folks who came to Nichols to help. They had left their 7 and 2-year-old daughters with family as they came to watch their home being gutted. First there were the belongings, their girls stuffed animals and bedding, carpets and books. The debris was piled about five feet high for 30 yards or more. Then came the furniture, the drywall and flooring as their home was dismantled. Ryan and Courtney went around to each volunteer thanking them for coming to help them tear apart their home as the process of mold and mildew abatement was starting. At one point starring at all the pile, Ryan broke out into a smile and then laughter. “God is so good to have brought you all the way from Rochester, New York to Nichols to be with us.” It is an image that we cherish.

A generous spirit plans for the future — as did British writer Rudyard Kipling, according to Isaac Asimov in his *Book of Facts*. As a gift to the nurse who cared for his firstborn, Kipling presented her with a manuscript and told her, “Someday if you need money, you may be able to sell it at a handsome price.”

A few years later, she sold the manuscript and lived in comfort for the rest of her life. He’d given her the original copy of *The Jungle Book*. He gave freely of his best work.

In Columbia, SC a brown recluse spider was spotted as we were doing mold remediation on Johnnie Mae’s home. Professional exterminators were called. The following day we saw lots of cockroaches, some making their last gasp with legs kicking on the floor and we saw no sign of the spiders. I returned to pulling down the insulation that had turned white, a sign of the mold. In the process of pulling down the insulation I grabbed what appeared to be some thick cardboard and when finally getting it extracted from the roof trusses, dropped it on the floor.

Debbie Traina began to examine the cardboard and discovered that it was a large, hand-made envelope filled with artwork. Little did we know at the time that it was the art of Johnnie Mae’s oldest son. It contained projects from elementary school, middle school and high school including a drawing for which he had won the Governor of South Carolina award for art during his senior year. The art had been lost for almost 20 years, but was worth so much more to Johnnie Mae that trying to salvage some of the structure of her house. She hugged the envelope with joy and asked the others who had accompanied her in the car to come out and see what had been found. With a smile and laughter, she said, “Thank you so much for giving this back to me. Thank you for coming here and giving me the hope that things will be all-right again.” Little did Johnnie Mae know, that it was our lives that were being transformed at that moment as much as hers.

Who knows? We, too may break out in laughter because of gratitude when we least expect one of God’s surprises. In a world that so often makes us feel rotten, giving freely may be the true key to contentment.

**Some Commentary on this Corinthians Passage**

The context for this passage is the first (as far as we know) church-wide financial appeal. What may have been the earliest mention of it occurs in Galatians 2:1-10, where Paul recounts his crucial meeting in Jerusalem with the church elders. That meeting results in the elders — James, Cephas and John — giving their blessing to Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. Their only stipulation is that Paul and his coworkers should “remember the poor” (Acts 11:27-30 may also refer to this same project, but if so, the chronology does not fit the event Paul describes in Galatians, which Acts reports in chapter 15).

Mostly likely, “the poor” refers literally to the members of the Jerusalem church, for the gospel was heard gladly by the disenfranchised and those who lived in poverty. And under the early communal arrangements, those Christians who were well off shared their possessions with the impoverished in the believing community, and all expected Christ to return any day. When that didn’t happen, the shared goods were eventually exhausted, and probably the whole community was in need. It is possible that “the poor” refers to any who might apply to the Jerusalem church for aid, but Romans 15:26 supports the former conclusion.

Paul readily agrees with the instruction to remember the poor and apparently wrote ahead to some of the churches, including the one at Corinth, to start setting funds aside for this purpose (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). When writing to the Roman church on this matter, Paul explains his rationale: Since the Gentiles had received spiritual blessings from the mother church, they should share their “material things” with the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-28). Soliciting the offering from the missionary churches and giving it to the Jerusalem church implies that the former was better off, but it’s not clear why this would be so. Perhaps, since they came to Christianity later, the communal practices that eventually impoverished the mother church had not been instituted in the later churches. In any event, Paul agrees to receive the offerings from the churches and then personally convey them to the Jerusalem church (1 Corinthians 16:3-4; Romans 15:28). Luke tells of Paul’s delivery of the gifts to Jerusalem (Acts 24:17).

In taking the offering, some churches, such as those in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1-5), were more generous than others. The Corinthian Christians, apparently, began the collection enthusiastically enough but had not sustained the effort at that level. It appears that after Paul’s mention of the offering in his previous letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:1-4), they took the collection, and Paul’s coworker, Titus, may have even picked it up and brought it to Paul (2 Corinthians 8:6, 16-17, 23), who was busy elsewhere. The problem was, it wasn’t a very generous offering, not according to what Paul thought the Corinthians should be able to do.

So now, getting ready to come to Corinth, he knows that one of the things he will do there is address the matter of the offering. There is even the possibility, he tells the Corinthians, that some of the generous Macedonian Christians will come with him (2 Corinthians 9:4). Thus, to prevent the Corinthian Christians from being embarrassed by how small their offering is, Paul writes to them in advance of his visit so they have time to beef it up. He has the letter hand-delivered by some of his coworkers, to “arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion” (2 Corinthians 9:5).

We might conclude that Paul’s intention was to lay a guilt trip on the Corinthians to pressure them to give more, but the word he uses for the “gift” he wants them to give is the same word for “blessing,” and his point is that God blesses them so that they can bless others. It was not enough to wish the poverty-stricken Jerusalem Christians well; the Corinthians needed to do what they could to help.

Then, coming to verse 6, where the lectionary reading begins, Paul hammers home his point using the metaphor of sowing and reaping. It is likely that the Corinthian Christians were not stingy, but they were worried. What if they gave generously and then became impoverished themselves? Times were uncertain, and who knew what tomorrow would bring? But, says Paul, God is able to provide for them “every blessing in abundance” (v. 8), so they should give willingly, even cheerfully. In fact, they will be “enriched in every way” for their generosity (v. 11).

We might ask if Paul is talking of material enrichment here, for we can all cite cases of believing people who have given too much and have not been materially blessed in return. Well, yes, they have been spiritually blessed, but did that physically sustain them when the paycheck ran short? Paul does not tell us whether he is talking of material or spiritual blessings; we note only that his wording does not exclude either one. What does help, however, is verse 9, a quote from Psalm 112:9 that Paul cites to reinforce his argument. There, generous giving is not linked to abundance, but to righteousness.

In verse 10, which has echoes of both Isaiah 55:10 and Hosea 10:12, Paul reminds his readers that God, who is the source of their sustenance in every case, will “multiply” what they give. Thus, the value of their gifts increases, especially when given with “great generosity” (v. 11).

Verse 12 states specifically the expected direct outcome of their giving, but the NRSV wording is awkward, using “the rendering of this ministry,” to translate *diakonia thz leitourgiaz*. The NIV is better: “The service that you perform.” In any case, this *diakonia* not only supplies the “saints” [in Jerusalem], but results in thanks being given to God, presumably by those who are helped by the gifts. This service through giving is a “testing” (v. 13), that when passed, is evidence of how the Corinthians “glorify” God. And another blessing follows, Paul says in verse 14, for the recipients will not only pray for the givers but also “long” for them, i.e., feel strongly the bond of Christian kinship with them.

In verse 15, Paul thanks God for God’s “indescribable gift,” but it is not clear to what he refers. It may be that it is the thought of the unity in Christ that the generous giving engenders between the mission churches and the mother church that Paul has in mind, or it may be a more general thanks for benefits of the gospel itself. More likely though, it is God’s gift of Christ himself for which Paul gives thanks.

1. Wessel, David. “Sad little rich country.” *The Washington Monthly*, November 2003, 51-53.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Johnson, Patrick. “Hilarious giving.” *Generous Giving Web Site*, Generousgiving.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)