

THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF ENLIGHTENED HEARTS

November 2, 2014

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

21st Sunday of Pentecost

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Joshua 3:7-17

Psalms 107:1-7, 33-37

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

ALL SAINTS DAY TEXTS

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalms 27

Romans 6:3-9

John 6:37-40

7TH IN SERIES

Encouragement to Celebrate God's Gifts

Dan 12:3 (NIV)

1 Corinthians 9:1-6

2 Corinthians 9:6-15



The Encouragement of Enlightened Hearts

Text: so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints (Ephesians 1:18)

Industrialist Henry Ford took a vacation to Dublin, Ireland, where 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, 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 scripture from Matthew 25, verse 35 as an inscription on it: I was a stranger, and you took me in."¹

Over the past six weeks we hope that no one has felt taken-in but that we have been encouraged to be light. We have considered:

Encouragement to be Lights Like Barnabas
Encouragement to be Faithful Students of Scripture
Encouragement to be Salt and Light
Encouragement to Honor God's Temple

¹ Bartlett's Anecdotes.

Encouragement to Encourage Others
Encouragement to Give of Ourselves
Encouragement to Celebrate God's Gifts –
The Encouragement of Enlightened Hearts
so that as the Bible says, “with the eyes of
your heart enlightened, you may know what
is the hope to which he has called you, what
are the riches of his glorious inheritance
among the saints.”²

Our hope is that today we can celebrate this
encouragement that comes from God that
God's world might be made a brighter place,
filled with the light of hope and grace.
Houses are expanding, incomes are growing,
health is improving ... and people are feeling
worse. Perhaps we have forgotten that
money can't buy happiness, but generosity
can.

We've never had it better ... and we've
never felt worse about it.
Or, to borrow a phrase: “It was the best of
times; it was the worst of times.”

That's the surprising state of affairs in our
society today, as we discover that cash
cannot create contentment and possessions
don't always provide us with a sense of
peace. Sure, we may watch *The Fabulous
Life of Celebrity Super Spenders* on VH1,
and gawk at the extravagant shopping sprees
of Hollywood's best-paid superstars, but we
know that most celebrities are just a few
steps away from having a meltdown and
ending up in rehab.

We've explored how what grandma always
said is true: Money can't buy happiness or
our more common take on this quote –
Perhaps money can't buy happiness, but it
can make you more comfortable when you
are feeling miserable. Before we get too far
here in November, we will have the

opportunity to vote and some feel that what
we do at the polls will determine our
happiness, too. Maybe not, but how we vote
may shed a ray or two of light into the
darkness of political decision making.

Consider what Gregg Easterbrook says in his
book, *The Progress Paradox*. He writes that
life has seemingly gotten better if we look
over the long haul. Houses are more
convenient, health care has had new
discoveries, attention to the environment has
begun to make a difference, and in places
that take community improvement seriously
there has been a drop in serious crime rates
and decreases in such things as teen
pregnancy and drug use.

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., in the early
1990s, the local NBC affiliate changed the
name of the weather segment from Weather
Center to Storm Center. Well, guess what?
They never changed it back, not even for
sunny days. It is still called the “Storm
Center.” Bad news sells.

We don't sleep enough. Yes, we should
have been able to increase our sleep time by
an hour last night but 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.

² Ephesians 1:18.

With such sleep deprivation, no wonder we feel cranky!

We are full of envy. Awards shows and celebrity Internet sites have us continually comparing ourselves to others. *People* magazine challenges us at the check-out counter, bombarding us with information about how some fortunate members of society live in order to make us envious, even if we realized that we really wouldn't want to have Justin Bieber's life.

The solution to one problem creates another. Easterbrook describes this phenomenon as "the unsettled character of progress." In order to be truthful we now require all those pharmaceutical ads to explain all the side effects.

Side effects may include nervousness, restlessness, excitability, dizziness, headache, fear, anxiety, and tremor. Blood pressure and heart rate may increase. You should check with your doctor immediately if you experience bladder pain, bloody or cloudy urine, or lower back pain. Additional side effects include cough or hoarseness, fever or chills or conditions that may lead to drowsiness, headache, depression, accompanied by nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or a mild itching or rash. This medicine is habit forming and chronic use may lead to dependence swelling and hives.

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, it is clear that 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 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.

Now that is a paradox.

So how does this work? Paul uses 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?! I thought we could have an amazingly unique experiment if we asked the people in front of us or behind us to fill in our commitment cards for us. Let me give you a simple report. Last week a number of your church officers turned in their commitment cards a week ahead of today. Three families who had made commitments in the past but not last year made commitments for 2015. One family who had never made a commitment before made one for \$9,980. Three families decreased their commitment slightly for 2015 over 2014, ten are keeping their

ADDENDUM

commitment at the same level as 2014 and 14 are increasing their commitment for 2015. These 31 families are saying that in 2015 as God prospers them it is their intention to give to God through the ministry and mission of this congregation \$127,395. You may ask me who, but I can’t tell you. Cesca has recorded this information and makes the totals available, but that is the limit of my knowledge. But, perhaps this is helpful for you.

To each of them I say, “Thank you. May God bless you and give you a level of peace and satisfaction that will nurture your hearts and help you sleep and enjoy the world God has given to us.”

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.

So, when was the last time that you actually laughed as you sat down to write a check, got home tired but overwhelmed that serving others at the memorial service reception had been a blessing or that your visit to Cameron was sad in some ways but inspiring in so many others. Maybe you’re not giving at the level that will tip you over into hilarity. Or perhaps you’re not focusing enough on the joy that God is feeling, and that needy people are feeling, as a result of your generosity.

Hilarious giving. That’s the solution to the paradox. On this All Saints Sunday, may the eyes of our hearts be enlightened, so that we may know what is the hope to which God has called us, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints.

But there's an unanswered question in the middle of our Stewardship Paradox: How does generous giving actually 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 establish. It is not immediately clear how faithful stewardship can make us happier in our rotten-feeling world today.³

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 pretty well for himself, financially, but he has discovered that his greatest joy is not to be found in managing fixed-income portfolios.

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 would 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 actually so overwhelmed with joy that he laughed. It was spontaneous laughter, born out of the joy that was being experienced by God, by the homeless men, and by Johnson himself, due to one small gift.⁴

The Progress Paradox says the antidote to the unhappiness we are bound to feel as we spend our days in the middle of our self-obsessed society can be mitigated. Gregg Easterbook himself believes that we would all be better off if we were more grateful and more forgiving. Our lives would be improved if we gave more energy to our spiritual development. He challenges us to move beyond our materialistic obsession 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.

Who knows? We may even break out in laughter. In a world that so often makes us feel rotten, hilarious giving is the key to contentment.

³ Wessel, David. "Sad little rich country." *The Washington Monthly*, November 2003, 51-53

⁴ Wessel, David. "Sad little rich country." *The Washington Monthly*, November 2003, 51-53.

THOUGHTS FROM BRUCE'S NOTEBOOK

❖ “A lot of people are willing to give God credit,” writes Rev. Robert Harris, “but so few ever give him cash.”

❖ I can always choose a charity and write a check, but I like to dream up original ideas that inspire other people to give; that stretches the dollar and makes it more valuable. In 1992 I sponsored a fundraiser at my alma mater, Lewis & Clark College, in Portland, Oregon. As part of a \$1 million dollar gift, I donated \$25,000 in the name of each student who could match my 625 sit-ups in 15 minutes, 116 continuous push-ups, 24 continuous pull-ups and a 16-foot rope climb. Only five students bested me in all categories. The event helped pay for a new library.

Robert B. Pamplin, “Do you have fun giving?” *Reformed Quarterly* Online, Spring 2001, rts.edu\quarterly\spring 01\qa.html.

❖ A generous spirit plans ahead — 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 are in need of 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*.

❖ In his *Lives*, Plutarch reports that Alexander the Great, before he proceeded with his conquest of Asia, practiced a form of advance compensation toward his followers — he gifted them with crown estates. His general, Perdiccas, was concerned that his king had depleted his own resources and asked what Alexander had held back for himself. “Hope,” the young monarch replied.

“In that case, we who share in your labors will also take part in your hopes,” Perdiccas avowed. He and several others returned their estates and followed Alexander off to war.

❖ Actress Minnie Driver traveled to Cambodia, where she visited Third World factory workers. “The living conditions are brutal,” she told *People Magazine* (March 1, 2004). “There are five girls sleeping in a room that is 4 feet by 4 feet. These women had worked their 10-hour day, they had not eaten a single healthful meal, yet they still smiled and asked if I wanted to stay for dinner.”

❖ In the diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota, a group of Catholic priests decided to take action on behalf of both the victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse in the church. About 30 active and retired priests created an independent nonprofit called the Lazarus Fund, to which they are donating 5 percent of their monthly salaries. The money helps pay for therapy costs for victims of sexual abuse and for abusers. In addition to monetary contributions, the priests fast one day a week and hold weekly Masses to pray for healing the pain that sexual abuse has caused.

“Raising Lazarus in South Dakota,” *Sojourners*, May 2004, 11.

❖ Researchers at Cornell University have conducted what they call “holier-than-thou” experiments to see just how generous people think they are, compared to how generous they think others are. Invariably, reports Julie Salamon in the book *Rambam’s Ladder: A Meditation on Generosity and Why It Is Necessary to Give*, people judge themselves to be more generous than they really are, and they think others are less generous.

In one experiment, undergraduate students were given \$5 each, and then asked how much of this money they thought they would give to charity. On average, they thought they would give \$2.50, and their peers would give only \$1.80. In reality, the students gave \$1.53.

COMMENTARY

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

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 were 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 seems almost 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.