

Excel in Everything

Psalm 30; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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One of my responsibilities as the editor and publisher of the *Presbyterian Outlook* was fundraising. I asked people frequently for money: In person, in letters, and via email. I crafted our appeal letters with precision and prayer. I worked hard at “making the case” as it is called in development parlance. I used recommended tactics that attempted to put a dollar amount on services offered. I tried mightily to connect the dots between donors’ gifts and our impact on the church and the world. I used biblical imagery and theological language in fervent hope that my words would move enough people to give enough money for us to make payroll and keep the presses running. I would dutifully agonize over the content of these appeals and then our publishing consultant would predictably tell me it didn’t matter what I said so long as we kept asking. I always wondered if he was right even though I wanted to think my words made a difference.

So, when our most recent Sid and Cathy Batts resident, Keith Dove, said he wanted to spend some time talking about stewardship, I was game, eager even to take a deep dive into this subject that had occupied much of my professional life. We started with an academic tome about the theological power of money in the West. It had a lot of sentences like this: “God’s *oikos* must be reflected in an earthly *oikonomia*, even as the rule of God as Father coincides with the rule of the one emperor and *paterfamilias* of the empire. As we shall see, it falls to the Son as the Logos, the governor of the Father, to be the chief administrator, who oversees and manages resource and power allocations.” (Divine Currency, 45-46, Devin Singh) And while it was good to flex our theological muscles, we decided this wasn’t the most helpful approach for our purposes, so we pressed on.

Next, we read a “how to” book that felt akin to a slick marketing strategy. The images and metaphors didn’t resonate, and the theology wasn’t really our brand. Although it did give us this gem: “People do not want to give to a sinking ship but to one that might actually arrive at a destination.” (Rich Church, Poor Church, J. Clif Christopher) Good to know but it may be important and faithful to tell people when lifeboats are necessary.

Keith finally found a happy medium, a resource that articulated the important truth that, “Giving money away is a statement of faith. It is a declaration that God has provided all that we have...People who have discovered generosity have come to understand God as a God of abundance. They have not bought into the idea that there isn’t enough, but rather they believe that what they have is a gift, and the gift should be shared.” (Abundance, Creating a Culture of Generosity, Michael Ward) This felt more in our Reformed wheelhouse and at least moved us closer to being able to talk about stewardship authentically. But what this exploration revealed

more than anything else was how difficult it is to broach the subject at all. It pointed us to our need to begin not with theory or with “how to” guides, but with Scripture and Paul gives us quite a passage today.

Paul starts at a different place than all of the resources and tactics above. He begins with the stunning assumption that his hearers want to excel in everything, in all matters of their faith, from speech to wisdom to love. He assumes their desire for their discipleship to shape every aspect of their lives. No case statement. No give and you will get. No guilt. Paul knows that authentic giving can't be cajoled or commanded and further it doesn't need to be, because he begins with his belief in the power of Jesus Christ to reorder our priorities and re-shape our lives. Paul really and truly believes all of life is a gift from God and our Spirit-inspired response to that gift is gratitude embodied in generosity. *The People's New Testament Commentary* puts it like this: “For Paul the offering itself is a matter of grace...it is a gift of God to be able to participate in it and be willing to do so.” Further, “because of Jesus we believe that the heart of the universe isn't a struggle for survival but self-giving love.”

This is the radical reorientation of the gospel.

The heart of the universe isn't a struggle for survival but self-giving love. If we believe this than we will excel in everything according to the calculus of faith. We will be generous in all things: our speech, our forgiveness, our compassion, our praise, our hospitality, with all our resources and in all our interactions because everything is gift and being able to participate in the grace of our Lord, the love of our God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, is priceless, freeing and joyous.

This sounds great, doesn't it? But as theologian and pastor Willie James Jennings said in a recent lecture at the University of Chicago, “People will not fight you at all when you say you need to learn to love each other but they will fight you tooth and nail when you say the configuration of real estate must show how we love each other.”

<https://www.lumenchristi.org/event/2021/04/among-fragments-race-fragile-hope-of-wholeness-in-america>

It is well and good to say everything we have is a gift from God and sharing is itself a gift, but when Paul insists on earthly fairness and equity among people, that's when we get antsy, anxious and angry.

And make no mistake, this is what Paul is saying. In grateful response to the goodness of God and the love of Jesus Christ we are empowered to excel in establishing equity among people. Like the manna in the desert, no one has too much or too little, no matter how much they gather on any given day.

Paul reminds believers then and now that we follow a self-emptying, other serving God in a take it, hoard it, everything-belongs-to-you-culture. The genuineness of our love and the earnestness of our faith will be evident in the configuration of the neighborhoods we inhabit, the institutions we represent, the policies we advocate or oppose and the community we cultivate.

We are called to excel in everything for the sake of the One who gave it all, but we can't do this on our own and Paul knows this, too. He knows that any generosity we exhibit comes through the movement of the Spirit within us. In that sense my publishing consultant was right: it really didn't matter what I wrote in those fundraising appeals, any response that came was grace. Anytime we individually or collectively de-center ourselves and our own interests it is grace. Anytime we love God with all we've got and our neighbors as ourselves, it is grace. Anytime we give up something for the sake of someone else it is grace. And while that in no way absolves us of responsibility, it ought to give us hope.

God moves us to share with gladness that which has been entrusted to us. God involves us in the reconciliation of the world. We participate in the work of Christ because we trust the goodness of God who made and sustains all creation and who has upheld us even when we walked through the valley of the shadow of death, or wandered in the wilderness or cried out, "O Lord, how long?" In the words of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, we want everyone to flourish because we know about the more excellent bread, "the bread of life, and you do not have to bake it." "...we know about our beginnings and our endings...we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic, or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for." (*Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*, page 72)

Brueggemann continues:

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul directs a stewardship campaign for the early church and presents Jesus as the new covenant. Though Jesus was rich, Paul says, "yet for your sakes he became poor, that by his poverty you might become rich." ... Jesus gave himself to enrich others, and we should do the same. Our abundance and the poverty of others need to be brought into a new balance. Paul ends his stewardship letter by quoting Exodus 16: "And the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." The citation is from the story of the manna that transformed the wilderness into abundance.

It is, of course, easier to talk about these things than to live them. ...Our world absolutely requires this news. It has nothing to do with being Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives, socialists or capitalists. It is much more elemental: the creation is infused with the creator's generosity, and we can find practices, procedures, and institutions that allow that generosity to work. ...Sharing our abundance may, as Jesus says, be impossible for mortals, but nothing is impossible for God. None of us knows what risks God's Spirit may empower us to take. ...our faith, ministry, and hope are that the creator will empower us to trust his generosity so that bread may abound. (*Deep Memory Exuberant Hope*, page 75)

May the Holy Spirit empower us to trust God's generosity and inspire us to excel in everything for the sake of the One who poured himself out so that everyone might have life abundant. Everything a gift. All of it Grace. Thanks be to God.