

The Joy-Filled Giver
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
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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. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, Our rock and redeemer, Amen.

In a midsized Missouri town near the interstate, the owner of an old time “cash only” full service station pulled in 45 minutes late one morning. He shouted to the customers, “I’ll turn the pumps on right away!” What he didn’t know was that the night crew had left those pumps on all night. By the time he got to the office, most of the cars had filled up and driven off. He saw only one customer who had stayed to pay.

His heart sank. Visions of thousands of dollars in losses danced through his head – as did the many things he would not be able to do for his family. Then that one customer pulled out a wad of cash from his pocket and handed it to him.

He said, “We kept passing the money to the last guy. We figured you’d get here sooner or later.”

We are arguably the richest country in the world. Yet survey after survey shows that we worry more about money than any other population in the world. Economically speaking, with relatively few exceptions, most of us in this country in many ways have never had it better... but strangely, we’ve never felt worse about it. That’s the state of affairs generally in our society today. Perhaps that should not come as a surprise since our culture, more than any other in the world, equates happiness, peace, and contentment with the bottom line.

From the time we are infants, it is in the air we breathe that – 1. Progress is next to Godliness and 2. Progress is measured by what we make. This belief, this tenet of real American faith is behind a large portion of those in this country – those who have *not* seen much progress in the last twenty years – rising up against a whole system claims an intention on keeping that divine promise. Radical change is

therefore afoot. It is a very similar climate to that of late medieval Europe: 1517 to be exact. The priest, Martin Luther in Germany saw a corrupt church that extorted money from people by promising them paradise if they gave to the church, but a prolonged, perhaps indefinite stint in purgatory, if they didn't.

Just as the 16th century medieval peasant was taught by his culture that he could expect improvement to his lot, post mortem, we have all been taught by ours that unless we see an infinite set of improvements in our purchasing power over time, *we* are going to be in a kind of purgatory.

In the early 2000's journalist, Gregg Easterbrook wrote a little book called *The Progress Paradox: how life gets better while people feel worse*. In it Easterbrook made the point that the markers in our culture that were supposed to tell us that life should be getting better were: bigger homes, growing incomes, and improving health, as well as a drop in certain problem areas such as divorce, teen pregnancy, drug use and abortion. And in fact, from 1963 to 2003 every one of these markers had shown marked improvement. And yet survey after survey revealed, even 14 years ago, that people were *more* fearful and unhappy than they had ever been since Gallup began taking such polls.

Indicators these days reveal that progress continues but definitely not for the population as a whole. Yet it is ironic that the fear and unhappiness among Americans has shown only a slight uptick since 2003 while anger is at an all-time high. (pause)

Among the first to set foot on American soil around the time of the Reformation were those who held that America was the New Jerusalem – the place on earth where there was room and the freedom for God's eternal spiritual progress in human beings to take place. But somewhere along the way, spiritual progress became tied to material and technological progress. Idolatry these days is therefore rampant – the worship of ideas and things rather than God – and hell hath no fury like that of those from whom you threaten to remove their object of worship.

We are thus, perhaps in the midst of a possible new Reformation but unlike that original Reformation, we have shifted from a place of relative humility in an assumed God-centered universe that both makes sense and is valued by the majority – to an ego-centered world that has become unmoored from roots that are any deeper than this morning's news. The result is either a religious fanaticism that assumes the power of God on its side, or a neo-liberal, atheistic, rationalism that replaces an assumption of God with a blind faith in the ultimate goodness of human nature, science and the empirical method.

Both of these options lead to catastrophic results because neither are capable of handling the depth and breadth of the human condition.

In particular, neither do a thing to realistically address our dark side – what the scriptures call, sin. Religious fanatics excuse their own sin by relying on cheap grace and projecting *their* darkness onto others, demonizing *them* and then seeking comfort in their destruction. Liberal, empirical positivists *overlook* their own bias and *overestimate* the ultimate power of the human ego to eradicate such things as poverty, crime, corruption and oppression. (Pause)

And what has the equating of eternal spiritual progress to economic and technological progress done to us? First, it has led us to feeling our worst, because it has contributed to an increasing denial of our own

darkness. Thus the kinds of violence perpetrated are more heinous, and the bad news a lot more sinister than it was in generations past.

Second, the superficiality of reliance on economic progress for salvation means that *we tend to be full of envy no matter how much we have*. Awards shows, feature films, celebrity internet sites, *TMZ* magazine and programs such as *Housewives of Beverly Hills* are constantly bombarding us with information about how the most fortunate members of society live, and this tends to make us feel envy or resentment — even when our lifestyle is really quite comfortable.

And finally, reliance on economic and technological progress for salvation has led us to believe that we can solve anything when the reality is that *the solution to one problem tends to create unforeseen if not unpredictable bunches of others*. Easterbrook described 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 its 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 and wonder about our children’s ability to connect directly with other human beings because they are addicted to their smart phone. We develop miraculous cures and medical procedures for diseases, and then worry that we will not be able to afford them. The unsettled character of progress has left us all feeling very anxious about the future.

For these reasons, and others, we’re going through a “progress paradox” — we’re feeling constantly anxious while living better than most people a century ago could even have dreamed, while at the same time we are witnessing an upheaval of the whole idea of progress.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to Christians in the wealthy, progressive Greek city of Corinth. And the first thing he does is to reconnect them to who they *really* are first and foremost: God’s own children and as God’s own he reminds them of the practical measures they can take: “Be generous, remembering your poorer Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem by offering a bountiful gift (2 Corinthians 9:5).”

Paul’s day and time was no less a time of upheaval than the one in which we live. The transformation that was taking place was radical – a fading of the great Roman Empire and movement from widespread polytheism to the Christianization of the West. And that old way by no means was going gentle into the night.

So what is Paul’s answer to a culture in turmoil? Compassion and generosity. Paul understands that willing generosity leads to the promises of rewards that are unseen and unmeasurable.

For Paul, true happiness and depth of fulfillment are found in what you give ... not in what you receive or in the progress you make.

“God loves a cheerful giver,” he tells them.

“Do you want to be enriched in every way?” He asks. Then in the midst of unsure times, let us show “great generosity”.

Are you interested in inviting others to spiritual progress as a deeper more valuable way of being than that of a complete focus on technological and economic progress? Then, says Paul, show your brothers

and sisters “the generosity of your sharing”.

Are you looking for God to provide you “with every blessing in abundance”? Then don’t hold tight with fear to the miserly attitude fostered by our culture — instead, “share abundantly in every good work”.

The apostle is laying out for us an antidote to the progress myth in our culture and that is 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. Here it is: blessings in abundance come less from economic progress than they do from sharing abundantly with others. Paul’s point is that you receive the most in this world by gladly giving the most – especially when it looks like you have the most to lose.

The Stewardship Paradox.

What we give to the church, Christ’s body, or the body’s various arms in the world, really has nothing to do with programs or building needs, or mission projects. It really has to do with participating in some much needed soul work – in *spiritual* progress regardless of whether or not there is hope of *economic* progress.

There is absolutely nothing that causes one to deal with one’s own darkness, one’s own sin, like the soul-searching that it takes to consider what one has, and how one is spending and/or investing that.

And I have never met anyone who gives generously, without expectation of return, who was not also deeply aware of his or her own darkness and deep need for God. (Pause)

The connection that Paul makes 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 good stewardship can make us happier in our rich but rotten-feeling world today.

That’s why I like the story about Patrick Johnson.

Patrick Johnson found a link one day between generosity and happiness when he wrote a check for an air-conditioner. Johnson was a vice president at BancorpSouth Investment Services, so he was doing pretty well for himself, financially. However, he discovered that his greatest joy was not to be found in managing fixed-income portfolios.

Instead, his joy came from giving. Johnson is a Christian and it is his practice as he is writing a check for any charitable organization for him to *remember who he really is and where he came from*: dirt poor poverty where crime was about the only way to make it, and from which he just barely escaped, with the help of some very loving disciples of Christ.

Well, not long ago, Johnson was writing a check to help purchase a central air-conditioning unit for a local homeless shelter. He started praying and thinking about what others thought about him simply because he had money as compared to the men in the shelter. He began to feel amused. He knew better.

Then he imagined the immense joy that God was feeling as he, who came from such darkness now, 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 felt God’s love there, maybe for the very first time.

The absurdity of it all welled up in Patrick Johnson, as he prayed, and he began to laugh. He was actually so overwhelmed with the absurdity and the joy of the situation that he laughed out loud. It was a 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.

Given what Paul has to say about the matter, this shouldn't surprise us. When he writes that "God loves a cheerful giver", 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 a sense of the absurd, with joy and laughter.

So, when was the last time that you actually laughed as you sat down to write your check out to the church? Or to the food bank or to the Children's Home or to Love Inc? Maybe you're not giving at the level that will tip you over into hilarity. Or maybe you're not focusing enough on the joy that God is feeling, and that people in real need are feeling as a result of your generosity.

Hilarious giving to a living God as disciples of Jesus Christ: that's at least one helpful solution to the progress conundrum that we are living with every day, the antidote to the unhappiness and the fear we often feel as we spend our days in the middle of our self-obsessed secular society with its news reports of the latest violence perpetrated by fanatics.

We would all be better off if we were more grateful, more forgiving, and more spiritual. It would perhaps help us reclaim a more hopeful view of the world and our future.

And that is the opportunity you are being given again this fall here at Trinity as you consider what percentage of your income you are going to give to God in the coming year. We can all capture a more hopeful view, but only by learning to give with joy and laughter and a sense of the absurdity of it all. It is, indeed a way to reconnect with our Reformation roots.

And 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. 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, as the Apostle Paul says, the "surpassing grace of God". As we make sacrifices for others, we will come to see that economic progress cannot guarantee 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 may just be one key element to contentment.

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us to reflect on our lives, on who we are what is truly in us and yet what we have been given – so that we may feel your calling as to generous possibilities that are out there – possibilities that may lead us to your joy and ours – enough to make us laugh. (pause)

And now Oh Lord, bless us and our commitment and these tokens of our gratitude that they may bring forth fruit for your kingdom. Amen.