Called to Give – Joyful Living

Psalm 112:1-9 Kimby Young

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 September 25, 2016

This portion of the letter to the Corinthians was written to ask the congregation to support a mission outreach financially. The church in Jerusalem was struggling with extreme poverty and trying to help others who were very poor. The church in Corinth was relatively secure financially – not wealthy but certainly not suffering, sort of upper middle class for the day. So naturally Paul appeals to his friends in Corinth to help the church in Jerusalem. You’ve heard the appeal before. I’ve made the appeal before. Flood victims in Louisiana, refugees from Syria, orphan children in Africa, homeless people in downtown Kansas City, poor neighbors right here in Gardner. And every time you hear an appeal, you look at your budget and decide if you can manage it. At least I do. You think rationally, you see what bills you have to pay, you worry about what challenges will come tomorrow. And you decide. The book of Acts records that the church in Corinth responded generously sending a very rich offering to help the poor who were struggling in Jerusalem. In this letter before the offering, Paul is confident in the generosity of his church people even before they donate. He speaks of their generosity as a way of praising God, a way of producing thanksgiving to God among the people far away. Verse 13 – “because of you, others will praise God.” Paul says that is just one more reason, just one more way God’s grace will be revealed to the world. “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.”

It’s an interesting argument Paul uses to motivate giving, a rather circular argument. You should give to others because God will use your giving to bless others. Just as you have known God’s grace, you will be the cause, the instrument God uses, so that others can receive the same kind of grace God has already given you. You know how it feels to be blessed by God. Share that blessing with others so that they might also come to know God’s love more clearly and fully. And then by that logic – they will bless others, and those others will bless still others, and so on and so on. It’s the gift that keeps on giving. It’s “pay it forward” on a grand and glorious scale.

Some time in the next week or so, you will receive a letter from me and from the Congregational Life Pillar representing session, as we kick off our stewardship campaign for this year. We will be asking you to think ahead and to make a pledge or a promise for giving for 2017. Part of this is financial giving, but we are expanding the giving this year to include time, talent and prayer. We are asking you to consider how God is calling you to give this year – in time, in energy, in effort, in work, in talent, in prayer, in support and yes, in money. As Paul says in this letter to the Corinthians – this is not about compulsion – this is about sincere response to God’s call. I don’t want you to stretch too far in time or money – and later regret your commitment. We don’t want you to feel pressure and later feel resentment. Paul says examine your heart. Be realistic. Know what you have. Know your limits. And know that your God is with you. Trust God. Trust how God has always been with you and always will be. Think about all that God has given you – and wallow in that blessing. I use that word wallow intentionally. Sometimes we focus on the negative and that sadness or grief or despair just gets bigger and bigger. This is an invitation to reverse that – to focus on the positive, to think about all that is good, to look for everything that is beautiful and to roll around in that and enjoy God’s gifts. I believe that positive focus will build on itself. If you look for the joy you will see it. Think about all the ways you are blessed by God each day. Remember that blessing. And believe God’s blessing will continue to pour onto you and into you and around you and through you, in whatever way you need for as long as you need it. Believe it and give thanks to God.

That is what Paul is saying here. That is how he is asking his people to be generous. It’s a little like “the power of positive thinking”. He says don’t focus on the fear and the need. Focus on the blessing. Focus on the abundance of God. Because indeed God is certainly able to make things right. If we believe God could raise Jesus from the dead, if we believe God could cleanse us of all sin and give us eternal life, if we believe God can create the entire world and everything in it – why don’t we believe God can pay my bills and take care of my retirement? Why don’t I believe God who created time can help me manage my time so that I can help others as well as helping myself? And why do I think I have to do everything by myself? That’s crazy. God expects me to do my best, to offer what I have – but God doesn’t expect me to carry everybody’s load. God has promised over and over again to give us the power we need for any task, the time for each day, the strength for each moment. Trust those promises and give control to God. So when I say we are called to give – I’m not only talking about time or talent or money. We are called to give everything to God – to give control and fear and worry to God. We are called to give God our difficult decisions and our deepest fears. We are called to give God our failures and our weaknesses. We are called to give everything to God, and to trust that God can turn even that into grace and blessing. God can. God can take whatever we give and turn it into abundance and joy. “Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift.”

I have a friend who used to say – whenever something bad happened – she would say, “It’s a gift!” The first time she said that I thought you are crazy – what gift? But she was right. Even the bad things are an opportunity for God to shine. God can use even the difficulties to offer grace in some surprising way. So if you are going through a hard time, if you are not able to give this year in money – give in time or talent or prayer. If you are not able to give in any of those ways either, because of some really tough things in your life, there is no guilt here – only grace. Give your stress to God and promise to look for God’s blessing each day. That can be your pledge for this year – to find one moment of grace, one glimpse of joy, one touch of light each and every day. That can be your pledge. Sometimes you have to look for it. But sometimes it just pours down in abundance all over you. Find the gift of God and live in that joy. Then as Paul says that will lead to thanksgiving and recognition of the glory of God all around us.

There is an African American prayer I first heard 15-20 years ago. It is, “God, I thank you for waking me up this morning!” Think about this simple, straightforward prayer. Each day is a gift. Each new day, God is with us from the very first breath we take each morning – which is not a guarantee. And God is with us each moment of each day. Whatever comes our way – God is with us and God provides for us. Live into the confidence of God’s grace. Live fully and joyfully. Live in the abundance of God’s blessing. And respond in gratitude as you are called. Respond in sharing as you are able. Give thanks to the Lord for God is good. Give thanks. Give love. Give hope. Give joyfully. Give to the glory of God.