



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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NOVEMBER 23, 2014
CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

The Generous Community Psalm 100; II Corinthians 8:1-15

Paul would be proud! He would be so proud of you and our community. Despite losing industry over the years—textile mills and other manufacturers, corporate offices like Hardee's and Centura, now PNC—despite the flood which covered nearly a quarter of our city and the recession which resulted in deep harm to individuals and the community—despite a conveyor belt of hardships and challenges, last month our community was recognized as being the most generous metropolitan area in the state and thus, one of the top in the country.

People in this area on average contributed about 5% of their income to charitable causes. Nash county residents averaged 5.36% while Edgecombe County residents, living in one of the poorest counties in the state, averaged charitable gifts of 3.9%. Residents of Rocky Mount averaged gifts of over 6%.¹

Paul would be proud. He would travel to Greenville and Raleigh, to Durham and Chapel Hill. He would write letters to Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, and Wilmington and say to the people in those communities, "I want you to know what the folks in Rocky Mount and the surrounding area have done. Despite all of their hardships and economic woes, they have continued to be generous, above and beyond anyone else in the neighborhood and above most people in the country."

That's what Paul told the people in Corinth when he wrote to them about the offering for the believers in Jerusalem which a year earlier the Corinthians had indicated they wanted to give. Obviously Paul did not tell the Corinthians about Rocky Mount, but he did tell them about Macedonia, an area that had seen its share of challenges. "We want you to know, brothers and sisters," he wrote, "about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part" (II Corinthians 8:1-2). Apparently Paul was not above encouraging a bit of

¹"Area Ranked First in State for Charitable Giving," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, October 31, 2014.

friendly competition if it meant helping the followers of Christ in Jerusalem who were struggling under Roman persecution.

This is a generous community, but to what do we attribute this charitable spirit? Is it because you, like the Macedonians, are simply good people? Are you charitable because you recognize that giving back is a civic duty? Do you see charity as a Christian responsibility? Or is it because tax deductions are always helpful, especially at this time of year? This is a generous community and you are generous people because of the grace of God. As with the Macedonians, your abundant joy, your gratitude and enjoyment of the gift of life, your recognition of God's mercy and generosity have repeatedly combined with the hardships and disasters and heartbreaks that have afflicted this community, and your generosity has overflowed. I have said for years that I have never been a part of a community as generous as this one. Certainly good people who respond to civic duty, especially when compelled by Christian convictions, are charitable. You possess those qualities, but above and beyond charitable, you are generous.

Generosity begins with gratitude and fortunately we are a people who understand gratitude. Thanksgiving should be a daily experience, but how fortunate we are that in the fabric of this country's traditions is woven a season of acknowledging our gratitude to God. The choir just sang a beautiful expression of our thanksgiving² and earlier we heard that humble and uplifting psalm which reminds us of God's generosity:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Psalm 100

²Ralph Vaughan Williams, "O How Amiable."

God is abundantly generous toward us because we are his people. God has no sense of scarcity or selfishness when it comes to us; rather, the world has been filled with every good thing we need. That is why the writer of the letter of James gushed, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” (James 1:17). In a very real sense, our generosity is God’s generosity for ultimately God inspires us to good. Therefore, we are grateful for all that God does for us and for the opportunities we have to do good for others.

Stewardship follows gratitude. None of us treats a gift we treasure with carelessness. We take care of the things we value and for which we are grateful. In the same way, we take care of all that God provides for us. Since all good gifts come from God, the entire world as well as everything in it and beyond are God’s gifts to us. We are called to be good stewards of all that God has offered to us.

When we manage our resources carefully, we see our own abundance increase. I am not a proponent of what is commonly known as the “prosperity gospel.” The prosperity gospel leads you to believe that if you are faithful, if you believe hard enough, and if you provide certain television evangelists with “seed money,” your own prosperity will increase and your bank account will grow. Nothing could be further from the truth of the Gospel Jesus came to proclaim. Jesus taught good stewardship and generosity, but never promised that we could get rich by buying a prayer cloth or investing in the wardrobe of a televangelist. If I am not mistaken, it was Jesus who said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8.35). We lose ourselves by taking seriously our responsibility to care for all God provides for us. We find ourselves when we live generously in the world.

How many of us have said, “When I win the lottery, I am going to do this and that with the money” – even give a million dollars to the church? Every once in a while, someone does hit the big jackpot. Statistically, however, the money is gone within five years and most of the winners are unhappy. You and I might be very different were we to win, but the truth is that we do not have to wait to do good things. We have resources now that we can share with other people. We may not have that multimillion dollar checking account, but we do have time and energy and talents and some money so that we can do a world of good for others.

The Apostle Paul knew that the secret to our generosity is God's generosity. He reminded the people in Corinth of the generosity of the Macedonians, but he also reminded them of an ancient Hebrew truth. Paul wrote, "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little'" (I Corinthians 8:13-15).

Paul reached back into his rabbinical training and remembered the frustration and fear of the Hebrew people in the wilderness when they wanted to return to slavery in Egypt rather than starve in the desert. Everyone knew that story of how God fed the Israelites with manna in the morning and quail in the evenings. They also knew that no one was allowed to hoard their provisions. Each day, every family had exactly what it needed, no more and no less (Exodus 16:18).

Albert Lexie has worked at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh since 1981. He is not a physician, a nurse, a technician, or custodian. Mr. Lexie is the shoeshine man. He is also a model of generosity for the people who know him and a hero for children whose families cannot afford to pay for medical care. A shoe shine at Mr. Lexie's booth will cost you five dollars, but most of his customers are generous and offer a one or two dollar tip. For thirty-three years, Mr. Lexie has collected those tips and donated them to the hospital's Free Care Fund. His gifts have totaled over \$200,000, over a third of his lifetime salary, by one estimation. A pediatrician commented, "I think he does it because he loves the kids."³ I suspect that Mr. Lexie loves everybody and is generous in every way.

Give according to your means, Paul told the Corinthian Christians, but give out of your generosity, not your fear. Later in the same letter, Paul wrote, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (II Corinthians 9:7). Apparently those Macedonians were a happy lot for they struggled through adversity and managed to come up with a generous offering for the Christians in Jerusalem. Aren't we, too? Think of all that we have endured and still have come out on top. Think of all the blessings that are ours. Think of the joy our

³*The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, "Shoe Shiner Turns 30 Years of Tips Into \$200,000 in Gifts," February 25, 2013; available online at: <http://philanthropy.com/blogs/philanthropytoday/shoe-shiner-turns-30-years-of-tips-into-200000-in-gifts/63363>.

kindness brings to other people. Think of the happiness it brings to us. We are a generous community, taking our cues from God himself who has lavished us with all we need and more. Gratitude and stewardship lead to generosity. And generosity leads us to the kingdom of God in our midst. May it always be said of this congregation as well as of this community that no matter our hardships, our joyful faith and our challenges overflow in a wealth of generosity to the glory of God and the benefit of his people. Thanks be to God! Amen.

November 23, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

The movement of the seasons constantly reminds us of the abundant provision you make for us, O God. Everything we need, all that we enjoy, even the people we love, are offered to us from the from the generosity of your love.

We are thankful. We may verbalize and celebrate our gratitude more openly at this time of year, but each day we are aware of your kindness to us and we are grateful. Thank you for every blessing we enjoy, every gift of delight that comes our way, and every provision made so that our sojourn on this earth is filled with all of the goodness you have intended.

We are also thankful—especially grateful—for the ways in which you move to meet our special needs even before we are fully aware of them. There are so many challenges day by day, so many concerns and worries and dangers to negotiate. We know that we are not alone on our journey and that you place people and resources in our path. We know that you care as deeply for our loved ones who are ill as do we. We know that you hurt when we hurt and rejoice when we rejoice. We know that you desire that life be full and complete for us all. When it is not, you act to provide us with what we need to restore life.

Make us aware of your activity in our lives. Help us to understand how we are also the agents of your grace and goodness in the world and open our hearts to opportunities that allow us to share your love and kindness with others. We pray for health and well-being, for hope and happiness, for safety and abundance for all people. Grant us the joy of being the answer to someone else's prayer, O God.

Thank you, God, for life and love. Thank you for faith and its abundant resources. Thank you for patience and mercy. Thank you for creating us and claiming us and caring for us. This day, this week, and throughout life, to you "in the highest, hosanna and praise." Amen.