

November 05, 2023

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

“For Him and For Others!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Say the word “stewardship” at church and you might see some eye rolling and hear a few sighs and groans. For some, it’s a church code word for “we want your money!” For others, it’s the idea of applying harsh rules of frugality in all things churchly - rules that you would hardly want to be applied to your own personal life. Pastor Bill and I often joke that Stewardship Sundays must be the time when all visitors come to Pilgrim so that the devil can confirm in them that the church is nothing more than a money making scheme. I could go on but you get the drift.

Someone once said: “Stewardship is everything I do after I say, ‘I believe.’” Well, that’s a pretty good way of saying it depending upon what’s behind it. I have no idea if the person who said it understood it in the way I am about to say it, but it is true that stewardship is how we manage all that we have been given at the cross and empty tomb. We have been born again by water and the Spirit and have been given the forgiveness of sins and everything in Jesus. Stewardship is about managing the gift of our Savior.

Have you ever given much thought to the truth that God has entrusted you with the very precious gift of Jesus, and that all that is yours flows to and from the salvation that is in him? Stewardship is really about believing and embracing who we are in baptism, and appreciating the precious time that has been given to us by God, and taking what we have and dedicating it in support to our salvation and that of others.

But, it’s really hard for us to think in those terms because we still struggle with being curved in toward ourselves. That’s an old way of saying that there is still a part of us that remains in love with the self and is downright selfish. Yes. The unbeliever is entirely curved in toward the self. And we as Christians, though we have been born again, still struggle with this. We still have our old self that is in love with the self. One author writes: “Because that is the most prevalent characteristic of sin, all people, including you and me, naturally think of our bodies, our lives, this world, our personal resources, and the resources of this world *in relation to us at the center*. Even what we do or don’t do for others is tainted or smudged with sin.” How true!

God through Christ, in his undeserved kindness and mercy has helped us and given us all things. By Jesus’ death on the cross, God has saved us from the condemnation of our self-centered, self-loving, and self-fulfilling ways. Having been emptied of ourselves by the law of God, and having been graciously given the forgiveness of sins and new life in the gospel, we are to have a different perspective on the whole of our living and the things of this life. He has moved us from love for self to love for him and for others.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 17, “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, *that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised* ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” While the context of this passage revolves around the office of the ministry, the words apply to every Christian. Again, those words need to be digested. Jesus died for all “*that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised* ...” And to live for him is to live for others.

The question on any Stewardship Sunday is simply: are we good managers of everything that has been given? “All things are yours!” Paul writes in 1 Cor. 3:21, all things spiritual and physical are a gift that serve salvation. But, are we to view all things given as nothing but our own or also for Him and for others? The truth is that when we have been emptied of ourselves and filled with all things in Christ it changes our perspective in ways we might never have imagined. All things that have been given to us, are for us, but they do become **For Him and For Others!** We can’t help but to love when we have been so loved by Jesus. In other words, there is this incredible thing that happens to us when we are touched by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, seeing the depths of his love for us. It touches us in such a way that we want to do well with what we have by loving him and touching others as we have been touched

When a person loses himself in Jesus, because he gave up himself for us, we become about him and for others. It’s what Luther says in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, *that I may be his own and live under Him in his kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.*

Yes ... that I may be his own and live in his kingdom and serve him with all that I am and all that I have been given. Everything that is mine is **For Him and For Others!** That’s the changing power of the gospel that turns us inside out so that we are no longer about ourselves but now curved toward him and those around us. Even that which is for ourselves has in view **For Him and For Others!** We see this illustrated in our epistle lesson for this morning in the Macedonian Christians. It’s a powerful example that really disturbs our sinful tendency to turn back to our selves. The Macedonians were good managers of everything God had given to them, and they put me and us to shame when we hear about how deeply they were **For Him and For Others!** Paul is writing to the Corinthians and reminds them about “the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.” He writes:

... for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints - and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

Powerful words! They gave themselves first **For Him and** then, by the will of God, **For Others!** Like I said a moment ago, their example causes us to pause when thinking about ourselves. We make several discoveries from them. First, stewardship is not self-made. As Paul indicates, this comes from the grace of God which is God’s undeserved kindness. That was why the Macedonians were doing what they were doing in helping others. When Paul talks about managing what we have he is talking about all that

comes from the grace of God. To be good managers of everything God has given is to believe and live the undeserved kindness of him who died for our sins at Calvary. As it says in verse four of the sermon hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*: “Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a tribute far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.” And that captures the Macedonians.

Moreover, you will note that the Macedonians begged to help to take care of their brothers and sisters in Christ. One doesn’t expect people who are terribly poor themselves to be begging for the opportunity to give financial support to others. They could only do this because they believed that they were rich in Jesus. How often do we find ourselves struggling with shortness of time and begging for the chance to fill up our time with serving in the church? Like I said, the Macedonians cause us to think.

Finally, the Macedonian Christians teach us that managing what we have from God in Christ Jesus often means going beyond our capabilities. We are told that they were undergoing a severe test of affliction when they were wanting to help out those who were suffering. What is incredibly interesting is that it was the combination of their joy in Christ and their own struggles that gave them an otherworldly sympathy. It reminds me of a true story of a person who was poor and someone came around asking for donations for the poor and he gave to the poor because he understood what it was like to be poor.

We are not poor like the Macedonians, but we prayerfully do have one thing in common with them that will make us like them and that is this: we know the undeserved kindness of Christ in our lives, first through the cross and empty tomb, and then how he has taken incredible care of us over the years. For Paul writes in 2 Cor. 2:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” So, in this unique combination of his forgiveness and care for us over these many years in all things, we are able to give ourselves here at **Pilgrim For Him and For Others!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott