

“The Joy of Sharing”

Acts 20:33-35 -- Christ the King Sunday

Stewardship 3, November 20, 2016

In 2012, the renowned Christian author Max Lucado published a marvelous little book entitled: GRACE—MORE THAN WE DESERVE; GREATER THAN WE CAN IMAGINE. Halfway through this little book, he issues a very powerful statement when he says: “When grace happens, generosity happens—un-squash-able, eye-popping bigheartedness happens!”

Isn't this exactly how our God works? He starts the process. The Apostle John teaches us, “*In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave up his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins*” (1 John 4:9-10)! And yet God doesn't just love us—he “lavishes” his love upon us. St John says: “*See what love the Father has lavished upon us that we should be called the children of God, for this is who we are*” (1 John 3:1)!

Jesus was born into our world as the eternally-begotten Son of God to reveal the Heavenly Father to us.

- Through Jesus we can now see our Heavenly Father as the One who overflowed the table of the prodigal son in Jesus' parable—with an exquisite banquet.
- Through Jesus we see our Heavenly Father as the One who caused those six large vats of water to overflow at the Wedding Feast in Cana with high-quality vintage wine!
- And through Jesus, not just one time, but two times we see the Heavenly Father as the One who filled Peter's boat with such an enormously large catch of fish that Peter could barely bring his fishing vessel to the shore without it sinking!

“Fortunately,” Max Lucado points out: “God doesn't dispense his goodness towards us with an eyedropper but with a fire hydrant!” He continues: “Your heart is a Dixie cup and his grace is the Mediterranean Sea. You simply can't contain it all. So let it bubble over and spill out of your life into the lives of others around you. After all, Jesus himself says: *'Freely you have received, freely give'* (Matthew 10:8)!”

“When grace happens, generosity happens; unsquashable, eye-popping bigheartedness happens!” And can't we see this truth being evident all throughout our Lord's three year ministry?

Do you remember that lovely Bible story found in Luke 19—about a Jewish man named Zacchaeus who went to work for the Roman occupying forces as a “chief tax collector”? Those first century tax collectors like Zacchaeus—were notorious for shaking down most anyone they could shakedown because the Roman government allowed them to keep any additional proceeds that they could swindle out of their fellow Jews!

St. Luke tells this about Zacchaeus: “*He was rich*” (Luke 19:2)!

Even though Zacchaeus was rich, he also knew that he was breaking God's commandment: “*Thou shalt not steal*” and yet Zacchaeus just couldn't stop stealing because of the great “spell” that worldly wealth had over him. But Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus—and that he would soon be passing through Zacchaeus' home town of Jericho. Maybe this Man named Jesus could change his life--and you remember that Jesus did!

So what does Zacchaeus do, being the “vertically-challenged” man that he was; not tall, but rather short in stature? Suddenly, Zacchaeus spotted a sycamore tree close by that he quickly shimmied up and Zacchaeus was more than happy to go out on a limb in the hopes of catching a better glimpse at Jesus as our Lord passed by. He never imagined even for a second that our Savior would take a good look at him, but Jesus did: “*Zacchaeus come down immediately—for I am going to your house today*” (Luke 19:5)!

After that, Zacchaeus was never the same: *“Look, Lord! Here and now I am going to give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay that person back four times the amount I stole from him”* (v. 8), which was really quite generous when we remember that the Old Testament Levitical law only required a two-fold restitution!

Grace walked into Zacchaeus’ front door that day, and just as quickly as Jesus entered into Zacchaeus’ life, all of the “selfishness” that had plagued Zacchaeus in his life for many years exited immediately out of the back door of Zacchaeus’ life! Why? Because Jesus was there and the grace of God changed Zacchaeus’ heart!

Here, we can see a great spiritual truth being revealed to us that we see being revealed to us in the lives of people that Jesus touches all throughout the pages of the New Testament. When grace happens—generosity happens—unsquashable, eye-popping generosity happens!

Here we can see that grace begets grace. Those who have become the personal recipients of god’s grace at work in their lives are people who become the dispensers of god’s grace in this world to the lives of other people all around them.

Grace begets grace—and there is probably no one in the history of the world who knew this to be more powerfully true than did the apostle Paul! He was speaking out of his own personal experience one day, when he said: *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come, and all of this is from God who through Christ has reconciled us to himself and committed to us the ministry of reconciliation”* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Having spent several years of his life persecuting those who were followers of “The Way,” as the early Christian movement was first known, since Jesus always called upon his followers to adhere to his teachings as a “Way of Life,” people thought perhaps it was some kind of cruel hoax or mean trick that others were trying to inflict upon them when they heard—that Saul of Tarsus—had himself actually been “born again” into the kingdom of God and that this violent persecutor of the Church had literally come to see the light, on the Road to Damascus one day—where he was stopped dead in his tracks one day by the glorious appearing of our Crucified and Risen Savior.

The words that he heard that day were unforgettable: *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* And when he said, *“Who are you, Lord?”* And what Paul must have heard to his own great horror was, *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!”* But far from striking Saul dead, the risen Lord chose to make of him the greatest missionary that the world has ever known! *“Enter the city,”* our Savior said to him, *“and you will be told what you are to do”* (Acts 9:4-6)!

For anyone who has ever been interested in learning more about the life of the Apostle Paul, this 20th chapter of Acts is a real goldmine for sure. Here we see the Apostle Paul near the end of his life and ministry. Here he has just served the Church at Ephesus as their pastor for three years; the longest Paul had ever stayed and ministered in the same geographical location because he was primarily a missionary and not a parish pastor. But Paul has sensed that God the Holy Spirit was urging him to go back to Jerusalem, even though he also knew trouble would be awaiting him there. Paul has been warned by others of a possible imprisonment and afflictions that would come to him there. His spirit is troubled. Yet he is compelled to continue to Jerusalem. Yet, before he leaves he asks all of his fellow clergymen, the “elders” who had served in that whole region around the Mediterranean Sea to meet with them one last time—in a smaller city named Miletus, about 20 miles south of Ephesus. Paul sheds tears because he knows that this will be the last time he will see any of these men alive on this side of the grave, and they are shedding tears as well for the same reason!

In this passage (Acts 20:33-34) Paul is reminding the elders, how to a very large degree, he had provided for his own needs as a pastor among them. Paul reminds them that he has not been paid with gold and silver, or even with clothing, but has provided for his own needs, as well as for the needs of those who were his traveling companions. He did this so that he and his companions would not have to accept payment from anybody in Ephesus.

From this statement and from statements Paul made elsewhere—this often seemed to be the approach that he took towards his apostolic ministry. We know from passages like Acts 18:1-3 and Philippians 4:14-16—that he was a professional tentmaker—that he made tents for a living. And here in our text, Paul is stating that he not only provided for his own needs, but also for those who travelled with him!

After his description of his own ministry, Paul was encouraging the Ephesian elders to follow his example. He tells them that they should labor with their hands as he has, so that they can help support the weak (Acts 20:35). While some believe that the “weak” as Paul mentions some group of people here—are those who do not understand why an elder should get paid to teach the Scriptures, it is also likely that the weak are those who were unable to provide for themselves.

While preachers throughout the history of the Church have probably used this magnificent text to encourage the lay people in the churches they were serving to tithe, in their original context, in these words St. Paul was actually urging of the clergy to set the right example even he had attempted to do.

While Paul may have practiced tent-making as a secondary-vocation to provide for his own physical needs, he describes this as AN EXCEPTION TO THE LORD’S COMMANDMENT THAT “THOSE WHO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL SHOULD GET THEIR LIVING BY THE GOSPEL” (I Cor. 9:14). Even though he gives up his own right to be paid a salary, he clearly does not think that this should be a normative expectation for most ministers (I Cor. 9:3-18)!

Here Paul is encouraging a large group of pastors in his day to provide leadership to their congregations through their own personal example. Pastor who do not practice tithing can hardly encourage their fellow believers to practice tithing. Yet, for so many people who have striven—and actually arrived eventually at that goal of tithing—they have found Jesus words to be so true in their lives, those words when he tells us that you and I can never out-give God! These words are found in Luke 6:38, *“Give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you!”* St James does remind us that those who are pastors and teachers in the church will be judged more severely than others, when he writes: *“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness”* (James 3:1)!

Nevertheless, here in Acts 20:35, this is the only place where we receive a direct quote from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ anywhere else in the New Testament, that are not words found in the four Gospels, besides the book of Revelation. *You remember how our Lord Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive!”* You know there are all sorts of reason for which people who are faithful members of a Christian congregation like ours—might consider it to be more blessed to give than to receive, but not necessarily all of these motives are Gospel-driven.

Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount reminds us that one motive behind our desire to be faithful givers in the church may be in the hopes of gaining the respect, the honor and the admiration of other people in our church family—who will discover what we are doing and hopefully think more highly of us because of that. But in doing so, we can shortchange ourselves in a substantial.

You remember how Jesus says: *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you”* (Matthew 6:1-3)!

Some people may feel it is more blessed to give than to receive in their false hopes of gaining more influence over what goes on in the church, and more leverage in decision-making. Some may even do so in their attempt to bribe God or simply because they want to feel good about themselves in fulfilling what they see primarily as a personal obligation and nothing more. Some may believe it is more blessed to give than to receive because they want to make a personal contribution to a worthy cause. But all of those motives are more self-centered than God-centered.

But for those whose hearts are in the right place, they may believe it is more blessed to give than to receive—because they genuinely want to express their love to God. Others may do so—because they know—that **GOD AT WORK WITHIN THEM BOTH TO WILL AND TO DO OF HIS OWN GOOD PLEASURE**. Some may believe it is more blessed to give than to receive—because they have been recreated to a greater degree in the image of God—a process that began for them many years ago in their Baptism and a process that continues to bear more fruit in the kingdom of God—because, as Paul one day said, they know that it is: *“No longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20).*

There are two places in the New Testament that makes it abundantly clear to us that what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ did for us in his perfect life, death and resurrection...was motivated to a large degree by his own personal sense of joy—that as he knew the Father—we would come to know the Father too.

On the night before he died he said, *“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be full” (John 15:11)! And in Hebrews 12:1-2, the writer tells us: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

A woman who hiking alone in the mountains one day stopped to rest for a while, where there was a babbling brook (or creek if you please) running alongside of that trail. Glancing down at the water with some bright sunlight shining upon it—she saw a precious stone just lying there—prompting her to reach down into the water, to pick it up, and place it promptly in her hiking bag!

The next day she met another traveler who was hungry and the woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him, which she did without any hesitation at all.

The traveler left, rejoicing in his great fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But a few days later he came back to return the stone to the woman.

“I’ve been thinking!” he said. “I know how valuable this stone is, but I want to give it back to you in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.”

The woman smiled—all because she knew—“The Joy of Sharing!” Amen