

“Extravagant Generosity” (5th in the Series “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”)

2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

February 22, 2009 (Transfiguration of the Lord)

Rev. Deborah Dail

Denbigh Presbyterian Church

As a congregation we have been working through a series of sermons on the “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.” Those who study Christian churches have identified five strengths--five practices--which are common to vibrant, growing, fruitful congregations. In recent weeks we have considered the first four practices:

Radical Hospitality – that practice of being a church with open doors and open arms to all people, even those very different from us.

Passionate Worship – that practice of being a church which worships the triune God with passion and sincerity, regardless of the style of worship.

Intentional Faith Development – that practice of being a church which takes seriously the Christian education of all its members, from the youngest to the oldest. This practice emphasizes that for most of us, spiritual growth occurs best when believers study God’s Word together in community. This practice reminds us that we must study in order to effectively carry out the “outward” practices such as . . .

Risk-Taking Mission and Service – Churches which are vibrant and growing engage in risk-taking mission and service which stretches them beyond their comfort zones.

Today, we turn our attention to the fifth and final practice identified in this series. Vibrant, growing and fruitful churches demonstrate **Extravagant Generosity**.

Our New Testament Lesson from 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15 speaks to the matter of extravagant generosity. We are reading the Apostle Paul’s correspondence with the church in Corinth. This is a church, like all others, which had its fair share of problems. Paul wrote to them to encourage, challenge, correct and teach them in his absence.

Paul writes concerning the needs of the Jerusalem church. When we picture the early church we must remember that it is different from church today. When we speak of church we often think of the building, then the people. In the early church the people gathered together in homes. When Paul speaks of the poverty of the church in Jerusalem, he is not speaking of an institution but about the people. They don’t need a new piece of furniture or something for a “church program.” The people are in need. They are impoverished. They are going without food.

Paul gives several reasons the Corinthian Church should respond to the dire needs of the Jerusalem Christians. (Outline from William Barclay commentary on *1 and 2 Corinthians*)

First, Paul holds up the example of the Macedonian churches who have already given to the Jerusalem Church. He says they should look at how extravagantly generous the Macedonian churches have been and follow their example. Even though they were having their own dire circumstances, they “gave offerings of whatever they could afford—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians” (*The Message*, Eugene Peterson).

It's beautiful when this happens. I often see it happen here at Denbigh Presbyterian. We find out about a need and people come out of the woodwork to help, "pleading for the privilege of helping out." It's beautiful to see how God works through this congregation.

Paul emphasizes that the Macedonian Christians gave spontaneously. No one pressured them. He attributes this to the fact that they had first "given themselves to God. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives" (*The Message*, Peterson).

Our choir sang a medley of two hymns this morning—"My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less" and "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me". I was struck with how they began with "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less." Everything begins with the truth of Jesus crucified and raised. When we embrace this truth, we then seek to "live and sing and pray so God can use us." In the end, as in the medley, we return to the truth that our hope is built on Jesus crucified and raised for us. Our works do not save us. They are response to Jesus' amazing love and grace. We give ourselves first to God. Our living, singing, praying and giving "flows out of the purposes of God working in our lives."

After holding up the Macedonian Christians' extravagant generosity as an inspiration for the Corinthians, Paul holds up the supreme example of extravagant generosity—Jesus Christ. Jesus was rich but became poor for us. He emptied himself. He gave everything—even his own life. He became poor that we might become rich. Paul challenges the Corinthians to follow Jesus' lead in giving their all to help the believers in Jerusalem.

Third, Paul reminds the Corinthians of their own record in giving. He affirms that they started out on the right foot. They had good intentions, but had not followed through. He affirms that their hearts are in the right place—they just need to get the job of giving done.

Paul concludes our lesson for today by giving them an Old Testament Bible reference from Exodus 16. The reference recalls the Israelites after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This passage relates how they wandered in the wilderness and how God provided manna in the morning and quail in the evenings so the people would have enough to eat. The people were told to gather as much as they each needed. Based on their needs some gathered more, some less. Those who gathered little had no shortage. They gathered as much as each of them needed. The people were not to operate out of fear of scarcity. They were told not to store up or save the manna and quail. God would provide for their daily needs. Some tried storing up because they were afraid they'd be without. What they stored rotted. Paul uses this Bible story to remind the Corinthians not to operate out of a fear of scarcity. He is saying to them that God will provide for their needs. Don't let the fear of not having enough prevent you from giving to the Jerusalem church.

Fruitful congregations are generous congregations. They are generous with finances, with their spiritual gifts, with their time and with their resources (such as their building and property). I celebrate the generosity of Denbigh Presbyterian Church and I only pray we will grow in our practice of extravagant generosity. I pray we will not live as those who operate out of a fear of scarcity.

I believe fruitful congregations also have a different kind of generosity. I believe fruitful congregations also have a generosity of attitude – a generosity of spirit toward

one another, their communities and the world. What do I mean by this? I believe fruitful congregations look for the best, not the worst, in one another and those around them. Members of fruitful congregations assume the best of intentions and motives, not the worst. They are people of grace. They are extravagantly generous with grace, love, mercy and forgiveness as they interact within the church and as they minister beyond the church. I pray we will continue to grow in this type of extravagant generosity here at Denbigh Presbyterian Church.

We are now at the end of our series on the “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.” I do hope you will finish reading your devotional book this week as we wrap up the readings on “extravagant generosity.”

While the series is ending, I pray these practices will continue and grow in our congregation and in each of us individually.

You will continue to hear this language – Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service and Extravagant Generosity – as we hone and grow our church’s vision and as we plan our mission objectives for the next five years. My prayer is that we will be ever more fruitful as we seek to be faithful to God.