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2 Corinthians 9:6-15
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Putting On Your Perspectacles

Well, we are in the midst of Stewardship season and I can't resist starting off this morning with a stewardship story from our own church.

Last year, Emmanuel, our Stewardship chair decided to visit with a member (who shall remain nameless) to discuss his potential pledge for 2017.

"Sir," he began (Emmanuel is very polite), "I understand that you make an annual income of \$500,000 but have never pledged to the church – So,, how about it ... can we count on a pledge this year?"

After a pause, the man replied, "Well, did you know that my mother is very ill and her medical bills are several times her annual income?"

And with passion rising he added, "And did you know that my brother is a disabled vet and confined to a wheelchair?"

Indignantly he continued, "And did you know that my sister is a single mother with three children?"

Humiliated, Emmanuel stammered, "I had no idea..."

On a roll, the man cut him off. "So, if I didn't give any money to them, why should I give any money to you?" OUCH!!!

Ok, true confession. Emmanuel didn't visit anyone last year and nobody in our congregation, to my knowledge, makes \$500,000 a year.

However, if anyone knows where Jimmy Garoppolo is going to live – when he moves to San Jose - please invite him to church!

Since this is our stewardship season, appropriately we just read that the Apostle Paul, in this letter to the Corinthians, encourages us to be cheerful givers, to sow bountifully, to share abundantly – not reluctantly or by compulsion.

Then, Paul states that the giver will be enriched in every way for her or his generosity.

My experience has been that generosity and cheerfulness are two of your greatest attributes.

Santa Teresa Hills has never faltered in showing hospitality to all, engaging in social justice, participating in all sorts of mission projects ... in short – doing what churches do – and you, the membership have always supported its ministry and mission.

Even a few years ago when we were caught up short and we had to scramble a bit, you always came through and as a result, we never lost momentum, never failed to do what we were called to do.

I gotta say, you are a remarkable bunch!

So, really Stewardship season, at least in this church, should be more a time of great celebration.

I mean, look at what the Lord has done for us! God has provided for us everything we need, and much of what we want.

So, what do we return to the Lord for all these blessings?

We offer our lives, our praise, our time, talent and treasures.

We offer the first fruits of our lives – not out of compulsion or guilt, not even because we have to reach a budget – but because we are at our best when we are being generous and this is what God’s people do.

I love the story of a little Brazilian boy deep in the Amazon who knocked on the missionary's door one day.

He was holding a large fish in his hands, and he said, "Pastor, you taught us what tithing is. Here is my tithe."

The missionary thanked him and said, "But, if this is your tithe, where are the other nine fish?"

The boy beamed and said, "Oh, they are still in the river. I'm going out to catch them now."

And that’s why the first check I write each month (okay, the bank automatically sends it) is my tithe.

In our text, Paul is encouraging the faithful to be grateful for all that God has done and is doing.

Paul is undertaking what was probably the first stewardship campaign in the history of the church as he urges the Christians in Corinth to contribute for the relief of the suffering Christians of Jerusalem.

Paul is giving them a pep talk, challenging the faithful to be “cheerful givers”.

Notice what Paul says in verses 6 and 7. Eugene Peterson in THE MESSAGE translates them this way:

"Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give.

"That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving."

I want to focus on that phrase found in verse 7: *"God loves a cheerful giver."*

Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it: *God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.*

The original Greek word for cheerful is *hilaros*, which is the root of our word *hilarious*.

In other words, we are to be hilarious over the prospect of giving. How many of you laugh out loud when you put money in the plate or have the bank send it in???

We are to be hilarious as we share from our bounty, our many blessings, our indescribable gifts, not the least of which is the gift of salvation that we have received through Jesus Christ.

A church's stewardship campaign should not take on the look of a dog and pony show or an annual circus.

This is not the "hand-wringing sermon of desperation."

This is a time to be glad and rejoice as we look forward to what God has in store for our church in the coming year.

I want you to feel the privilege of giving, not the obligation. "God

loves hilarious givers,” not givers who’ve been emotionally bludgeoned by an irate preacher.

Giving cheerfully doesn’t just have to do with money. It also means giving gifts of time and talents. Most importantly, it means giving yourself.

A perfect example is the story of six-year-old Susie. She wondered why her mother was baking a casserole for their neighbor, Mrs. Smith.

Her mother explained that the woman was very sad since her daughter died and she had a broken heart.

Her mother said, “because we are part of a community and Mrs. Smith is our neighbor, we need to do some things to help her.” She then challenged Susie to do something for her too.

Susie went to Mrs. Smith’s house and said, “My mommy says that you lost your daughter and you’re very, very sad with a broken heart.

“This is for your broken heart.” (She then gave Mrs. Smith a Band Aid)

Mrs. Smith accepted Susie’s act of kindness and took it one step further. She put the Band Aid in a key- ring picture frame to remind herself to heal a little every time she sees it.

What I want to say to you today is that when we talk about Christian stewardship, we are not talking about squeezing a few more dollars out of sometimes reluctant church members.

It’s not about paying dues to the church the way you would pay

dues to belong to the Chamber of Commerce or the YMCA.

It's not even about supporting a church budget.

It's really about letting God be first in our lives, committing our total selves— our time, our talent, and our treasure— to the ministry and mission of God's kingdom.

Giving money away is crucial – but the church is more than a religious United Way giving money to other institutions.

We invest in programs that alleviate hunger and poverty, break down walls of racism, bring assistance to those in need in Cameroon – this is our mission.

Some people say, "Give till it hurts." But God recommends that we "give until it feels good!" Remember God loves a cheerful giver!

A research study done about 10 years ago reported back the not so shocking news that those who live from a posture of abundance and gratitude live both happier lives and statistically longer lives.

Gratitude makes us happy, deeply happy. Gratitude connects us to other people. Gratitude connects us with God and, in itself, makes us better stewards of all we have and the planet we live on.

And GRATITUDE, by the way, is the theme of our Stewardship Campaign.

Glennon Melton is a blogger, and a few months ago she posted a picture of herself in her kitchen.

The kitchen was irrelevant to the picture--it just happened to be the room where she was standing, but following that post, she immediately received messages from readers wanting to help her update her kitchen.

She writes, "Along with their messages came pictures of how my kitchen could look, if I would just put some effort and money into it."

She says, "I've always loved my kitchen, but after seeing those pictures I found myself looking at it through new, critical eyes. Maybe it was all wrong.

"Maybe the 80's counters, laminate cabinets, mismatched appliances and clutter really were mistakes I should try to fix.

"I stood and stared and suddenly my kitchen looked shabby and lazy to me. I wondered if that meant I was shabby and lazy, too. I decided I'd talk to my husband and make some calls about updates."

But then, later that night, she changed her mind.

She realized that she had become overrun by the notion that what she had was not enough--she realized that what she needed was not new things, but rather new eyes to see the things she already had.

And so instead of starting plans for remodeling, she wrote a new post, and she titled it, "Give me gratitude, or give me debt."

Here, she proceeded to post pictures of her kitchen with comments like this: "You guys. I have a REFRIGERATOR. This thing MAGICALLY MAKES FOOD COLD. Inside my refrigerator is FOOD. Healthy food that so many parents would give anything to be able to feed their children.

“Almost 16,000 mama’s babies die every day from malnutrition. Not mine. When this food runs out, I’ll just jump in my car to get more. It’s ludicrous, really. It’s like my family hits the lottery every morning.”

“THIS CRAZY THING IS A WATER FAUCET. I pull this lever and CLEAN WATER POURS OUT EVERY TIME, DAY OR NIGHT. 780 million people worldwide (one in nine) lack access to clean water.

“I’m almost embarrassed to say that we also have one of these in each of our two bathrooms, and one in the front yard with which to WASH OUR FEET. We use clean drinking water to WASH OUR FEET. Holy bounty.

“And then this: This is the magical box in which I put uncooked stuff, push some buttons, and then a minute later- pull out cooked stuff. It is like the JETSONS up in here.”

Do you see what she did? She shifted her focus--in her words, she put on her "**perspectacles**." I love that word – PERSPECTACLES!!!

She shifted her focus from what she didn't have to what she had-- from noticing what was missing from her kitchen, to noticing the amazing gifts filling her kitchen.

She made a switch from one narrative to another--from the narrative that says, "There's something out there that I don't have, and other people seem to think I should have it. What I have must not be enough."

To a narrative that says, "Wow! Look at this!" She shifted from a narrative of scarcity ... to a narrative of abundance, by one single act: gratitude.

Gratitude is the act of shifting perspective, opening our eyes to the gifts all around us.

Gratitude is the antidote to self-indulgence, and unhealthy desire.

When we find ourselves with a stranglehold on our resources, on our paychecks, grabbing hold of them and demanding:

"Give me everything you've got," gratitude loosens our grip, unclenches our fists, just enough that we can see the gifts God has put in the palms of our hands, so that we can look up, and simply say, "Wow."

Glennon unclenched her hands, looked around her kitchen, realized that what she had was more than enough.

She realized that the most important thing in her kitchen was the people who come in and out of it, who dance on its floors and feast on the bounty God creates there. "I am free," she said.

Freedom. When my hands are open, they are free--freely available for receiving, and for giving, for becoming a part of God's lavish economy of grace.

Grace--a story of abundance--God's story. Grace poured out in abundance, like water, poured over us, washing us clean, making us whole, giving us a new story, a new narrative--from scarcity, to abundance.

Giving money to God is a great privilege and a great blessing. The truth is, you can never out give God. But it might be fun to try. How about it?

We all have more than enough. This week you will be receiving a letter encouraging you to prayerfully consider what God might be asking you to give. Take time to reflect and pray what that might be.

A pledge card is included, with an envelope to seal it in. Next week I'll give you a little more to think about and encouragement. And then you can either bring it to church on the 25th on our Celebration Sunday OR mail it directly to Laura, our church treasurer.

The 25th will be a true celebration of your generosity – whether it is a commitment of your treasure, time, or talent OR all three.

Whatever you decide, may God bless you or your giving and this church that it will be responsible in how it allocates your treasure, your time, and your talent.

And may we all wear the PERSPECTACLES of gratitude. For God is good ... all the time. And all the time – God is good!

Amen!