

Practices: Generosity

November 8, 2015

Deuteronomy 15:10-11; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

We continue with our worship series on the practices that bind us together as a congregation. We renewed our baptismal commitment, looked at honouring everyone, and last week, we looked at rituals of worship, specifically anointing. This week, the practice is generosity. To help us engage this topic, let's look at this passage from 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9 have always intrigued me. Paul is writing to the churches in Corinth, encouraging them to fulfill the commitment they made the previous year—to take up a collection for the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. For Paul, there is an important symbolism in this collection—it is from the Gentile believers in the mission churches for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. This group of people about whom a special council was held in Acts 15, to decide if they had to first become Jews before they could be Christians, is now the group that is giving aid to the poor Jewish believers. The mission to the Gentiles has been successful, so successful that they are now contributing as full partners in mission.

Paul's tactic in these 2 chapters is, yes, to hold them to their previous commitment, but also to tell them that the churches in Macedonia, another mission outpost, have been very generous, in spite of their severe ordeal of affliction. In spite of hardship, they were eager to give to this collection. So if the Macedonians could be this generous, surely the Corinthians can be as well, since they have not experienced such a severe ordeal. And if that isn't enough, in chapter 9, Paul says that he already bragged about them to the church in Macedonia saying that they were ready to give last year already! It seems Paul's stewardship strategy is to let one group know of the other group's eagerness and generosity, in order to motivate, or spur them on to contribute! One also gets the feeling that maybe Paul is also trying to save face, by encouraging them to give what Paul already promised they would give. Anyway, I can't help but read these 2 chapters with a bit of a smile on my face.

In looking specifically at these verses in chapter 8 that were read, there are 2 words that caught my attention—the word translated 'grace' and 'joy', and the word translated 'abundance'. I'd like to read you an adapted version, taken from

the NRSV, but substituting the Greek word, 'charis' where it is found in the text, as well as different forms of the word, 'abundance' where that word is found in the text. In using the same word to translate the Greek word, you can hear this passage differently.

"We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the **charis** (*grace*) of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their **abundant charis** (*joy*) and their extreme poverty have overflowed in an **abundance** (wealth) of generosity (sincere concern) on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the **charis** (*privilege*) of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this **charis** (*generous undertaking*) among you. Now as you **abound** (excel) in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to **abound** (excel) also in this **charis** (*generous undertaking*).

"I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the **charis** (*generous act*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in the matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 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'm struck by a number of things in doing this word substitution. The first is that there's a lot of abundance and abounding! In keeping the word close to its root, we see how prevalent it is in this passage. The emphasis is on what is, not what is not; abundance, rather than scarcity.

The second is that the words ‘generous undertaking’ are really only 1 word in Greek—*charis*. And the one word that is translated ‘generosity’ in verse 2 is found only a handful of times in the New Testament, here and in chapter 9, and its meaning is closer to “sincere concern”.

The third thing to notice is that the word *charis* appears 6 times in these 15 verses, and is translated 5 different ways! That actually diminishes the text, for we miss how often this word occurs, and we miss its connection to Jesus. Using different words, instead of the same word, gives the impression the text is about a number of things—grace, joy, acts of generosity. But it is really about 1 thing—*charis*. These words are good ways to translate *charis* but sticking with 1 consistent word helps us to know that these words are all related.

This passage is about *charis*, the *charis* we show to others and the *charis* Jesus showed. The *charis* we show others is the same *charis* shown to us by Jesus. Whether we translate *charis* as grace, joy, privilege, or generous act or undertaking, they all have their home in the *charis* of Jesus. *Charis* is not something we do on our own, or of our own accord; *charis* is what we do because of what Jesus first did.

And that’s the point Paul was making. While it may seem he is pressuring the Corinthians to give, they had previously, voluntarily, offered their aid, and he is asking them to fulfill that commitment. He says he is testing the genuineness of their love against the eagerness of others, reminding them also of the *charis* of Jesus, and linking what it is they intend to do, with Jesus’ own act of *charis*. He made himself poor, in order that we might become rich. But the goal isn’t the impoverishment of the Corinthians, or making their life more difficult, it is so that there can be a fair balance. It isn’t that he is calling one group to live without, while another group benefits, but that this kind of giving is reciprocal and mutual—this year, we have plenty, and so we share with those who don’t have enough; next year they have plenty, and so they share with us in our need.

We here at Berkey also have many words for ‘generosity’, and many ways of living it out. Generosity was a theme that was repeated in the focus group, but I don’t know if anyone actually used the words ‘generous’ or ‘generosity’. They talked about the care we show each other through meals and prayer shawls; they

mentioned that when there's a need clearly articulated, people respond, sighting the remodeling projects, money for scholarships to Mennonite schools, and money for green cards. I would add to that the generosity of time of people in various leadership, teaching, mentoring, caring roles here, and also the generosity of time of a number of people who show up at the church during the week and tend to the yard, the flower beds, the garden, the building, repairing, cleaning, caring; doing the things that aren't noticed when all is going well, but are very noticed when they don't work. There are people here in the congregation who donate hours of their own time so that we can enjoy this space each Sunday!

We aren't in the habit, as Mennonites, of articulating why it is we do what we do—there is a reason we were known as the quiet in the land. We are much better at living out our faith, than articulating our faith. But these acts of generosity, whether they are gifts of time, talent or money, are all rooted in the deep belief that the *charis* of Jesus modelled for us what it means to live that same *charis* in our own lives. These acts of generosity are rooted in the belief that there should be a fair balance in our community—that our abundance is for another's need, just as their abundance may be for our time of need.

In Proverbs 30:7-9, Agur prays to God, asking for 2 things: that God would remove his falsehood and lying; and that he would be neither poor nor wealthy. He asks that God “feed me with the food I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God.” Agur understands the temptations of both poverty and wealth. So does Paul, which is why he is encouraging a fair balance--that neither community should have too much or too little.

Research findings in our time seem to illustrate this point. Researchers at Berkeley have found that as wealth increases, compassion and empathy decrease. (Paul Piff, Does Money make you Mean? www.ted.com) The more wealthy you are, the more likely you are to pursue personal success and accomplishment, and the less likely you are to respond to those in need around you; and the more likely you are to see yourself as entitled to this wealth, even if you acquired it through inheritance, rather than hard work. Those who have less are more likely to respond compassionately to needs around them. As the disparity between the poor and the wealthy increases in a society, it has a negative impact on the whole society, not just the poor at the bottom. So the prayer of Agur and the teaching of Paul

are important reminders that for the health of the community, there should be a fair balance.

The passage in Deuteronomy also supports this: “Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’”

The generosity that characterizes our congregational life is a generosity we show toward each other, through meals, prayer shawls, prayers, rides, child care, financial aid and the care of the building and property. But it is also generosity we show toward our community, through our support of Model School, and through the Missions budget, which supports lots of local organizations working to minimize the disparity between rich and poor in our community. Our generosity also extends beyond our community through the money we give to Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference and Mennonite Church USA.

Our hands are open—they are open to the poor and needy in our community and around our world, and they are open to each other. We are not perfect in this—there are needs we fail to see, or fail to respond to; there are attitudes and beliefs we have a hard time being generous toward. It is part of the journey of being human. But we know the *charis* of God; we have experienced God’s grace and compassion toward us through the grace and compassion others have shown to us. All of our generosity grows out of God’s *charis* in Jesus Christ. Our generosity is our protest against the injustice we see in our community and our world; it is our commitment to a fair balance between our own abundance and the needs of others. Our generosity is a witness to the belief that with equitable distribution, there is enough for all.

God is present and at work in our midst. Through our *charis* toward others and each other, God is at work, bringing justice and mercy, helping us to keep our hands open to those around us. Our generosity is grounded in our trust in a God who loves abundantly; our acts of generosity are our thanksgiving to this God whose giving knows no ending.