

Sermon: An Acceptable Gift

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 30, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is a storm brewing in the not too distant horizon of the Presbytery of Ottawa. A number of congregations have stopped recently, in contributing to the Presbyterians Sharing.

Presbyterians Sharing is a time-honour, grace-filled mechanism of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, in pooling congregational resources across the country together in order to do collective ministries, and to assist congregations in need of help. Without getting into the specifics of calculating the 'dollar base', the denomination essentially looks at each congregation's annual budget, and suggests that 1/10 of it be their Presbyterians Sharing contribution for the following year.

It is up to each congregation to accept its allocation, as sort of a pledge, and to live up to that pledge. There is no obligation to accept the suggested amount, and the national church always receives the accepted allocation, with grace and thanksgiving.

In the past few years, St. Giles has accepted about 50% of the suggested amount. The primary reason is that the congregation also supports a number of other worthwhile outside ministries. I've always taught that as long as 1/10 of our annual budget goes outside of the congregation, towards the wider kingdom of God, we are right with God in our stewardship obligation, in keeping with the principle of tithing.

So why have those congregations stopped altogether contributing to the Presbyterians Sharing? We don't really know. They are not congregations in financial trouble. As matter of fact, they are, what I would call 'have' congregations in this Presbytery, as opposed to the 'have-nots'. Through personal conversations I have had with ministers of those congregation, I have a few inklings of their dissatisfactions. The Presbytery of Ottawa has now set out a formal process of surveying all congregations, in hope of having a constructive conversation with those congregations who have recently decided to 'not share' in the presbyterian way. I believe the Policy & Planning committee has been tasked with conducting the

survey and overseeing the conversation—a truly un-enviable task if there is ever such a thing.

Come to think of it, the Apostle Paul was also put into that un-enviable situation, of having to write a pastoral letter with fundraising appeal to the Corinthian church, in our Lectionary passage today, of 2 Corinthians 8:7-15. Actually, the entire section of that appeal should include verse 1-6 of chapter 8 as well. Allow me to organize this appeal with three key, theologically significant Greek words, of *logeia*, *charis*, and *isotès*, or roughly translated as collection, grace, and equality.

The word *logeia* or collection appears actually in 1 Corinthians 16: 1-2, as collection for the saints, where Paul instructed members of that church to put aside whatever extra they earn each week, so that when he does come to Corinth, there would be no need to call for collections. The purpose of such collection, as Paul explains is to aid ‘the poor among the saints at Jerusalem’ (Romans 15:26).

You see, Jerusalem the mother church was at a decline due largely to persecution from Jewish and Roman authorities, whereas the outlying churches of mostly Gentile Christians were growing rapidly due mostly to Paul’s tireless and zealous missionary journeys. As a self-proclaimed Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul could have rightly earned his bragging right, particularly to the Twelve, who were initially quite lukewarm, even hostile to this mission to the Gentiles. Yet he did not do so.

Facing an actual need of the mother church, Paul organized a multi-year and multi-congregational collection scheme where these growing and affluent Gentile churches would share their blessings, or *eulogia* in Greek, with those in need. But it is so much more than simple relief work. In Paul’s teaching, such collection is a ‘priestly service’ (1 Cor. 9:12), as part of being in ‘fellowship’ (8:4 and 9:13), and a tangible gesture of gospel solidarity and love (8:8) between Gentiles and Jews.

The Corinthians, evidently, started this *logeia* or collection, but for reasons unknown, they abandoned it not long after. It could be internal division, challenges to Paul’s leadership, or simply apathy to the cause. Whatever the reason, Paul makes another effort, to appeal to the congregation in 2 Corinthians 8. This time he holds up before them the example of the Macedonian Christians (v.1-5), who gave even during ‘a severe ordeal of affliction’, and out of ‘their extreme poverty’.

But rather than trying to arouse a sense of completion with other churches (probably Philippi and Thessalonica), Paul reminds them of their

own qualities and strength. Praising them for excelling in faith, speech, knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in receiving love, Paul urges them to excel also in this generous undertaking, which leads to the second our Greek word of today, *charis*.

The word *charis*, or grace is more central to this passage than might appear from the English translation of the Bible. In 8:1, it is explicitly the grace of God that has been granted to churches of Macedonia; in verse 4 the same word is translated as 'favour' (or 'privilege' in NIV) of partnering in this ministry to the saints; and in verse 6-7 it refers to the 'generous undertaking' (or 'act of grace' in ESV) represented by the collection. For Paul these are all expressed in the one Greek word: *charis*.

What is even more important, all these generous undertakings are sustained by the *charis* (or 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." (v.9) This self-giving act of Jesus, reminiscent of the self-emptying act of Christ in Philippians 2, is not only the heart of the gospel itself, but also a description of what has been called the "economy of God", not in the modern fiscal sense of the word, but in a theological sense.

Allow me to restate this: God's saving act of grace in Jesus Christ is a gift to us, and has now become our 'economic' model of how we are to fellowship with other Christians, that is based on one word: *charis*. In response to such a *charis*, our hearts are full of thanksgiving (or *eucharistia*) as we willingly and eagerly share our gifts (or *charismata*) with others.

This leads to the third and final Greek word today, of *isotès* or equality and fairness. Paul reassures the Corinthians that he is not asking for them to give to the extent of putting them into hardship, but there be *isotès* between their abundance and the Jerusalem churches' needs (v.13-14). He is challenging the economic disparity between the Corinthians and the Jerusalem churches, and he is calling the Gentile congregations, not just the Corinthians but all others, to correct this disparity. It is an acknowledgment, as Peter S. Hawkins writes in Feasting on the Word, "We give of our substance, of ourselves, because we have ourselves been given to. All giving, therefore is ultimately a giving back."

It is in stark contrast to the very early model as described in Acts 4, where believers were foregoing private ownership and laying everything by the feet of the apostles, Paul reminds them that a gift is acceptable

according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. Just like the widow with her small copper coins at the temple treasure (Mark 12:41-44), God honours not just our gifts, but our hearts.

Finally, Paul cites the example of the economy of God in the manna story of Exodus 16:18, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

So there it is, of *logeia*, *charis*, and *isotès*, or collection, grace, and equality. Three biblical principles of stewardship, of how we are called to live as stewards of God’s manyfold blessings to us.

I will finish today’s sharing with a story. A good and faithful young man who has faithfully attended a country church, and faithfully given 1/10 of his earning every year, comes to his old pastor with a dilemma. His dot com venture has really taken off, and he is now earning an obscene amount of money, more than he could ever dream of. He is certainly thankful to God, and acknowledges God’s abundant blessings to him. He wants to give back, but questions the necessity of tithing—is it really necessary to give back to God 1/10 of what he earns? So he asks the old pastor to give him a special dispensation, of only needing to give back 1/100 of what he earns, not 1/10. The rich young man figures that even at 1/100 level, his annual giving would still far exceed the country church’s annual budget, and surely the pastor would be happy to grant that special dispensation.

The old pastor looks at the rich young man pensively and lovingly, and finally gives out a long sigh...and said, “I can’t really do that. Giving back to God 1/10 of what you earn is a time-honoured biblical principle, and is not something I have the power to alter. If you are not happy with that principle, take it up with God. What I could do is to pray for you, so that God will reduce your earning to a much lower level so that tithing will no longer be such a hardship on you.”

For God loves a cheerful giver.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**