

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1 Corinthians 8:1-9

Rich through His Poverty

Our flesh recoils at this text. This text turns everything upside down. This text takes the flesh's faith in its self-made works and beats it silly. Our flesh doesn't know what to do with it. Our flesh can't understand what it is to give with nothing to gain and no obligation.

Our flesh loves to give, or, rather, to be seen giving. That's why Jesus' words sting: "*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 it in secret will reward you*" (Mt. 6:2-4). But the flesh wants its reward now, to impress those here now. The flesh loves to drop hints or tell tales of its charity, which is no charity at all if done to purchase bragging rights.

Like a dog on a leash, our flesh wants to be told where to go and what to do to get a pat on the head. So our flesh is troubled when St. Paul warns us, "*I say this not as a command.*" "Well, if I don't have to, then why should I," the flesh scratches its head, befuddled. The flesh wants know, "How much am I supposed to put in the plate?" It glances at the next guy to compare. It sets arbitrary numbers, contrives cockamamie formulas, revels in graphs and charts, pluses and minuses, percentages and decimal points, bricks and titles. But our text will have none of that.

Our flesh is easily motivated. The flesh will fill the coffers if only the preacher says and does the right things. We could have a record financial year if only I preached to motivate the flesh instead of to kill it. We could get some PowerPoint screens up here, a sort of wall of shame, to flash people's names when we deemed them miserly. Sure we might lose a few members, but others would surely ante up to avoid the wall of shame. I could talk about all the full pockets in hell and how it is harder *for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved* (Mt. 10:25), and many would give, but it would not be charity or thankfulness, but rather a desperate attempt to save themselves. We could rank our givers like they do in college basketball. Everyone wants to be number one, to move up in the rankings. We could have a banquet each year to thank our biggest donors, the men and women of the hour. We all like to be men and women of the hour. We could give out plaques to put in living rooms and business offices to impress guests and clients. It's easy to motivate the flesh, but our text wants nothing to do with the flesh. It speaks to the redeemed heart.

There is much confusion in today's world about whether the church takes an offering or payments. But St. Paul's Church, which is Christ's Church, knows nothing of payments. It knows only free offerings, motivated, not in an appeal to the flesh, but by the memory of Christ's offering for us. The Christian Church gives offerings of thanks and praise, not payments for pew seats and brownie points with God.

St. Paul's mention of the Macedonians is thankful and not Pharisaical: "*In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.*" This is not the Pharisee's mint tithe and gold coins; this is the widow's mite: "*Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, 'Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on'*" (21:1-4).

The Corinthian congregation was a wealthy and sophisticated one—filet mignon and chardonnay, with important connections and plenty of strings to pull. The Macedonians were burgers and Miller Lite in good times, ramen noodles and Budweiser now. Their offering was

worth mentioning, not because of its size, but because of the attitude and motivation behind it—it was gospel giving. It would hardly be surprising if the plates in Corinth contained many times more money each week than those in Macedonia. Size wasn't the point. Motivation was.

St. Paul begins our text with the words that tossed the first dagger into our flesh: *"We want you to know, brothers, about the Grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia..."* The flesh had no hand in this offering. There was no payment, no attempt to curry favor or fame, to purchase bragging rights or get a complimentary pen set. This was an overflow, as the grace of Christ, poured into them in the Sacrament as it was offered to them on the cross, kept flowing in their daily lives so that, just as they had been objects of charity in Christ, they showed charity toward their brothers and sisters in Christ. Why should my brother or sister in Christ be poor when we can all be poor together, that is, poor in the pocketbook, but rich in mercy and the love of God? Faith opened its hand reflexively to the needs of others just as it had closed its hand on Christ's offering to us in our need.

There is no command in our text, no amount, no percentage, no decimal point or chart. There is only Jesus doing through His Church what He had once done for her. St. Paul says as much, *"I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."* St. Paul's mention of the Macedonian offering was not in praise of the love of the Macedonians, but in praise of the love of Christ, soaked in, reflected by, and evident in the love of the Macedonians.

Few pastors enjoy preaching about money, not because money is intrinsically immoral, but because money, like sex, can incite the flesh like little else, because the flesh seeks to use it to its own glory. But the good news is that this text is not about money. This text is about the love of Jesus that sought out and redeemed these Corinthians, that purchased and prompted the Macedonians, that still today moves God's people to give with no strings attached, out of love, because faith can't help but overflow in love, as a reflex, and not by compulsion. The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. The mind doesn't stop to check the heart. Poverty doesn't hold back the overflow of Christ's plenty. And thus, in the Judgment, the sheep say, *When did we feed you, clothe you, visit you Lord?* (Mt. 25), because faith is quick to act and slow to boast, with better eyes than memory.

The Church doesn't want your money. God doesn't want your money. I don't want your money. I don't know what anyone here gives, and I don't want to know. God wants your heart. So, instead of the amount of cash, St. Paul talks about the amount of love—love for God, love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. When you feel compelled to put your hand in your pocket, take it out, because I don't want law-money to dirty the offerings of faith, the gospel-gifts.

You are more than your wallet. You are Christ's riches, which He became poor to purchase with His very Body and Blood. You are redeemed, restored, forgiven testimonies to the charity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Never forget that, and should that move your faith to do what faith does instinctively (Luther's Preface to Romans), just as we instinctively breathe, because we are living and active, because we are not dead, good. If not, look to Christ some more, remember who He is and what He has done, and keep your hand out of your pocket and your money out of the plate, until faith, faith with hand closed upon the vicarious poverty of Christ, opens your hand and puts it there. Christ died for you, not your paycheck. May His poverty always be your plenty, and, in your poverty, may He always be more than you could ever want or need. Amen.