



“This Grace of Giving”

Isaiah 58:7-8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9; Mark 12:41-44

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Generosity is transforming and contagious. I’ve experienced its power.

The church I was serving committed itself to economic development in what was then called The Third World. We chose West Africa as a place to do that work. We engaged World Relief, a Christian relief and development organization, as our partner. World Relief, in turn partnered with churches on the ground in Burkina Faso and Mali.

Both countries are suffering from the consequences of desertification as the Sahara Desert moves south. What was once the Sahel, grassy plains suitable for growing grain and raising cattle, is now becoming desert. Once prosperous land is now barren and its people poor and hungry.

Our church focused on raising money to finance digging wells. That work has been a literal and figurative river of life to thousands of poor Africans. Perhaps most heartening of all is the way these churches have generously shared water with their neighbors. Whole villages and neighborhoods are receiving the gift of life.

Several of us decided to visit West Africa to see first hand what our gifts had accomplished. When our plane landed in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, Moise Napon, the director of World Relief, West Africa and our host for trip, met us at the airport. Moise is a delightful and generous African who has devoted his life to helping the poor of West Africa. He is a picture of what Christian faith looks like in the flesh.

Moise took us to a church in Ouagadougou with a well in its back yard. The well waters a large garden in the churchyard. The women of the church tend the garden which supplies food for their tables and their poor neighbors. In addition, the women formed a cooperative green market to sell vegetables to neighbors. The garden and green market keep families alive.

Then we visited an arts and crafts training center that assists abandoned wives of polygamous men. The women learn arts and crafts at the center and sell the products in a shop they own.

Out in the countryside we visited villages transformed by grain mills owned by women’s cooperatives. The mills are wonderful labor saving devices and provide a small business opportunity for the villages. We visited many villages with wells donated by our congregation.

I was and continue to be amazed at the large consequences of a modest investment in Christian mission. A few thousand dollars can keep a whole village alive.

The last leg of our journey took us to southern Mali and the Cliffs of Sangha. At one time the people of that area actually lived in caves in the cliffs. They developed a unique culture which has been a focus of anthropologists for decades. The Dogan people were once featured in the National Geographic Magazine. Now the people live in a large village atop the cliffs.

Mali is a nominally Muslim culture and the Dogan people are mostly Animists. However, a thriving Christian church stands in the middle of the village. Beside the church is a well sponsored by our congregation and World Relief. The entire village uses the well, and much of its water is used for a communal onion farm. At harvest time the men haul the onions on their backs in large bags down the cliffs and across the plains to Ouagadougou where they trade for grain hauled back to the village for use as food.

When we arrived, it hadn't rained for several years and there was no grain in Burkina Faso. Some of the villagers have gardens, but there wasn't enough food for all and some people were eating onion tops.

The 150-mile trip to Sangha is an all day ordeal. We traveled in sturdy four-wheel drive trucks. Not too far north of Ouagadougou the road suddenly ends, and the rest of the journey is through the nearly trackless Sahel. It was hot, dusty, and barren. The only sign of life we saw for hours was a boy driving a wagon harnessed to a camel.

At last the cliffs loomed up before us. "Strap yourselves in," our driver, Suleiman, told us. There is no real road up the cliffs. The French colonial government began constructing a road up the cliffs years ago – a remarkable engineering project. They barely started when colonial rule ended. A group of Canadian Christians pledged to finish the road, but ran out of money and abandoned the effort.

Up the steep unfinished road we headed, dodging boulders, negotiating hairpin turns, avoiding potholes the size of small cars, and trying not to look over the side of the cliff. We imagined the village men transporting sacks of onions down the cliffs and hauling grain back up.

Finally, we reached the top and drove into the courtyard of our hotel, creatively named "Le Hotel Femme." Made of dried mud, the hotel is a two-story tall quadrangle with a courtyard in the middle. The rooms are meant to look and feel like the caves in the cliffs. The doors have no locks and are attached by leather hinges. The beds were made of poles with interlaced leather straps as a mattress. No pillows were supplied. The hotel has no running water and no sewage system. (Another story for another time!!)

Our host received us politely in the courtyard – no hotel office – sent us to our rooms and ordered one of his wives to cook us supper. Tired and still dirty from the trip, we gathered in the courtyard for dinner. Our host served us cous cous which, because we were international guests, featured goat meat. Plenty of French bread and our bottled water completed the meal eaten by starlight assisted by several candles.

Our guest for the evening was a lovely woman, Judy, a linguist and translator who serves as a missionary and literacy teacher for the village. Judy was a delightful dinner companion who filled us in on the local culture. As an aside, she said the village had no word to describe her, a single white woman. She was not totally human to their way of thinking.

Toward the end of the meal, the two elders from the village church arrived to pay their respects and welcome us to the village. Judy translated. One of the men welcomed us and told us because we were Christian, we were part of his family. He told us to tell Americans that despite the hardships, the village was doing fine and the church was

prospering. He thanked us profusely for the well, the gift of life, and said the church prayed that God would repay our gift one hundred times.

Then the elder opened a bag and said he had a gift for our church. He pulled out a hand carved depiction of life in the village. It is a gorgeous piece of native art.

Then he gave each of us a gift, a small hand woven place mat. Written on the mat is a reference to Isaiah 58:7-8 which now has rich and powerful meaning to me:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then they left and we sat in stunned silence. How do you respond to generosity that comes out of poverty? Judy interrupted the silence to remind us that the elders mentioned two boys in the church who wanted to go to school in Birkinia Faso but lacked the money. We asked how much. Judy told us \$100 per boy per year.

We all took out our money to see what we had on hand. With no bank or ATM machine we were handicapped! We came up with \$200 which we entrusted to Judy to manage on our behalf.

Generosity is powerful, creative, and contagious. Our generosity to that village church, just a few thousand dollars, went to work and is transforming lives, families, and a village. They were generous with us even though they are quite poor. None of us left that village quite the same as when we drove in. Generosity, properly managed, transforms both giver and receiver.

And I hasten to add, you don't have to travel to West Africa to experience it. Needless to say, we returned home filled with stories, experiences, and enthusiasm. That congregation went on to larger investments in West Africa that are still transforming lives here and there.

Generosity works! There is an inherent and transforming power that comes alive when we are generous. Well placed and well managed, small gifts have large impact, and large generosity creates even larger impact. Generosity is not magic. It must be managed carefully. It is not a risk-free way of life. Projects fail and humans falter. But generosity always works powerfully in those who liberally give themselves and their resources.

I think that is St. Paul's point in the Epistle Lesson. The apostle was trying to heal the growing breach between Gentile and Jewish Christianity and the larger breach between Judaism and Christianity. He was determined to do what it took to bring reconciliation.

He organized and managed a large capital fund drive among the Gentile churches. He would give the money to the poor in Jerusalem as a good faith gift and gesture of reconciliation. After all, he argued, Gentile Christians are obligated to the Jews who gave us Jesus and the gospel.

All the churches filled out their pledge cards but one: Corinth. This section of Paul's letter to Corinth is Paul's appeal to the church to fill out its pledge card and turn it in. In other words, our text is a stewardship appeal. It's how one Christian leader motivated a congregation toward generosity.

Paul's method is different from conventional stewardship appeals – at least the ones I've seen. He doesn't give a heartrending description of poor and hungry children in Jerusalem. He could have, but he didn't. Such appeals work.

Nor does he offer a soaring vision of a healed church and how this money would bring reconciliation. He could have. He had such a vision. But he didn't. That's interesting, because the conventional wisdom about fundraising is that money follows vision, and the larger the vision, the larger the gifts.

Nor does Paul use his apostolic authority. He could have, of course. He founded that church. He doesn't threaten them or make them feel guilty – common stewardship techniques.

Paul doesn't attempt to move them by suggesting that Christian giving is a good investment. You may have heard TV preachers claim that God always gives more money back than we give. That is dubious theology at best, and certainly isn't used by Paul.

Apparently Paul isn't driven by pragmatism. All those methods work, but Paul doesn't use them. He does point out that the Macedonian church gave generously even though they were quite poor. It's an old, but true, irony and wisdom. The poor are often more generous than the affluent.

The heart of Paul's appeal is not pragmatic and it's not obvious, though it is everywhere in our text. Paul uses some big New Testament words to describe this gift he wants the Corinthians to join.

He says their giving is more than money. For one thing, he argues, it's part of being a community. Christian communities are, by nature, generous communities (The word Paul uses is *koinonia*). Giving is also a ministry. The Greek word is *diaconia* from which we get the English word "Deacon." Every gift given to God is divine service to others on God's behalf.

But more than anything else, generosity is grace. Eight times in these short paragraphs Paul calls Christian giving grace. Generosity is the spontaneous consequence of the experience of grace. It is, Paul says, "this grace of giving."

Generosity is the spontaneous consequence of knowing and experiencing the generosity of God revealed in Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it in our text, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, he became poor so that we, through his poverty, might become rich."

In other words, the more we understand and experience the generosity (grace) of God, the more generous we become. When we see and accept God's radical liberality to us, the consequence is always increased liberality. The larger and more generous our God, the larger and more generous we will become. Generosity creates generosity.

Maybe that's why poor people are often the most generous people. I think those poor Christian villagers in Sangha realized in ways I cannot, that everything they have is a gift. Consequently, they hold on to little. We tend to forget everything we are and have is a gift, and we hang on to it all.

That's what Jesus taught his disciples one day in the Temple. He was watching people put their offerings in the offering boxes at the door. Some were making sizeable gifts.

A poor widow put a couple of cents in the box. Jesus said, "Do you see that? Her gift was small in its amount, but very large in the size of her generosity. All gifts, no matter how small or large, are significant. The real issue, however, is the heart from which the gift springs.

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims
Sermon 4/29/07

It's time to be generous. God is at work in Plymouth Church. Look around. You can see it. God is recreating this family of faith. By the generous hand of God, this congregation is feeding our souls and transforming our lives.

Look around you and see God at work. Look inside yourself and notice God's transforming power. And remember, Jesus said the most important thing, the one non-negotiable, is to love God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves. God already loves us and the whole world with incalculable generosity. And so should we!

Amen.

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