

“Lord, Make Me Rich”
II Corinthians 8:7-15; Psalm 24

You never know when he’ll show up, but when he does he always creates an event in the church office. “Bill,” not his real name, does not fit the stereotype of those who usually walk through Westminster’s office door. Appearing several times a year, Bill is never exactly the same person. Sometimes he dresses like a man, sometimes like a woman, and sometimes as a combination of the two. One day last year he waltzed through the office door in a mini skirt and fetching black top, but without his high heels. His explanation for the fashion come down? He was pregnant. Every visit carries a little surprise, whether it be a fashion statement or a gender quiz.

There is some speculation Bill may suffer from mental illness. He can be seen prowling the highways as far away as the east side and Simpsonville. Others speculate it is all a scam, that Bill just doesn’t want to work. The outrageous costumes and talking to himself cover a desire to do as he pleases. Theories abound in the church office. But no one really knows. And it doesn’t matter.

What is obvious is that Bill lives on the edge of survival. His worn clothing, body odor, and demeanor proclaim his living standard. He comes to us for food. And we feed him. We don’t feed him because he is or will ever be one of us, or because we are trying to reform or save him, or because we think it will solve all his problems, or because we believe he can do something for us. We feed him because he’s hungry, and we have the resources to meet his need.

The context of our scripture lesson this morning is Paul’s request that the Corinthian Church donate to a fund collecting money for the Jerusalem Church. The Jerusalem Church relief fund is mentioned four times in Paul’s New Testament letters. We know from historical documents that between 40-48 AD, Judea suffered a severe food shortage. Likely this created a real problem for the Jerusalem Church which was attempting to care for so many widows and orphans. Plus, the Jerusalem Church was probably filled with members with few resources.

On the other hand, the Gentile, or non Jewish, churches founded by the Apostle Paul were more prosperous. Consequently, Paul appeals to these churches, like the Corinthian one, to give so that their fellow Christians in Jerusalem will survive. And Paul’s reasoning for why the Corinthians should help those in Jerusalem is that “it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need...” What strikes me here is the simplicity of Paul’s statement. There is no discussion of theology, no criteria of right belief, or repayment, or whether they deserve it, just plain, old simple: you have plenty, they have need — share.

One of the interesting aspects of the passage is the Jerusalem Church’s view of these gentile congregations like Corinth. Remember the people in the Jerusalem Church were former Jews. The Book of Acts tells us the former Jews did not view these gentiles as true Christians. They wanted them to go through the Jewish rituals, be circumcised before being admitted into the Church. As you can imagine this created extraordinary tension and ill will between these congregations. Yet, ignoring all this Paul says, “That’s not the point, “The point is they are hungry, and you have the resources to alleviate that hunger.”

Now, this passage is written in the context of giving money. But its principle goes far deeper than that. It asks the fundamental question of how we see ourselves in relation to others. This is not a surface issue of obligation, but as Christians, how does Christ call us to relate to one another, to share with one another?

Did you know that in the United States, the poor and the lower middle class give a far higher percentage of their incomes to help other people than do the upper middle and upper classes — you and me? Otherwise, those who have less to share give more of what they possess than those of us with much more than enough.

All of us in this sanctuary are crazed with the stock market. When we look at where we were three years ago, and where we are now, our stomachs begin to churn. But there are different degrees of hurting. Some of us are concerned about retirement, but others are worried about how they will eat.

We live in a culture that demands more and more. Success in accumulation. The one with the biggest toys wins. But Paul says the faith seeks “a fair balance.” Those with help those who are without.

The old Cherokee chief sat in his reservation hut, smoking the ceremonial pipe, eyeing the two US government officials sent to interview him. “Chief Two Eagles,” one official began, “you have observed the white man for many generations. You have seen his wars and his products, you have seen all his progress, and all his problems.” The chief nodded. The official continued, “Considering the state of the world economic situation, in your opinion, where has the white man gone wrong?” The chief stared at the government officials for over a minute, and then calmly replied. “When white man found the land, Indians were running it. No taxes. No debt. Plenty of buffalo. Plenty of beaver. Women did most of the work. Medicine man free. Indian men hunted and fished all the time.” The chief smiled, and added quietly, “White man dumb enough to think he could improve a system like that.”

Paul reminds us we cannot improve on God’s system of those who have sharing with those who have not.

We use God’s blessings to achieve “a fair balance.” We do that as an expression of love. Paul says that the foundation of how we treat one another, why we share with one another is built on the example of Christ’s gift to us. We give, we share, we help others because Jesus Christ, God Himself, came to earth and gave Himself for each and every one of us. The Christian is motivated to give of himself or herself because of how Christ offered His very life for you and me. As with the example of Jesus, our expressions of love are not found in kind words, sympathy, or “feeling another’s pain,” but in deeds. Good will, good theology, good thoughts must always be accompanied by good actions. Jesus not only talked the talk, he walked the walk.

For instance, in a family, it is good and positive to repeat the words “I love you” to one another. But true love is expressed by going to work everyday earning money for remodeled kitchens, college tuition, and car payments. True love stays up all night with a sick child. True love is being a young person displaying compassion and kindness. True love actively seeks the well being and prosperity of each member of the family. Believing in Jesus Christ, and seeking to spread the good news of the gospel means expressing that love with the sharing of our time, money and talents.

Giving to others is not only about fulfilling physical needs. It creates hope. It opens a window to the future. It gives people a chance. It does for others what Jesus did for you and me.

Jim, not his real name, was a freshman in high school when he saw a kid named Kyle walking home from school one day. He looked like he was carrying all his books. Jim thought to himself, “Why would anyone bring all his books home on a Friday? He must really be a nerd.” Jim had a big weekend planned — parties and football.

As he was walking, he saw a bunch of kids running toward Kyle. They hit him, tripped him, knocked all his books out of his hands — his glasses went flying. Kyle looked up and Jim saw the terrible sadness in his eyes, as a tear trickled down his cheek. Jim’s heart went out to him so he jogged over and helped him find his glasses. “Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives.”

Kyle looked up and said, “Thanks!” He had a big smile on his face, a smile that shows real gratitude.

As it turned out he lived near Jim’s house and when Jim asked him why he had never seen him before, Kyle said he had gone to private school. So Jim carried Kyle’s books home and discovered Kyle was a pretty neat kid. He asked him if he wanted to play football Saturday with him and his friends. Kyle readily said, “Yes.” They hung out together all weekend, and the more he got to know Kyle, the more he liked him, and so did his friends.

Over the next four years Jim and Kyle became best friends. For college Kyle decided on Georgetown and Jim would attend Duke, but he knew they would always remain close. Kyle was valedictorian of the class, so he had to give a speech at graduation.

Kyle had really found himself in high school. He had filled out, even looked good in his glasses and had more dates than his friend. Sometimes Jim was even a little jealous of him.

Well, on the big day he could tell Kyle was nervous about his speech, so he slapped him on the back and said, “Hey, big guy, you’ll be great!”

When the time came, Kyle cleared his throat, stood up and began: “Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach...but mostly your friends. I am here to tell all that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you a story.”

Jim just looked at his friend in disbelief as Kyle told the story of the first day they met. Kyle had planned to kill himself over the weekend. He had cleaned out his locker of all his books so his mom wouldn’t have to do it later. “Thankfully,” Kyle said, looking at Jim, “I was saved. My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable.”

A gasp went through the crowd as this handsome, popular boy told about his weakest moment — and how someone reaching out to him, sharing his friendship, saved his life.

When we give of ourselves, our resources, our love, our kindness, our friendship we do as Jesus did and taught us to do.

“Lord, Make Me Rich”

Though we may not have overtly prayed this prayer, most of us have thought about it. Money looks to be the avenue to happiness. Yet, the Christian faith flies in the face of culture and economics. One gets rich not by hoarding, but by giving. Money will not make us wealthy or happy. Every one of us knows people who are rich in things, but poor in soul. Christians seek a fair balance, whereby we make certain everyone has enough.

I'm glad this lectionary passage appeared in August. It prevents us from glumly casting it aside as a stewardship/church budget sermon. The Apostle Paul is discussing more than donating to a relief fund. He calls us to examine how we see ourselves in relation to others, how closely we follow the example of giving Jesus showed us. Wealth, like love, comes not by what we accumulate, but by what we share.

This morning, as you and I examine our lives, even if our portfolios are down, are we still getting rich because of what we give?

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