

Faith Mennonite Church
February 3, 2013 - Annual Meeting Sunday
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Giving and serving to build up the body
2 Corinthians 8:1-7 9, 12-15; Ephesians 4:7, 11-16

A few decades ago when Gerald and I were volunteers with Mennonite Central Committee, I remember hearing the CEO of MCC tell a story to a constituent group. He was commenting on the fact that many constituents liked to brag about how low MCC's overhead expenses were in comparison to some other faith-based organizations. MCC historically spent only 10-12% of its total budget on overhead, administrative costs.

So Reg Toews told this story: A farmer had a beloved, hard-working quarter horse. One day the farmer decided to begin experimenting with lowering the horse's food ration. Being a good steward of his resources, he wanted to see how little the horse could get by on. Each day he incrementally decreased the amount he fed the horse. He was feeling really proud of himself when he got down to one cup of oats a day, but then before he got to the coffee shop in town to tell all his friends, the horse died.

Frugality may be good, said Reg, but too much frugality, or focusing only on frugality, can be deadly! Reg wanted to commend the desire to have as much of one's gift go to meeting actual need as possible. At the same time, he pointed out that assessing needs, adequately caring for international workers and their local partners who provide assistance, and evaluating the effectiveness of programs also requires resources.

Some Catholic friends that we got to know in Central America during our MCC service there, told us a very different story, from the largely Latino immigrant parish they attended in Chicago when they returned to the US. One Sunday during announcement time, the priest asked the parishioners to save the lottery tickets that they would purchase during that week and to bring and place them in the next Sunday's collection. I'm not sure how large the parish was, but the next week's offering included about \$3,000 dollars worth of lottery ticket stubs. The following Sunday the priest shared the results and suggested what the parish and neighborhood could do with this money if everyone brought it to church. They could purchase playground equipment, library books, and do other projects to enhance the whole community rather than taking the gamble on a personal jackpot.

These very different stories demonstrate contrasting human tendencies. Some people tend toward thrift, thinking the highest value is always to spend the least amount of money on anything, not always recognizing the need for investment or for quality. Many people, and this might include some in the first category, consider money in primarily individualistic terms, not realizing the power of a few dollars shared. Every time I hear certain politicians say "individuals know how to spend money better than the government," I wonder how many of us individually would build roads, school and libraries.

Today at our annual meeting, as we do each year, we will affirm a proposed budget for the coming year and a slate of persons who have agreed to serve in a variety of capacities in our congregation. These two things may feel like rather ordinary, pro forma business. But in light of our scripture readings this morning they are the important ordinary! And, not surprisingly, they represent two of seven priorities for living into our denomination's "Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan: Desiring God's Coming Kingdom": stewardship and leadership development.

Often in church settings when we hear the word stewardship we think of "meeting the budget." But the biblical sense of stewardship is a simple recognition that God has generously entrusted us with resources that are intended for the good of all. Everything we have belongs first and ultimately to God. Practicing stewardship involves care of our bodies, care of creation, the practice of mutual aid among ourselves which we do through our Deacons Fund, and sharing beyond our congregation, all of which reflect the generosity of God.

I came across some interesting statistics this week that mirror the picture we see in the reading from 2 Corinthians. Paul was addressing the church in Corinth with a request that they share in meeting the needs of Christians in another location. As an incentive, he reports about the church in Macedonia, and how “during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ...they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means...” (8:2-3). It appears that the Corinthians were in a better financial situation than their brothers and sisters in Macedonia, yet Paul held up the Macedonians for their generosity in the midst of poverty.

In a book titled *Passing the Plate: Why Americans Don't Give Away More of their Money*, the authors report that the average American making under \$10,000 gives 2.3% of their income to religious organizations while people earning \$70,000 or more only give 1.2%. Among active Christians, those earning under \$12,500 give 7%, which is not surpassed by any higher income groups except for those earning over \$90,000 where the percentage rises to 8.8%. (Oxford University Press, 2008)

Researchers John and Sylvia Ronsvalle, of a Champaign, Ill.-based organization called Empty Tomb, uncovered another interesting fact. “Among church members of 11 primary Protestant denominations (or their historical antecedents) in the United States and Canada, per-member giving as a percentage of income was lower in 2000 than in either 1921 or 1933. In 1921, per-member giving as a percentage of income was 2.9 percent. In 1933, at the depth of the Great Depression, per-member giving grew to 3.3 percent. By 2000, after a half-century of unprecedented prosperity, giving had fallen to 2.6 percent.” (John L. Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving through 2000* (Champaign, Ill.: Empty Tomb, 2002), 40.)

There are many ways we might respond to the scripture and to these statistics. I'd like to consider just one this morning—something that each one of us can consider and do in some way. We have all grown up with different family practices regarding charitable giving or tithing, the Old Testament guide for giving 10% or the “first fruits of one's harvest/income.” Some of us may have been taught as children to set aside a portion of our very first allowance, to put in the church offering. Others of us may never have experienced such modeling in our families. Whatever our background and practice, we can each make a commitment to making a deliberate decision about giving. If you've never done proportionate giving, but rather pull from what's in your wallet when the offering plate is passed, I encourage you to start where you can and make a commitment that some portion, some fixed percentage of your income will be shared. Like Noah and Oliver's toys held in common, that proportion becomes *ours* not mine. Start with what seems manageable—one, two, or five percent. And then, each year, see whether you can increase that percentage.

This is not a competition, not a strict requirement; we don't want to kill any horses. As Paul wrote, “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” (8:13-14). Then, recalling how manna was distributed when the Israelites lacked food in the wilderness:

“The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little” (8:15).

It is fascinating how our scriptures this morning are linked by the concept of giving. In the Ephesians 4 passage, which focuses on leadership development, the writer speaks of the roles and positions that build the church as *gifts* given by Christ to the church. Just as our financial giving represents much more than “meeting the budget,” the names on our slate of officers, commission and committee members represent much more than the meetings they will attend or individual tasks they will fulfill. The verses in Ephesians speak of empowerment, development, and participation so that the whole church grows in its ministry of healing and hope and extending the news of God's kingdom to others.

We're a fairly humble bunch here. Those who accept the call to serve as deacons often say they're not sure they're “spiritual” enough to accept that role. Many of us, regardless of the assignment, fear that we can't give as much as might be expected. But I've watched people grow into roles or exhibit

capacities that were there but we had not had occasion to witness. And always, the best service, is that which grows from a desire to serve the whole rather than perform or fulfill an expectation. Like stewardship, we offer ourselves in service because of the gifts we have received.

The other day I read an article that quoted Parker Palmer, speaking at a recent conference: “In the human world,” said Palmer, “abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common story. Whether the ‘scarce resource’ is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around.” (Quoted by Dean Hilgers in *Loyola Letter*, Winter/Spring 2013)

May we carry this spirit of abundance, of grateful stewards, of gifted people joined together to build up ourselves as a body that reaches out to heal and share the good news of Christ in the world.