

SHOW ME THE MONEY
2 Corinthians 8: 7-15

Roula: *Hi Don. How is it going today?*

Don: *I am not sure. I have a lot on my mind. I've been thinking of how to get people to give more money for the church. You know it is stewardship season.*

Roula: *So, what did you come up with?*

Don: *Well, here is what I found on the internet. It is a very clever idea and we easily can get it implemented here. "New offering plate for churches: This ingenious invention receives gifts a dollar or more on a plush cushion with silent graciousness. But when half-dollars are dropped in, it rings a bell; when quarters are given, it blows a whistle; when dimes are slipped in, it fires a shot. But when someone refuses to give, it takes their picture."*

Roula: *Well, I have not been here very long, but somehow I think this might offend people. This is definitely over the top. So, did you have any other ideas?*

Don: *Oh yes, what about having a campaign called, "show me the money and I will show you Jesus." This way we can use a catchy title and get the point across without calling it a stewardship campaign. Let's just get to the bottom line. Doesn't this sound good, "show me the money and I will show Jesus." I can even come up with a tune for this one.*

Roula: *This campaign sounds like something from the movie, Jerry McGuire. I agree that it does sound catchy, but I think the stewardship team had something else in mind.*

Don: *See that's the trouble, we keep saying that stewardship is about lofty goals of faith and we confuse people and lose their interest. I saw on CNN the other day how big time preachers get people to donate a lot of money. They tell them that they have to do it so that they can be blessed. You wouldn't mind getting a big Mercedes, would you? I think it is either the new offering plates or the catchy campaign. One or the other, you choose. You call me when you make up your mind.*

Roula: *OK, I will call you by the end of the week.*

What is interesting about Don's ideas is that they are similar to those of the Corinthians. Some of the people in the church of Corinth felt manipulated by the Apostle Paul. It seemed at first when he told them that God's grace was free and they didn't have to earn it, all they had to do was accept it. When he founded the church, he wouldn't take any money from them. He lived on funds from another church. Then he told them that they needed to contribute to the church in Jerusalem. Some members felt that he tricked them into signing up and then slapped a tax on them. So, instead of going back to them to fight with them, Paul decided to send Titus in his place to organize the offering. Then he wrote them a letter to help them understand that giving was not an obligation but a blessing. It was not something that would earn them God's love. It was something that would help make them more like Christ. Paul knew that one of the things that we hold onto so dearly is our money. Money is one of those things in life that make us feel secure. To give it away is a hardship for most of us because it means that we are letting go of our security. We want to give, but we only give what is left over, what does not change our lifestyle. I am not talking about just our basic needs. Yet, in order for our giving to shape our lives, it has to be more than the extras. It has to be something that helps us become more generous and more reliant upon God's grace every day.

The reference at the end of the scripture we read today in 2 Corinthians 8 is from Exodus 16 when Paul talks about “the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” This is when the people of God, the Israelites, left their slavery in Egypt and were in the desert relying on God for manna for their daily food. God gave them manna from heaven every day and they were supposed to eat all they wanted but not keep any overnight. They were supposed to wait for the next day to get more. As a child in Syria, I was fascinated with this miracle of how the Israelites received food from God in the desert. To add to my curiosity, one day after my grandfather returned from a trip to the desert, he shared with me some actual manna. After eating it, he explained to me that manna is made with crystallized honeydew of scale insects feeding on tamarisk twigs; at the turn of the 20th century local Arabs in Palestine collected the resin of the tamarisk, pronounced as *mann es-sama* ("heavenly manna"), and sold it to pilgrims. I was not thrilled that I ate the honeydew of scale insects from a tree, but I was impressed to know that the Israelites truly found manna in the desert. As I look back at this story, I find even more meaning in it. It is not just a miracle of finding something so unique in the desert through God’s help, but it is also about learning how to fully trust God’s care and to rely on God every day. This way also, the economy of the people was balanced where everyone’s need was satisfied. No one went hungry because they didn’t have enough money.

This of course goes against most of what our culture teaches us. We are taught that our happiness is tied to accumulating material wealth. We are told that the more we have, the happier we are. Christmas is coming up and I invite you to pay attention to how advertisers give us the message that loving others involves spending a lot of money. A couple of months ago, I heard about Reverend Billy, of the Church of Stop Shopping. This is an ordinary man who uses his theatrical skills to call our attention to something that we have gotten so comfortable with. That is, consumerism. Rev. Billy, Bill Talen, recently wrote a book called, “What Would Jesus Buy?” His church is always on the move and his sermons are preached in places like Starbucks, Disney Store, and Victoria Secret. In fact, “What Would Jesus Buy” is also coming out as a movie on November 16, which is “Buy Nothing Day.” There is a lot of humor in the way Rev. Billy imitates the style of televangelists, but underneath all of what he does is a sincere concern for our souls to be freed from consumerism, and embrace who we truly are: people who know how to give and receive love.

This is the vision our ancestors, who sacrificed their own time and money, had when they bought the land and built First Presbyterian Church of Batavia. I have been enjoying reading the history of this church and learning about how through thick and thin the people of this congregation kept going and saw the importance of having this congregation be a place for welcoming, nurturing and equipping people to be disciples of Christ. It was interesting to learn that this was the first congregation established in Batavia because the people saw the importance of having a church.

So, we stand here today almost two hundred years from that day when the church was established and we proclaim the same vision for having this congregation be a place where people come to be nurtured and leave to be sent out into the world as transformed people to join God’s mission in the world. I invite you today as you look at your pledge card to pray and ask God for guidance about your giving to help you become more generous so that your financial giving may be a blessing to your spiritual life.

In his book Run with the Horses, Eugene Peterson tells how he saw some birds teaching their young to fly. Three young birds were perched on a dead branch that stretched out over a lake. “One adult bird got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch—pushing, pushing, pushing. The end one fell off. Somewhere between the branch and the water below, the wings started working and the little bird was off on his own. Then the second one. The third one, however, was not to be bullied. At the last possible moment his grip on the branch loosened just enough so that he swung downward, then tightened again, bulldog tenacious. The parent pecked at the desperately clinging claws until it was more painful for the chick to hang on than risk the insecurities of flying. The grip was released and the wings began pumping. The mature bird knew what the chick did not—that it would fly—that there was no danger in making it do what it was designed to do.” Peterson writes, “Birds have feet and can walk. Birds have claws and can grasp a branch

securely. They can walk; they can cling. But flying is their characteristic action and not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully.

Giving is what we do best. It is the air into which we were born. It is the action that was designed into us before our birth. Some people try desperately to hold on to themselves, to live for self. They look so sad doing it, hanging on to the dead branch of selfishness afraid to risk themselves on the untried wings of giving. Yet many people don't think they can live generously because they have never tried." We were created to live generously by giving generously of our time, talents and finances. We were meant to soar. May we soar together in the love of Christ through our giving and receiving of love.