

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8) – Year B – July 1, 2009 - Homily**  
**2 Samuel 1: 1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

If you do an internet search for the word “money” you get close to one billion hits. I also searched the Bible for mentions of money, riches, wealth and so on and came up with over five hundred references. Clearly an important topic that almost every Lutheran or Episcopalian I have ever met does not want to discuss! There are also a plentiful supply of songs, musicals, movies, poems and other cultural offerings about money. The opening lines of pop group Abba’s hit song *Money, Money, Money* is, “I work all night, I work all day, to pay the bills I have to pay / Ain’t it sad / And still there never seems to be a single penny left for me...” What truly is sad is the sentiment expressed in this and many other thoughts about money. The group sings that they work, first and foremost, to pay their bills. There’s no mention of giving to God’s work before running up those bills they have to pay!!

Tonight’s reading from Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth is plainly about stewardship. There is a little flattery at the beginning of this reading about how the Corinthians excel at everything, followed closely by Paul’s suggestion that they may also wish to excel in **this** generous undertaking as well. The generous undertaking he is talking about is financial support for other Christians. More specifically, the money he is trying to raise is for a gift to alleviate the suffering of the church in Jerusalem. This is more than just Christian charity or relief work. Paul presents his appeal as a theological and spiritual issue for every single follower of Christ to work out for ourselves. Well, not entirely by ourselves – Paul is here to help us, as was Jesus.

What is beautiful about Paul’s letter is that he gets straight down to the heart of stewardship and what being a steward of God’s bounty is really about. Jesus is paradigmatic for our understanding of how to be a steward. Here’s what Paul says about Jesus’ generous act of giving. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). The generous act of Jesus is being compared to the generous act that Paul is asking of the Corinthians. And it is so much more nuanced than our meager English translation implies. For the Greek-speaking Corinthians they would understand that the generous act is also a gift of grace, a blessing, Christian fellowship, priestly service, and participation in the life of Christ. When we consider ourselves stewards of God’s grace -- when we practice God’s graciousness -- it means exactly the same thing. That is generous acts of giving, gifts of grace given grace-fully, blessings to others, fellowship in and towards the community, priestly service to all of God’s children, and intentional participation in the life of our Lord Jesus as a disciple of Christ. This is what being a steward of God’s abundant gifts of grace really means, and that is why our financial giving, like that of the Corinthians, is truly about our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a theological issue, and a spiritual one.

Let’s look first at the theology. Theology simply means the study of God. So how do you and I mirror God’s characteristics in being good stewards? The nature of God is love, and that means relationship. For you and I it is expressed in loving our neighbors as ourselves, in generous giving and sharing with one another. In other words it is exactly what Paul was asking of the church at Corinth – to share from the abundance of God’s good and gracious gifts. Another way to understand stewardship is to remember that we are taking care of God’s people as a continuation of Christ’s work in the world, and that God gives us all that we need to do His work. We don’t *own* any of this – not the wages we earn, the homes we live in, our children or grandchildren – none of it. We are simply looking after everything on behalf of God. Thinking like a disciple changes our questions about money and about all the spiritual and material gifts from God. We no longer ask, “What can I afford to give?” because that kind of thinking effectively puts God last, and ourselves first, and is the way the world thinks. Instead, we pray with gratitude for all God’s gifts and ask, “How is God calling me to use all that God has given to me to serve Him?” All giving is a giving back to God with gratitude.

Another side of the theology is understanding who God is in relationship. That is the equality of

the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, which is sometimes called the “economy of God”. All persons of the Trinity are One: co-equal and co-eternal. This too is reflected in how Paul poses the request he makes to the Corinthians. Paul reminds the church that when God was providing for the Israelites’ needs in the desert, each were invited to collect manna every day except for the Sabbath day. And all who did collect manna had exactly what they needed – not too much and not too little. This is the model for our daily living. Paul is not asking the Corinthians to give to the point where they would be suffering and in need. He is asking them to share proportionately from their own abundance to alleviate the suffering and need of their brothers and sisters in Christ. With that said, it challenges you and me to consider our own giving. At the extremes there are many of us who value the luxuries of life to the point that we are so rich in abundance that we feel we have nothing left over to give for the work of the church and for those who have so little. It is the same as the song – I work all day and night to pay my bills. Those bills may well reflect things we want rather than things we really need. At the other extreme, there are some who may be tempted to sell everything they have and give it all to the poor. What God says, what Jesus said, what Paul also says is that there is middle way. A way that ensures we are healthy in body, mind and spirit. A way that means we are good stewards – not living our lives to such an excess that we spend everything we have on ourselves and then claim to have nothing left to give for God’s work. A way of life that says, you don’t need to sell it all and give it to the poor if you are being a good steward. Why? Because there is enough for everyone if we take time and care to live moderately, and share with one another generously. That is what we call a theology of abundance and it is entirely contrary to the world’s way which embraces a theology of scarcity. Culture will tell us again and again that there are scarce resources and we are in competition for them. God tells us again and again that He will provide for our needs, and there is more than enough – indeed an abundance -- to go around if we would stop hoarding or competing, and start sharing gladly.

Our theology informs our spirituality. When we put God first, we realize that everything we have belongs to God, and we are released from those feelings of scarcity and competition. Giving is what God desires for us, since it helps us to build and grow in relationships. That is why giving of our time, giving of our spiritual gifts, and giving of our money and other resources makes us feel good – because we are doing what God desires for us. In giving, we are prayerfully aligning our wills with God’s will in the way that Jesus did. The best part is that in our generous giving we are bringing ourselves closer to God, and the closer we are to God the easier our being and our doing becomes, the greater our joy in all aspects of our lives, and the more we are empowered to take greater responsibility for glorifying God’s name. I can’t speak for anyone else – we must each ask ourselves the question, “Is that closeness to God what I want in my life? Just in case you’re curious – my answer is a resounding “yes”!

Amen.