

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Giving from the Heart: Giving Joyfully”

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Deuteronomy 16:13-17; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

I was sucking wind. This past summer Cindy and I had met our daughter Katie and the boyfriend, Brendan, in Colorado. The plan was not only to spend time with the boyfriend, but for Katie, Brendan and I to do some short hikes. So, for our first, and what would prove to be our last hike, we chose to hike to Nymph and Emerald Lakes. The trail is about 2 miles, beginning at about 9,500 ft and ending up around 10,000 ft. So, all in all an easy walk...or at least it would be if I were in shape and acclimated to the altitude. But half way into the hike, as I was being passed by six and seven-year-olds, I was sucking wind and was wondering if it was worth it to continue. At that moment I had a choice to make, either I gave up or I continued, hoping to catch my second wind or I told my companions, “Don’t worry about me, you go on.”

I offer this story because it was where the Corinthians were. They were sucking wind, not from hiking, but from giving and they had a choice to make, give up on the offering, or quit. Sometime before Paul wrote this letter, the Corinthians had begun a joyful quest to financially support the church in Jerusalem, but somewhere along the way they had quit. They had lost the joy they once had for this endeavor and were not sure they could find the joyous energy to continue. It would be easy enough for Paul to simply let them give up, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t first because the church in Jerusalem, the church from which all other churches had come, was in difficult financial straits. He couldn’t secondly because he knew that if they were allowed to stop and never restart, it would be the end of their giving careers. It may be that we can sympathize with the Corinthians. After all, at this time of the year, we are inundated with requests to give. I know this because I have with me this large stack of requests that has come in just this week. Sometimes I think we see these and begin not only to suck giving wind, but to become depressed rather than joyous because there is so much need and limited funds to give. Thus, giving feels like a burden or obligation, rather than a joy. So how do we turn this around and find our second joyful giving breath? Let’s see if Paul can help.

He begins by pointing them to others who have joy. In this case to the Macedonians. *“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints...”* Macedonia was the poorest and most oppressed part of Asia Minor. By all accounts they ought to have been asking for, rather than giving, money. Yet there was a joy within them that overflowed such that they begged to give; they couldn’t help themselves. They were filled with the kind of joy that the Corinthians once had for giving. The Macedonians showed that joyful giving is possible. I have to say, for me, that anytime I lose a bit of the joy of giving, all I have to do is watch the

children comes down front for the Young Disciples Time and drop their money in the trumpet (yes that is what we call the vessel in which they put their money. The name comes from the same sort of vessels in the Temple in Jerusalem where the widow puts her mite). There seems to be within them an enthusiasm and joy for giving. Joy is out there. All we have to do is look.

Paul continues, by pointing them to Jesus. *“I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 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.”* This was a reminder that what they had was not their own. It had been given to them as a gift; a freely given gift by God through Jesus. That the faith they now owned was joyously offered to them by the one who sacrificed all so that they could have enough and more. I say joyously because the word used by Paul for generous is *“charis”* which means joyous grace. For me, I find this at the table and the cross. Every time I walk into this sanctuary and see them, I am reminded that who I am and what I have, have come to me not only through Jesus, but through countless generations who have told and retold the story of God’s love, who have broken the bread and poured the cup, and who have given joyfully that this church might be here to nurture us and future generations, in Jesus’ love and tender mercies. Joy is in here. All we have to do is look.

Finally, Paul points them to themselves. He reminds them that less than a year earlier they were filled with the joy of giving. They had the eagerness to give to this needed offering. *“And in this matter, I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.”* Paul reminds them that they had not been coerced into making a pledge to the church in Jerusalem but had been eager to do so. There had been this intense joy that had taken hold of them. He is saying, you had this joy once, you can have it again. Take a deep breath, find your joy and keep on going. I want to be clear about something at this point, and that is that Paul does not expect them to impoverish themselves. They are to give according to what they have and not what they do not have. Their giving is to be out of eagerness and joy, not fear or compulsion. My guess is that there is a time in your lives when you felt joy at giving. Maybe it was to the life and work of this church. Maybe it was to hurricane relief. Maybe it was to food baskets or Shop and Drop. Regardless of where that may have been, Paul reminds us that we can have it again. Joy is back there. All we have to do is look.

Unfortunately we have no idea if the Corinthians got their second wind, rediscovered the joy of giving and finished the collection. We don’t know because this is the last of the correspondence we have between Paul and the church. What we can know, though is that we can find the joy of giving again. Just as I found my second wind in Colorado and reached both lakes, we can find our second-giving wind.

The challenge for each of us is to find the joy. It is to catch our breath, find our second wind and rediscover the joy of giving back to God through this church and other helping organizations, such that lives are changed, and the world made better. My challenge to you then for this week is this, to ask yourselves, where am I rediscovering the joy of giving, such that I can continue to be part of the life changing work of God in the world?