

Rev. Kenneth J. Rodrigue
St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
10 November 2024

Sermon on 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Worship Theme:

LIVE A LIFE OF STARTLING GENEROSITY

Many people try to live life to the fullest right now because they believe that this life is all we have. But Jesus teaches us that he will raise us from the dead and take us to live in his perfect home. Knowing that, we are set free from the need to live a self-indulgent life. Instead, we can use the wealth that God has given us to serve both him and others. We can live a life of startling generosity.

Sermon Theme: “**Godly Generosity**”

Have you noticed it yet? Ready or not, “it’s beginning to look a lot like…” …well I think you know how the song goes. I’m noticing it “everywhere I go” though! Almost as if our calendars jumped straight from October 31 to December 1 – it seems like every store I go into has discounted candy corn right next to a bright shiny candy cane. I noticed something else too though: big boxes where food can be donated to people in need; different advertisements for groups raising money or gathering items for people who could use a little extra help; we even have a couple places to gather donated items right here at St. John’s. Those things tend to remind us that the “beginning-to-look-a-lot-like” season isn’t just the trees and lights and stockings; many people everywhere also see this as a wonderful season of giving.

In 2 Corinthians 8, the Apostle Paul is also talking about a season of giving. The Christian churches of that day often gathered offerings to be sent off to far-off places, to other Christian churches and people in need. Here Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians what the churches in Macedonia had already done. He says, “*In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. ⁴ They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations.*”

Paul’s words in this portion of his letter are beautiful, but do they strike your conscience a bit? They certainly strike mine. They strike mine because while I read them and marvel at the **generosity** as the Macedonians gave above and beyond what was expected and even beyond what was reasonable for them, I must admit I haven’t lived like that. We all often fail to live like that because **generosity** is not in our nature. Thanks to sin, our natural way of thinking is much more focused on self-preservation. We think things like, “I’ve worked hard for this money, so I deserve to keep and enjoy it.” or “There are plenty of jobs out there; why can’t they go earn money and take care of themselves the way I do?” or “I see people in need, but I just can’t swing it right now. I’m sure someone who has much more to spare will take care of them.” or “It’s not November or December, so it isn’t even the right season for giving to other people. Ask me again at that time.”

And we justify these thoughts by convincing ourselves that, because there may be an element of truth to them, it must be fine to think and act that way. Other people have much more than we have, so they can do the giving, and we should be allowed to keep what we have. We withhold our **generosity** because “I need all these things for myself!”

But what if God acted that way? What if God looked around at his beautiful Creation and said, “Well, they’ve already messed everything up, so I’m not giving them anything else – I’m keeping it for myself so it stays nice!” or “It’s not even the right time of year for this! They can get all their prayers and requests in during November and December, because that’s the season of giving. I’ll help them then, but for the other 10 months of the year, these people need to figure everything out for themselves. I’m not going to do it for them!”

How absolutely dreadful it would be for us if that were the way God thought and acted. Then we truly would have nothing. We would have no house, no money, no job, no food on our tables, no family. We wouldn’t even exist! And even if we did exist, then we would have only one thing to truly call our own: SIN. Sin is the only possession we can rightfully claim as our own, the only thing we’ve truly worked hard to earn in life. It doesn’t matter if we work our tails off all day every day, because we are sinful people who do nothing but ruin everything by our constant sinning! We haven’t earned or deserved a single blessing in life, not even during a so-called “season of giving.” God should give us nothing good.

And yet, did you catch what Paul said? *You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.* This is a life-changing verse! Let’s break it down a bit: “*Jesus Christ was rich.*” That much is obvious – Jesus is GOD! He is the Lord of everything, and there is nothing that exists in the entire universe that does not ultimately belong to him. But then a shocking little word pops out at us from that sentence: WAS. “*Jesus Christ WAS rich. Yet for your sake, he became poor.*” We sometimes have a hard time parting with a \$20 in our wallets; can you even imagine giving up off the throne of the universe?! But that’s what Jesus did *so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

As God, Jesus could go no higher. There was nothing he needed that he didn’t already have; no more power to gain, no more wealth to gather. Except for one thing. The one thing God didn’t have that he desperately desired to have was YOU. Because of our sin and rebellion against God, we belonged to the devil. Because the human race is a fallen sinful race, that’s who we are from the very moment our existence begins at conception: we are property of the devil, destined to spend eternity in hell with him. And it’s not unfair! It’s exactly what we deserve.

Yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. Jesus gave up his almighty throne in heaven, and entered into his Creation as a created human being, for you and me. He subjected himself to living among the most stingy and selfish creatures ever (US!!) to redeem us and make us his own. Did we deserve it? Absolutely not. But that’s what makes it *grace*. Undeserved love! We never grow tired of talking about or hearing about God’s

grace for us because it is that very love which caused him to come after us, speak his powerful Word into our hearts and lives, and bring us the incomparable peace of the full and free forgiveness of all our sins along with a permanent change of address for our eternal home, a home in heaven with him. God didn't do that just because it was a "season of giving!" Rather he did it because, for God, it's always a season of giving. **Godly Generosity** is what he shows us every single day – the generosity of a God who loves us infinitely beyond what we deserve. A God who gave up everything to save us. A God who claims us as his own and cherishes us so dearly, showering us with his love every day of our lives, sometimes in ways we don't even know.

It is to people who have been changed by that *grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* that Paul is writing, eager to share with them something else that comes from God's grace: *And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches*. Because of God's undeserved love for people, he has already changed everything about our lives – we're free from sin and heaven is our home, which means we have greater blessings than anything this world can ever offer us. And as an additional measure of his grace, God also gives us another gift: the privilege of giving! Joyfully, freely, without hesitation! Paul says of the Macedonian churches, *In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.* ³ *For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,* ⁴ *they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.* ⁵ *And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.* Did you notice how central God is to all that? This is not how human beings naturally behave! But it is how human beings who have been saved by God behave. They didn't care what their situation was – they were going to take the grace which God had so freely given them and pass it on to others so that they too would know the priceless undeserved love of Jesus. This is **godly generosity**, a generosity that so freely and willingly shows itself because of how greatly God has already worked in hearts and lives. The faith of the Macedonian Christians was bearing fruit as they joyfully spread whatever blessings they had to others who needed them too.

Paul then continues, *So we urged Titus to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.* ⁷ *But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.* ⁸ *I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.* In his words to the Corinthians Christians, notice he didn't say, "You must do this or else!" *I am not commanding you!* But he does remind them, us, and all Christians that because God has already given and continues to give so much, we don't need to remain in our old ways of stinginess and self-preservation – we have everything we'll ever need and more. And he also doesn't say we must give away absolutely everything we have, nor does he say we should stop caring about the things of this world as if they are unimportant. They're very important! Our jobs and homes and

money and everything we work hard for are important for providing for ourselves and our families; all these things are gifts from God's gracious hand too, and we can rejoice in them however and whenever he gives them!

But Paul reminds us that wealth in this world is never the goal, and we have something of far greater value: we have Jesus! Therefore we are set free from a life focused on getting all there is to have on earth, and we can use the things we have to be a blessing to others. This isn't something we must do in order to become a Christian; rather, it is a result that comes from already being one through the faith in Jesus which God gave us! It is truly a blessing and privilege to share what God so freely gives in Christ. God's gracious gift to us is that we also get to give grace. Because of the **Godly Generosity** of our Savior, who, *though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich* – because of that generosity! – we too can show **godly generosity** in many different ways, all throughout the year. God has no limit on his “season of giving”, and neither do his people. Our God-pleasing selfless generosity toward others is a thankful response to the grace he endlessly pours into our lives, which means every day is an opportunity to share the love of Jesus with others in as many ways as we can. Now “it's beginning to look a lot like” God's grace – “everywhere we go!” Thank you, Lord, for this wonderful blessing and privilege! Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.