

Celebrate Generosity

October 21, 2007

(2 Corinthians 9:6-15 NRSV) The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. {7} Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. {8} And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. {9} As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." {10} He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. {11} You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; {12} for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. {13} Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, {14} while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. {15} Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (The Message)

Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.

God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it,
He throws caution to the winds,
giving to the needy in reckless abandon.
His right-living, right-giving ways
never run out, never wear out.

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.

Carrying out this social relief work involves far more than helping meet the bare needs of poor Christians. It also produces abundant and bountiful thanksgivings to God. This relief offering is a prod to live at your very best, showing your gratitude to God by being openly obedient

to the plain meaning of the Message of Christ. You show your gratitude through your generous offerings to your needy brothers and sisters, and really toward everyone. Meanwhile, moved by the extravagance of God in your lives, they'll respond by praying for you in passionate intercession for whatever you need. Thank God for this gift, his gift. No language can praise it enough!

Charles Dickens, in a Tale of Two Cities, writing about the French Revolution wrote: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

How appropriate that seems to be given today's situation.

All one has to do is turn on the news — and I am not even talking about the "celebrity news" shows that are so popular.

Inside addition

Extra

Entertainment Tonight

Access Hollywood

Because even the local and national news shows are filled with stories about little rich kids who have it all — Paris Hilton, Brittany Spears, Lindsey Lohan — but have nothing. They are rich and famous — but they are miserable and their lives are a mess!

I think that just about every adult has said it sometime in their life: MONEY CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS.

But while we say that — we still run out a buy a lottery ticket, or dream about some huge windfall believing that THEN everything will be better.

My marriage will be happier

My kids/grandkids will be happier

My . . . — you can fill in the blank.

Unfortunately, the saying is still true: Money can't buy happiness.

Gregg Easterbrook in his book *The Progress Paradox*, makes the point that life is getting better all the time:

Our houses are bigger,

our incomes are growing,

our health is improving,

and the environment is becoming cleaner.

We are even enjoying a drop in crime rates.

So why aren't we all jumping for joy?

Easterbrook has some intriguing ideas about why we feel rotten in the middle of our nation's great riches. As he tries to explain how we can be both healthy and unhappy.

He argues that:

Bad news sells

If it doesn't bleed, it doesn't lead.

We all know that it's always a disaster of some kind that draws us to television news reports, and bad news is what keeps us glued to the tube through many commercial breaks.

During a snowstorm in Washington, D.C., in the early 1990s, the local NBC affiliate changed the name of the weather segment from WeatherCenter to StormCenter. Well, guess what? They never changed it back, not even for sunny days. Because the true is bad news sells.

We don't sleep enough

Americans sleep an hour less every night than they did a generation ago. And if that's not bad enough, we sleep about two or three hours less per night than people did a century ago. With such sleep deprivation, no wonder we feel cranky!

We are full of envy

Awards shows, feature films, celebrity Internet sites, *People* magazine and programs such as *Exotic Vacations of the Rich and Famous* are constantly bombarding us with information about how the more fortunate members of society live, and this is bound to make us feel envy — even if our lifestyle is really quite comfortable.

The solution to one problem creates another

Easterbrook describes this phenomenon as “the unsettled character of progress,” and his insight makes sense, when you think about it. We invent an anthrax vaccine, and then we fear that it has terrible side effects. We create a nationwide network of cell phones, and then we live in terror that some distracted driver is going to run us down in his SUV, or that we will develop brain cancer from the phone. We develop miraculous cures for diseases, and then worry that we will not be able to afford them. The unsettled character of progress often leaves us feeling very anxious about the future.

The result of all this is that even though we are living well — we still feel bad.

There's also a spiritual component to this problem, one that's addressed quite clearly by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians. Writing to Christians in the wealthy Greek city of Corinth, Paul reminds them of their promise to give him a "bountiful gift" for the poor Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:5). Although he describes this as a completely voluntary gift, it is clear that he expects the Corinthians to be generous in their support, and he promises many rewards for their giving.

For Paul, true happiness is found in what you give ... not in what you receive. "God loves a cheerful giver," he tells them, ramping up the very first Christian stewardship campaign (v. 7).

Do you want to be enriched in every way? Then let's see some "great generosity" (v. 11).

Are you interested in glorifying God? Then show your brothers and sisters "the generosity of your sharing" (v. 13).

Are you looking for God to provide you "with every blessing in abundance"? Then don't hold tight to a miserly attitude — instead, "share abundantly in every good work" (v. 8).

I know that this makes no sense — It is counter-intuitive.

In Paul's words to the Corinthians, he is saying that:
 personal enrichment comes from great generosity,
 and that blessings in abundance come from sharing abundantly with others.

His point is that you receive the most by giving the most.

"The point is this," says Paul, using an agricultural image: "the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (v. 6).

Whether you are growing melons or mission projects, Paul is absolutely right — you cannot expect significant results without making a significant investment.

Robert Kennedy biographer Evan Thomas notes that Kennedy, a child of wealth and privilege, rarely carried cash, relying instead upon various members of his entourage to pick up his tabs.

One day Kennedy, a devout Catholic, attended a church service with a friend, who dutifully placed a dollar on the collection plate on his behalf — only to hear the muttered protest: “Don’t you think I’d be more generous than that?”

Which raises the question: If your neighbor was going to put in for you, how much would that neighbor put in?!

Did you read our “*Words to Focus On* this morning?”

The Cornell researchers concluded that people judge themselves to be more generous than they really are, and they think others are less generous than they really are.

It seems to me that as we conclude our Celebrate Generosity campaign, the words of Paul ring as true for us as they did for the people of Corinth.

But there’s an unanswered question: How does generous giving actually lead to contentment?

The connection between sowing and reaping makes good logical sense, but the link between giving and happiness is a bit harder to establish.

It is not immediately clear how good stewardship can make us happier in our rich but rotten-feeling world today.

Patrick Johnson figured it out.

Patrick is a vice president at BancorpSouth Investment Services. He is doing pretty well for himself, financially, but he discovered that his greatest joy is not to be found in managing fixed-income portfolios.

Instead, his joy comes from giving, and it’s a joy that borders on hilarity.

As he was writing a check to help purchase a central air-conditioning unit for a local homeless shelter, he started praying and thinking about the immense joy that he imagined that God was feeling as he gave to this worthy cause.

He started thinking about the joy that would be felt by the homeless men as they slept in an air-conditioned room in the sweltering Mississippi heat.

He then started thinking about the joy these men would feel when they realized and felt God’s love, maybe for the very first time.

And what welled up in Patrick Johnson, as he prayed, was laughter.

He was so overwhelmed with joy that he laughed.

It was spontaneous laughter, born out of the joy that he imagined was being experienced by God, by the homeless men, and by Johnson himself, due to one small gift.

Does this story surprise you?

It shouldn't.

When Paul writes that "God loves a cheerful giver" (v. 7), what he says in the original Greek is that God loves a giver who is *hilaros* — the root of our English word "hilarious."

What God loves is a *hilarious* giver, a person who gives with spontaneous joy and laughter.

So, when was the last time that you actually laughed as you sat down to write your check to the church?

Or to the Red Cross?

Or to the local homeless shelter?

Maybe you're not giving at the level that will tip you over into hilarity.

Or perhaps you're not focusing enough on the joy that God is feeling, and that needy people are feeling, as a result of your generosity.

Hilarious giving. That's the solution, the antidote to the unhappiness we are bound to feel as we spend our days in the middle of our self-obsessed secular society.

In fact, author Gregg Easterbrook himself believes that we would all be better off if we were more grateful, more forgiving, and more spiritual, and he challenges us to move beyond our materialistic obsessions to reclaim "a mostly hopeful view of the human prospect."

We can capture a more hopeful view, but only by learning to give with joy and laughter.

As we commit ourselves to Christian stewardship, both inside and outside the church, we will discover that God is truly able to provide us with every blessing in abundance (v. 8).

As we share our resources with people in need, we will find that we will be enriched in every way for our great generosity, and we will find ourselves

filled with the “surpassing grace of God” (vv. 11-14).

As we make sacrifices for others, we will come to see that money cannot buy happiness, but generosity can.

Who knows? We may even break out in laughter.

In a world that so often makes us feel rotten, hilarious giving is the key to contentment.