

Many of you that were with me last Sunday may recall how I was speaking of how much my perspective on that week’s passage had CHANGED in the matter of just a few weeks. Well, with regards to THIS week, all I can say is... DITTO! Before, I was prepared to speak on how we can be guilty of, in the words of Malachi, ‘Robbing God’ with regards to our tithes and offerings. I had ‘armed’ myself with a ‘plethora’ of sobering statistics of how giving to the churches has paled in comparison to the overall wealth of our nation. And of how giving by non-Church goers to non-profits far outweighs the percentages given by regular attenders to their church. I had been particularly struck by Paul’s admonition to the church to **“*excel in this generous undertaking*”**... or, in the original Greek, to **“*excel in this grace.*”** What the NIV refers to as **“*this grace of giving.*”**

But then came the onslaught of a fearful virus... this microscopic, silent killer named “COVID-19.” “Coronavirus.” Sometimes shortened simply to ‘Corona.’ But by NO means to be confused with the Mexican beer. There is absolutely NOTHING pleasureable about this frightening illness. And in light of all that it has *taken away* from our world... in terms of not merely tremendous financial devastation, but the far more devastating loss of human LIFE... Not to mention the paralyzing power of FEAR...I found it hard to get excited about a message focused on what monetary resources we are called to *give* to our world, particularly through the life of churches who have been so impacted by this pandemic. Churches are by no means ‘immune’ to the tremendous impact of this 21st Century plague.

This is not to say that support of our churches and their ministries is NOT important. In fact, in keeping with some of those aforementioned statistics, which speak to the great increase in online giving over the last few years, our Session will be considering this coming week ways that you faithful supporters of the worship and ministry of F.P.C. will be able to continue to do so. So, in keeping with the manner in which we monitor the daily changes associated with ‘CV’ (i.e., ‘Coronavirus’) ‘stay tuned for further developments’ with regards to, in the words of *Malachi*, our ‘tithes and offerings’...

But today, rather than focus on the giving of our ‘treasures,’ I want to focus on how we use our ‘time’ and ‘talents.’ Time which we have a LOT of on our hands these days. ‘Talents,’ which we likely feel that we are NOT using a ‘lot’ of right now. In these times of separation, anxiety, and fear, how is the ‘church without walls’ called to continue to engage in this **‘grace of giving’** of ourselves? What can we learn from faithful believers like Paul, and those of the early church, who also had their share of challenges to overcome... and yet remained faithful by the ever-present, ever-protecting GRACE of God?

Before we look at the Scripture, let us be reminded of just what that word ‘grace’ means. To be a person of ‘grace,’ one might think of one who is of good character, a gentle and respectful nature. Or one who moves physically in a smooth and fluid manner. But from the first and foremost definition (acc. to Webster), **Grace** is defined in a spiritual way: “*God’s goodness,*” but not given based on ‘performance’... phrases like “*undeserved blessing*” or “*unmerited favor*” can be used to describe the biblical doctrine of grace. So then, as we are given the ‘underserved blessing’ of God’s goodness, we must consider how we, in turn, show others ‘unmerited favor.’

There are several references to this ‘grace’ that we are to show one another, starting with the opening verses of today’s passage from 2 Corinthians 8. Paul writes that “***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.***” (2 Cor. 8:1-2)

The 1st Century churches in the area of Macedonia (modern day Greece) demonstrated God’s grace by virtue of the fact that even in a time of “***severe ordeal of affliction***”... sound familiar?... despite being in “***extreme poverty***”... “***their abundant JOY overflowed in a wealth of generosity.***” Even though those early believers endured much persecution and lack of resources, they yet could be abundantly JOYFUL as their concern and care for others ‘overflowed.’ Their ‘grace of giving’ came not because of any **external** circumstances... not because they were especially wealthy or under ‘compulsion’ to give... but rather, they gave freely and joyfully of themselves because of an internal condition of their heart. Because they **TRUSTED in God**. Perhaps one of those ‘arrows’ in their Spiritual ‘quiver’ was from Proverbs:

“TRUST in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways submit to (acknowledge) him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6)

If there were ever a time when we need to TRUST in God... lean NOT on our own human, finite understanding ... and submit our lives to God, acknowledging HIM as the Lord of our life, not matter how difficult it might get... it is NOW.

With all that is going in our nation, and indeed, in our world, we have likely forgotten another ‘earth-shattering’ tragedy that struck just about a year ago... the tornadoes that descimated many parts of Nashville. As he interviewed many of the residents, a CBS News reporter named David Begnaud (who also happened to be a former Eucharistic minister at a Catholic church in Lafayette) made this observation: *“There was a resilience that seemed to bond them together which was inspiring to me... Every single person I talked to mentioned God. I will never forget (one particular man) Eric said, ‘How are we here? How do you explain this? How do you explain that every single piece of my home is gone and I’m still here?’ Nearly every person mentioned God,” Begnaud recalled.*

Though we are facing much more nationwide... and worldwide... losses of life and income, we too should display a ‘resiliency’ that ‘bonds us together.’ As we grapple with that question of ‘how do we explain this,’ may we yet be an inspiration to one another; that we mention GOD to ‘every single person we talk to’...

Aside from ‘trusting in God,’ we must also **TRUST IN ONE ANOTHER.** Support those who are burdened, heavy laden with fear, with anxiety, with doubt. To, as we have heard ‘once or twice,’ not just think of church as a time or place to go... but rather, what we are called to BE. WHEREVER we are. Paul spoke of how his fellow ‘church members’ had supported him: ***“...as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, 4 begging us earnestly for the privilege [grace] of sharing in this ministry to the saints...” (2 Cor. 8:3-4)***

You know, they didn’t have any ‘mega churches’ back then. No ‘Six Flags Over Jesus.” They were churches not too much bigger than ours. Ones who gave not merely out of there abundance, but even out of their ‘poverty.’ Even ‘beyond their means’... which certainly goes completely against ‘conventional economic wisdom.’ WHY? Because, of course, they TRUSTED

in God. But also because they ‘begged earnestly for the privilege... the GRACE... of sharing in this ministry to the saints.’ The ‘saints’ being other followers of the One true God. Saints like YOU! Other members of the community of faith who needed help... who were hurting. Who were struggling. In the words of Philip Yancey, author of one of my favorite books, What’s So Amazing About Grace, he says that **“Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part.”**

We must ask ourselves, how are we pouring out God’s grace, the flowing refreshment of the LIVING water, Jesus Christ, down to the ‘lowest parts’ of our church body. It’s kind of like those poor plants just outside this sanctuary: You have to make the effort, take the time, to actually fill up the bottle and water them. And you need to look at what you are doing, taking care to pour the water in the right place... or it will just get wasted... and do no good. And the plant will die...

So, I want to encourage you All to continue to find ways to ‘stay connected.’ Whether it’s by FB, or email, or text, or Instragram, or the BEST way... you know, actually use the phone as a PHONE... **stay in touch** with groups of people. Those groups that mean so much to you. Your children, grandchildren, long-lost cousins, college friends, old work colleagues, or current ones... prayer groups, Bible Study, men’s and women’s groups... in this time of “social distancing,” we MUST find ways to create ‘social CLOSE-NING.’ (Yes, I made that word up...)

I know that most all of you are pretty bright people... OK, there are SOME exceptions... and I think that Paul was speaking to you: **“Now (just) as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in eagerness, in love...”** SO TOO **“excel in this generous undertaking.”** AKA, **“GRACE.” “This GRACE of GIVING.”** Giving of the greatest gift you can give... YOURSELF. And as we ‘excel’ in this ‘grace of giving,’ may we realize the truth of the ancient words of God through the prophet Malachi: **“See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”** (Malachi 3:10)

Friends, by virtue of you WATCHING this worship service, you ARE blessed. Blessed by God for a purpose: to BE a blessing to others. And as you and I seek to BE that blessing, we will, in turn, BE blessed. Not a ‘vicious’ cycle... but a VICTORIOUS one. As we engage in that ‘**grace of giving**’... of love, of encouragement, of joy, of hope... we ARE the Hand of God. Remember Yancey’s words: **“Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part.”** From God... to you and me... to one another. We simply MUST be ‘care-ful’ of WHERE we are pouring...