

Putting 2nd First: Giving with Your Head, Your Hand, and Your Heart
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair
1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

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—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Some years ago (35!), I was bicycle touring through Ireland, from north to south, and found myself in the bustling city of Dublin. It was crowded, with lots of traffic, and I decided it would be better to walk my bike, to be safer and to see the sights. As I walked, I had to cross a pretty big bridge (I don't remember which one...O'Connell?) I remember that it was very crowded with lots of pedestrians, with small mobs of kids, street urchins, hovering about, (in a Dickensian way, I guess). I had been forewarned about this. The kids would circle around and rob you, they said. So I took off my bike bag and carried it like I was carrying a football, both arms folded over it. I had a protection system readied both for my money and my conscience, too.

If a street urchin grabbed at my bag, he'd have no chance of getting a hand into it or pulling it loose. As for giving them a handout, I was sure that all these kids were working for someone else, their evil overlord. I convinced myself with a hundred reasons why I shouldn't give them anything. "They wouldn't be able to keep the money anyway, and if I give to one, I'll be besieged by a pack of others." My self-protective logic went into

overdrive. I scurried over the bridge, hopped on my bike and sped away as fast as I could into the green countryside, leaving that threat, whether real or imagined, behind.

We are now one week away from Stewardship Dedication Sunday, and it's time to address the issue of giving. We are also just two days away from Election Day. I trust you will all exercise your right to vote, and you should.

Now I want to address an issue that only we, as Second Presbyterian Church, can influence; that is our 2017 budget.

Today I want to talk about how we can process **our giving** to move from paralysis to joy, from hoarding to transparency, from secrecy to shared adventure, disarming the self-protective layer we can coat ourselves with.

The template of my model comes from Paul's Corinthian letters. He was upfront in asking for a cause he championed: support for the poor in Jerusalem.

Now it's not clear whether the poor in Jerusalem means the struggling mother church in Jerusalem or the poor whom the church in Jerusalem is trying to serve.

I'm going to assume it's both. It is best to suggest that giving is always about assisting the poor, building up the church and deepening our own discipleship. In 2 Corinthians, Paul uses three arguments to persuade them. I have a special request for you, too. What I ask you is to think about someone to whom the argument applies; whose name or face comes up as this situation is described.

Paul first appeals to their pride and tries to get them into a contest to give more than the Macedonians. He points out that the Macedonians' abundant joy overflowed into a "wealth of generosity," in spite of their "extreme poverty." (Who- gave more than they had a right to... whose generosity overflowed that impressed you?)

Next he refers to giving as a "privilege," and then slyly tells them, "Now as you excel in everything— in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in eagerness — you can also excel in this generous undertaking."

He calls on their sense of financial management, to complete a commitment they began a year earlier and to give a realistic sum: "It is fitting for you who began last year not only to do something but — now to finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means." (Who is efficient in their giving, regular, constant, faithful?)

Finally he nudges their self-interest.

Bring your present abundance to their need, he says, and they might be around to bring their future abundance to your need, should you find yourselves in need one day. [Who gives as an investment, in people, in the future, in hope?]

Think about it. Pride, faith, self-interest; it's an ambiguous list of reasons for giving money. Sometimes mixed motives are part of our human condition.

Now, the apostle Paul wasn't worried about mixed motives. Giving is good. It is important to be faithful disciples with the financial part of our lives. So how do we work out just how to give?

Let me suggest three key aspects to giving. The first is giving with your **head**. Giving with your head is about sticking to the three R's of financial giving. R number one is routine. Giving is about regular habits, not always grand gestures. Be the kind of donor who can be relied on. Whatever the amount you give, give as a matter of routine. R number two is realism. Take an honest assessment of what you can give and stick to it. Paul says, "If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has." Realism means you might sometimes have to say no. But that no is because you've said yes to a need elsewhere.

R number three is relationships. There are things money can't do and things money makes worse. We're probably aware of a friendship of our own or someone else's that went bad somehow over the giving or lending of money.

Paul's plea to the Corinthians was not to their wallets but to their common baptism with Jerusalem Christians. He's saying, "It's time to show what being one body of Christ means." Our basic need for relationship is deeper than our need for money; really.

In the face of someone else's distress, it's best not to lead with your checkbook and say, "This is what I can do for you"—but instead to ask a gentle question, "How can I be a help to you?" Those are the three R's of giving with your head. Routine, realism, relationship.

The second dimension of giving is giving with your hand. Paul says, "Finish doing what you began." It's good to sort out what is right and wrong in your head, but it doesn't end there. Giving with your hand means combining your gifts with action. You can't totally subcontract kindness and generosity. At some stage there needs to be a face-to-face encounter, some genuine human warmth and interaction. Giving with your hand means seeing for yourself what money can and can't do. It means having a personal

encounter of what it feels like to be on the receiving end of charity what it can mean to be a small part of helping people find their way to get on their feet again. Numbers of ways, Shine into Womanhood program, bringing meals to girls on Friday evenings... a great & fun way to be connected....

Giving with your hand informs the way you spend your money and transforms the way you pray.

Finally, there's the third dimension of giving: giving with your heart. More than once Paul says giving is about turning your willingness into tangible contributions. A lot of us are protective when it comes to giving with our heart. We're cynical about emotional appeals and we're wary of the pitch that assumes the world's problems will evaporate if we just wrote that check. We're suspicious of entering into financial commitments where we could be taken advantage of. But we all know Paul's most famous words of all... "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." Just as you can't subcontract generosity, you can't entirely subcontract the emotional side of giving either. We think God wants us to give to others because God could use a little help from us in changing their lives. But the real reason God wants us to give to others is to change our lives.

That's the difference between giving with your head and hand, and giving with your heart. Giving with your head and hand changes others. Giving with your heart changes you. There are a hundred reasons why you may not want to do it, but allowing yourself to be changed by a relationship is in the end what giving really means. Probably none of us are equally adept at giving with our head, hand, and heart. That's one of the many reasons we need one another. That's why giving isn't fundamentally a private matter and why giving corporately as a church is so important.

We need the church because it's just not possible for any of us to embody the whole gospel on our own. And that's why the most beautiful and most challenging of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians are these: "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." In other words, the way Jesus makes room for us in his life is by emptying himself of everything else. When we enter his life we become rich beyond measure. And so the way we make room for Jesus in our life is by emptying ourselves of what is there. The more we give, the more room we make for Jesus. Thus the poorer we

become, the more we are open to being filled by the riches of the Holy Spirit. So the question for us becomes not, “How much shall we give, and to whom, and how often, and how can we be sure they’ll spend it wisely?” The question finally becomes, “How much room in our lives have we made to be filled with Jesus?”

After all, he has emptied his life to be filled with us. In the end, our heads, our hands and our hearts are given to us for one reason above all: that we may open them out to others in a way that they may be filled with the love of Jesus Christ.

*An addendum --

In an article written by the Dalai Lama just a few days ago, he shares a teaching of Buddhist sages, “If one lights a fire for others, it will also brighten one’s own way.”

Virtually all the world’s major religions teach that diligent work in the service of others is our highest nature and lies at the center of a happy life. Scientific surveys and studies confirm shared tenets of our faiths. Americans who prioritize doing good for others are almost twice as likely to say they are very happy about their lives. In Germany, people who seek to serve society are five times likelier to say they are very happy than those who do not view service as important.

Selflessness and joy are intertwined. The more we are one with the rest of humanity, the better we feel. Finding the right niche for ourselves is important- but serving others, in what ever way its done, makes a real difference.)