

“Kin Indeed”

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Lamentations 3:22-33; Psalm 30;
2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Frank was the town prankster. He was always coming up with trick of some sort to catch the unwary. One day he announced that he would give \$1,000 to anyone who could squeeze the last drop of juice out of a lemon that had already been thoroughly squeezed. Needless to say there were plenty of the townsfolk willing to try, but they all tried to no avail. No matter how hard they squeezed that darned lemon, they couldn't produce even one single drop of juice. Just when it looked as though Frank had won and the prank was over, a thin, short, balding man with wire rimmed glasses stepped up. “Frank,” he said, “I can squeeze juice out of your lemon.”

Everyone started laughing. The man took the lemon, held it over a glass, and squeezed. Everyone gasped, for out came not one, not two, but three large drops of lemon juice! The crowd was hysterical, they cheered and shouted and whistled and stomped their feet, but poor old Frank was stunned. “How in the world did you do that?” Frank asked. “Oh,” replied the man, “it was easy. I do it every day. You see, I'm a church treasurer at the Presbyterian Church!” (My apologies to the Presbyterians.)

On first blush, when we listen to the reading from Second Corinthians this morning, it seems as though Paul is putting the squeeze on the faithful in Corinth. Paul had appealed to them earlier to take up a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. The Corinthians had pledged their support, but they had started to fall behind in their giving. So Paul wrote to them, encouraging them to give generously. Listening to Paul's request we, like the Corinthians, are invited to consider our giving. Or, better put, we are invited to open ourselves to what Martin Luther called, “the third conversion.”

Like the Corinthian Christians, we've already had our hearts converted to Christ, and our minds converted to Christ. Our faith is strong; it's true, we abound in doing good works, but there remains that one last conversion, the conversion of our pocketbooks.

Yes, folks, this is a Stewardship sermon. And yes, this is a stewardship sermon about giving money. And yes, this is the middle of summer and it's not stewardship season. Now don't get the idea that we're in some sort of financial trouble at Trinity. We're not; things are going along nicely. But like the Corinthians, like so many other Christians in America, our giving is not nearly what it might be. We are right in the middle of a national crisis and it's centered on something very simple: the use and abuse of money!

So let us turn to what Paul has to say, and see if he can help us be grounded in our faith and life while this national crisis swirls around us. The crisis, if we may call it that, which Paul addressed was two fold: the suffering of the faithful Christians in Jerusalem, and the failure of the Corinthian Christians to fulfil their original pledge. Apparently in the area around and including Jerusalem there was a

financial crisis brought on or caused by or exacerbated by drought and famine. So Paul spread the word to the churches around the Mediterranean to let them know what was going on, and to inform them of the desperate need. Paul announced that he was organizing a collection, one in which he was really hoping that all of the churches would participate. Initially, the Corinthian Christians made a generous response, but it appears that their donations had begun to drop off and their initial enthusiasm for the campaign began to fade.

Rather than browbeat them with their obligations or some sense of beating them over their lack of commitment, Paul instead commends them for their faithfulness. He praises them for what is already evident in their life as a community of faith. They excel in everything: in their faith in God, in their speech of Him, in their knowledge, and, in their utmost eagerness – not at all unlike us, beloved, not at all unlike us. And then Paul challenges them to excel in one other area: the area of generosity, just as their fellow Christians in Macedonia had done (they were the “others” to whom Paul referred in his letter). The issue was not simply one of sharing economic resources, but it was also one of recognizing the global nature of the Christian community. The gentile Corinthian Christians were truly part of the Christian community as a whole, and they had real ties with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. So too, to this day, do we. We have ties to every Christian community, wherever it happens to be. And they, they beloved, have real ties to us. The Corinthians and other Christian communities and us are brethren, brothers and sisters in Christ, part of a vast Christian family. Consequently the Corinthians were bound to the Christians in Jerusalem and as such could not abandon them to poverty and destruction. Rather, theirs was the opportunity to come to the aid of their suffering brothers and sisters.

It's a simple concept, something like Nathan and his younger sister Rachel, each of whom had been given a candy bar of their own to enjoy. Nathan sat quietly with his candy and made every mouthful count, enjoying each and every individual bite. Next to him sat his little sister who was just pulling the wrapper off of hers. As she tore at the paper, the candy dropped out and fell to the floor and immediately, like a rocket, their dog Sam shot across the room, grabbed the candy, and swallowed the treat in one big gulp. Rachel screamed at Sam, with huge tears welling up in her eyes. All that candy was hers, it was her snack and now, just like that, it was all gone. She had nothing for a treat, and there was Nathan with almost his whole piece left.

She started to cry. Slowly Nathan brought the candy down from his mouth and broke it in two. He looked at the two pieces for a moment, then he took the larger half and reached out with it to Rachel, his crying little sister. She stopped, looked at the candy, and then at Nathan's face. He smiled at her and said, "Take it. You can have some of mine." And together, they continued to enjoy their snack.

Paul's words invite us to consider whether we have good intentions, as did the Corinthians, yet fail to follow through with concrete acts of faithful giving. So often when it comes to money we focus on ourselves, on satisfying our own perceived needs, our wants, our desires first, and then, if there is any, we offer what's left over to God.

It is like what has been going on with the Jordan River. Back in the nineteenth century the Jordan River carried an immense amount of water down to the Dead Sea, such that the mouth of the Jordan River where it joined the Dead Sea was 180 yards wide. Yet today, where the Jordan River joins the Dead Sea, it's been reduced to the size of a small creek, just a few feet across. What has happened is that both the Israeli and Jordanian governments siphoned off more and more of the Jordan's water for

personal and agricultural use, resulting in less and less water reaching the Dead Sea every year. In fact, some experts believe that the Dead Sea will no longer be with us and may totally disappear in less than fifty years.

Which raises the question for us: How much of the money that flows into our lives actually in the end reaches God? Are we good stewards of the wealth that God has entrusted to us? Or have we somehow managed to "siphon it off" for our own wants and needs? You see, we live in a world and in a time when there are so many demands made upon our money and our generosity.

I don't know how it is at your place, but I know how it is at ours. Almost every week some worthy cause sends an appeal through the mails: the Cancer Society, the March of Dimes, a missionary appeal, the local library, our political party – the list seems endless – and each competes for a portion of our money. Now understand, I'm not knocking any of these worthy causes, and each of us must decide which we'll support and which we won't. But have we allowed these causes to reduce our giving? Or worse still, have we confused worthy causes with what might or ought to be given to God in the first place? You see, it's not a matter of pitting our offering against the charitable causes we choose to support, but it's a matter of priority – to which will we give most, and to whom will we give first?

Left there, what I am saying is nothing more than making an ordinary stewardship appeal, but then that would be to miss the heart of Paul's message to the Corinthians and to us. Paul wants us to get things in perspective. The motivation for our giving, Paul teaches us, is not in the worthiness of our ministry or the careful planning of our budget or some sort of special cause within our congregation, but it is in what God in Christ has already given us. That's the motivation.

In a few minutes we will come forward to receive bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. Receiving it, we are instantly forgiven and given a new beginning along with the assurance that when we walk from this place today we are new people in Christ and we're assured that we are beloved children of God. We are given the gift of life now and we're promised life after death. And that salvation is given – it's not earned, it's not something we pay for, and it's certainly not something we deserve. Nothing can be added to the cost, and nothing can alter the fact that the price was paid by God on the first Easter. All we can do is be thankful and thank God with voices and how we use them, with our lives and what we do with them, with the gifts we have and how we employ them, with our abilities, and with our money and how we use it.

There is no need for Paul, nor is there any need for me, to demand or order or cajole you into giving. The example of Christ is sufficient. So our giving to God, our tithe, is only the beginning. You see our giving first to God through our offering to our church and then beyond that through our giving to the community and its causes, is our greatest witness. It's something we're asked to do out of proportion. Paul doesn't ask people to put themselves into poverty, but to give what they're able. Some have very little to give, and we embrace them with love in our community and try to give them what they need to help them. Others have more than enough, and we ask them to share out of their abundance. However we handle our money, however we handle our giving, is the greatest witness we can make in our world in these troubled financial times.

A clerk in a shoe store observed such powerful witness outside his store one day. He talks about it this way: One day I noticed a little barefoot boy standing by the hot air register outside the bakery next

door to my shop, trying to keep warm. I wasn't sure if I should invite the boy into the store or just what I should do with him, when a middle-aged lady came by and began to talk with him. About five minutes later, she brought him into the store and bought him new a new pair of shoes and a couple of pairs of heavy woolen socks. I then overheard the little boy ask the lady a question: "Are you God's wife?" he asked. Her reply was, "No son, I'm not God's wife, I'm just one of His children." To which he said, "Well, I knew you must be some kin to him." He thanked her and ran out the door.

Kin indeed! But aren't we all?

Amen.

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