

Text: II Corinthians 8:1-15
Title: Generativity
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For a few days every spring I join three seminary classmates to talk about where we're at, how we're doing, and who we are. We share struggles, success, try to tell the truth, listen, eat, encourage, and laugh. We've been friends for better than thirty years. It is a wonderful gift....

This spring one of them asked, "As we enter the last third of our lives how will we be generative? How will we be vital, give away our lives, get out of the way and help those who are coming behind us?"

Wait. What?
I'm entering the last third of my life?

The question is a good one. We're all at, or approaching, 60. One guy is retiring after 20 years at an east coast church, one is Vice President of the seminary, and one is serving a quirky little church in Denver's inner-city. In those different settings how will we be vital, give away our lives, get out of the way and help others ~ in the last third of our lives? How will we be generative?

The word, generative or generativity, comes from the work of psychoanalyst Erik Ericson. In writing about the stages of life he frames adulthood as a tension between generativity and stagnation. To be generative is to engage in that which contributes to the good of others. To be generative is to invest with compassion, creativity, and of clear sense of connectivity to the greater good.

How will we be generative?

Paul is asking the Corinthians the same question.
A little context....

Paul initiated a collection for the poor of the church in Jerusalem.

This ongoing offering project was not about funding Paul; it was about caring for poor fellow Christ-followers who are about 2000 miles away by road, 800 miles away by boat. This is an important undertaking for Paul. There are several other places in the New Testament that reference this work and this is the second or third time that Paul writes about it to the Corinthians.

So, here in our text, Paul points out:
how the impoverished churches of Macedonia have given with joy and liberality,
how giving is connected to God's giving in Christ,
and how giving is about a shared balance, a kind of equality.

Sounds like a fine three-point sermon.

1. Give with joy and liberality....
2. Give in the way that God has given in Christ....
3. Give in a way that enhances equality...

Three points, finish with a poem, pass the plates, let's go home.
Or...

We don't talk much about giving at Hope. I don't know when I've preached a "stewardship sermon," or when I've made an appeal from the pulpit about giving. In fact, it is so rare that I've been chastised for not pursuing that preaching path. I think the argument was something like: "In neglecting stewardship you're neglecting the full council of scripture."

So, let's sit with this a little longer.
I want to think with you about generativity and giving.

At the heart of this text Paul writes:

For 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.

What's easily lost in that line is the twist on giving.

We tend to think of giving as that which grows out of fullness. The rich help the poor by sharing their abundance. I have a good friend with a long career in development. While he calls on all sorts of people, and every gift counts, he invests the bulk of his time in building relationships with those who can give out of their wealth. That's the way the world works.

But, Paul writes that Christ enriched others by giving out of his poverty. Christ made us rich when he had nothing to give. We are filled up by his emptiness. He made others rich

by making himself poor,
by being one of the have-nots,
by being despised and rejected,
by giving out of his nothingness....

As Paul writes to the church in Philippi,

...Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant...

You get the idea.

Jesus doesn't give out of abundance. Jesus gives out of emptiness.
Even death. And in that we're made rich. In that we're made alive.
The mystery of the gospel. The way God works. Thanks be to God.

But, what strikes me is the sense of mutual dependence. Grace (or love) requires the other. I know that it is theologically dangerous to suggest that God needs us, but grace (or love) requires some relationship,
some exchange,
some connectedness,
some shared need.

God's love finds its fullest expression in self-giving through Christ. And in that God seeks mutual dependence and connectedness. God wants us to be dependent on him and somehow, he is dependent on us. God wants us to be connected to him and in some way he is connected to us. So, while God might not need us, he clearly pursues our participation or partnership.

And that is to say that God is connected to the poor in Jerusalem, the church in Corinth, and the hearty givers of Macedonia. Jerusalem is connected to Corinth, Paul is connected to Macedonia. Corinth is dependent and accountable to the poor in Jerusalem. You get the picture, there is here a web of mutual dependence and connectedness. Grace (or love) finds its fulfillment in relation to others.

Ubuntu is a philosophical concept with roots in southern Africa. It is often translated as "I am because we are." Or in other words, "a person is a person through other people." Desmond Tutu, the Noble Prize-winning Bishop from South Africa, describes it this way:

A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others... knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole, and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished.

When Doc Rivers led the Boston Celtics to an NBA Championship in 2008 he was so impressed with what he read from Tutu and others about *ubuntu* that the Celtics broke every huddle by shouting *ubuntu!*

When Paul writes to the Corinthians about giving to support the Jerusalem church he writes out of a spirit of *ubuntu*. We are connected by the self-giving grace of God. We give not out of obligation, or religious legalism, or as part of some sort of exchange (I give this and I get that), we give because of the web of mutual dependence and connectedness. We give because God's grace and love destroys the illusion of individualism. "I am, because we are."

And that, dear friends, brings us back to generativity.

I think one of the crucial questions facing Hope at this point in our life is how will we be vital, give away our lives, get out of the way and help others? As denominations decline and traditional reformed white congregations close how will we be generative? As we are connected to Roseland, as we are connected to Central America, as we are connected to Erin and Moises Pacheco in East Garfield Park, as we are connected to Oak Forest how will we be generative? As we are connected to immigrants and refugee families, as we connected to Muslim friends and neighbors, as we are connected to LGBT brothers and sisters how will we be generative?

I don't have a lot of answers, but I know that our faithfulness and health swings on those questions. Generativity versus stagnation. The idea is not that we are called to save the world and give beyond our means, the idea is that we are called to live into *ubuntu*. And the lens by which we would find our bearings is not FOX News, or MSNBC, or even the better angels of the American spirit, the lens is the gospel. The lens (by which we would find our bearings) is the self-giving love of God in Christ.

In the gospel of Mark one of the last things Jesus does before his arrest and subsequent execution is draw his disciples over to notice a widow giving her last dime to the temple. He doesn't praise the woman, or tell the disciples to go and do likewise, he simply calls them over to contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty. Barbara Brown Taylor offers this reflection:

If you ask me, that's why he noticed the poor widow in the first place. She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life to a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking in a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. "Look," he said to those who meant to follow him, "That's what I have been talking about. Look at her."

Amen.