

Sunday June 26, 2016
2 Cor. 8:1-15

I grew up in a house that didn't have a lot of unplanned company. We would have to ask days, if not weeks, in advance if we wanted to have someone stay for dinner. It wasn't that my parents didn't entertain, because they did, a lot. But it was always planned. To be fair, that was the model in which my mother grew up ... quite formal and not much happened by chance. Occasionally we would spontaneously decide to have dinner with our next door neighbours, with whom my parents were best friends. I loved those dinners, but I think it sent my mother into a tizzy. Later, after I moved out and lived with a gaggle of young women who didn't have families living in Toronto, my dad would call on Saturday before doing the shopping. "Who's coming for dinner tomorrow?" was always his question. My friends were always welcome, but my folks had to know in advance how many were coming.

So it was an absolute marvel to me when I joined the Martin family and every Sunday I would watch my mother-in-law stretch a meal she had made for 6 into one that would feed double that number. They lived in the country, and folks would be out for a Sunday drive,

and they would drop in for a visit. And of course they would be asked to stay for dinner. And somehow, there was always enough food.

Eric Law, in his book *Holy Currencies*, tells a wonderful story about his own family meals growing up. I shared the story with Session last month, so apologies to those who have heard it, but I think it's a good story, and bears repeating. He writes:

"When I was a child, my family always had guests for dinner. On any given night, there might be twelve to 15 people at the dinner table. Dinner was a time of joyful sharing of food and stories. I thought we were quite wealthy, feeding so many people every night. Only when I was older, while talking to my mother about the good old days, did I find out that we were not rich at all. My mother told me that some days she only had three dollars to feed fifteen people. How could that be? I could not remember a day when there was not enough food!

... Not only was everyone around the table filled every night, there were always leftovers. I believe the way we dealt with the leftovers at the dinner table is indicative of how this miracle of doing "more with less" was accomplished.

Toward the end of the dinner, there was always something left on a plate in the middle of the table. Everyone would be staring at it, especially when it was a piece of meat, which was an occasional, special treat. But no one would make a move to take it. Then someone would say, "Why don't you take it Grandma? You are the oldest?" But my grandma would say, "No, I've been eating this stuff all my life. Give it to the little one. He's the youngest and needs the nourishment to grow up to be big and strong." Now all eyes were on me, who was the youngest. But I, who also learned this ritual, would say, "No, not me. I am completely full because I have the smallest stomach. Give it to my older brother. He has an examination at school tomorrow. He needs it so he can do well." My oldest brother would say, "No, not me. Give it to my sister. She has a piano lesson tomorrow ..." The ritual would go on around the table; each person would find an excuse not to take the leftover piece of food. While we offered it to each other, we also affirmed each other's worthiness in the family. As a result, the piece of meat would sit in the middle of the table, destined to be left over, to be transformed into a new delicious dish the next day. The leftovers became a symbol of our

appreciation of each other's worth. This leftover piece of food became a sign of the abundance we shared – we can do more with less.

... The spirituality I learned at my dinner table begins with the assumption that there is enough and therefore it is okay to have less than the other. By insisting on having less than the other – "No, not me; let someone else have this" – we kept the blessing flowing in the form of the affirmation of each other's worth. The dynamics of passing the "leftover" around, generating a spirit of appreciation and affirmation, did so much more than fighting over the last piece of meat, as a fear-of-scarcity minded group would do."¹

After we read the story at Session, we spent some time talking about two questions ...

When have you experienced the ritual of "passing the leftover around"?

Where have you seen the spirituality of abundance practiced in your life, at St. John's, in the world?

The spirituality of abundance leads to the spirituality of generosity. Today, our final day in the six week series on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians,

¹ Holy Currencies, Law, Eric, Chalice Press, p. 14-15

we look at what Paul has to say about generosity. Who knew we could spend six weeks on one of Paul's letters? I was actually happy about finishing the series until I remembered that the next two weeks in the suggested readings are from the Book of Job. Even those who don't know the bible well will probably have a sense of what's in the book of Job – a wealthy man who loses everything and is struck down with a painful illness. Then I thought, ok, maybe I can stay with Paul for a few more weeks ...

In fact, I've learned a lot doing this series. I haven't spent a lot of time with Paul in my many years of ministry, and when I did I just focused on some of the more well known stories and passages, and on some of the women with whom he was in ministry – Lydia, Dorcas, Priscilla.

A couple of years ago I heard the wonderful Presbyterian preacher Anna Carter Florence preach about Eutycus, a youth who was sitting in an open window listening to Paul preach ... and Paul was going on and on and on and the youth fell asleep and then fell out the window, and died. Paul revived him, but it understandably shook the congregation up a bit. It's a great passage to use when thinking about ministry with

youth. You can look it up ... it's in the 20th chapter of Acts, verse 7. So I know some of the stories and the more well known passages from the letters of Paul, but I have to confess to not being too well versed on his theology, on his pastoral presence with churches that he started.

We have, during these six weeks, also learned a little about the church in Corinth. This is Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. Some think that it may even be a compilation of two or three letters. Several years have passed since he wrote the first letter.

We have learned that there was much conflict in the church, both amongst the church members, and some were in direct conflict with Paul. Since his first visit to Corinth, some "false apostles" as Paul calls them have come to Corinth and attacked Paul verbally. Paul is upset because the church members didn't come to his defense. In previous weeks we have looked at themes of consolation, forgiveness, faith, and reconciliation. We have had a glimpse into Paul's deep love for the Gospel, the churches that he founded, the pain that he felt about the misunderstanding, rejection, and personal attack on him.

And today, we hear what Paul thinks of generosity. The context is that Paul is asking the Corinthians to give money generously to help the poorer Jerusalem church. There is a suggestion in some of the materials that I read that there is a terrible famine there because of a period of extreme drought. Paul even goes so far as to say that other churches in Macedonia have given. The Corinthian church apparently did give money last year, but for some reason had stopped giving, perhaps because of the conflict.

Paul urges them to give again, to “finish doing it”, and then quotes directly from the story from the book of Exodus when the Israelites were starving in the desert. God sent them manna every morning, but they were only to gather as much as they needed for one day. If anyone took more than they needed, the extra would spoil. This, Paul says, is a model for generosity and how we should give to others. It is reciprocal, he says, “... it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.”

Perhaps you have seen this graphic before:

http://allmyneighbors.org/equality_justice.JPG

The title says “Equality doesn’t mean justice.” It’s a picture of three young people looking over a fence at a baseball game. They are all standing on the same size box. Clearly, the one on the right, the shortest of the three, can’t see over the fence. They are all standing on the same size box. That’s equality. But is it fair?

The picture on the right side shows that the tallest person has given up his box to the shortest one. The tallest one can still see over the fence, but now they can all see over the fence. The picture on the left shows equality, where everyone gets the same. The picture on the right shows justice.

If everyone in the desert had gathered the same amount of manna, some families would have had too much, and some would not have had enough. Everyone was told to take according to their need.

The problem today, is things are so out of whack that some of us have to give up the box that we are standing on so that the guy at the end can see over the fence. But that feels scary. It certainly feels scary to me. Our world today is very much based on a theology of individuality and fear of scarcity which justifies

amassing as much as one can so that we are prepared for whatever fearful thing is to come.

Doug Henry, in a bible study on this passage, says that "... our world is increasingly marked by wretched, widespread failures of generosity." He pinpoints two lies that can distort our thinking and impede generosity of spirit. They tempt us to believe we "inhabit a world not of gifts, but rather of objects to own, possess, or sequester for our private use." He says the first lie is presumption, which urges us to seek security against vulnerability through cleverness and control. By possessing things and exercising power, it is imagined that one can protect oneself from loss. The second lie is despair, which causes us to dismiss the possibilities for nurturing others' happiness. We envy those who possess what we are missing and try to hang on to what remains. Presumption and despair are in fact mirror images of each other, and Henry says that they each distort the gracious, gift-laden divine economy of God. He describes generosity as "giving others more than they are due, and can be expressed in how we

share our time, attention, knowledge and advice, homes and meals, etc."²

And so as we prepare to enjoy our summer, wherever that may take us ... I issue a challenge – both to myself, and to all of you. May we prayerfully hold in our hearts the generous spirit that is present in this faith community. May we ponder the many ways that we practice "passing the leftovers around", and live out of a theology of abundance in our own lives, and in this community. May we be challenged by the words of Eric Law that "... there is enough, and therefore it is ok to have less than the other." Some of us may have to give up a box – a box of power, a box of compassion, a box of privilege ... what boxes might we need to pass on down the line so that someone can see over the fence? It's a hard question. But that's what is asked of us.

Thanks be to God.

² <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/253576.pdf>