

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost  
July 2, 2006

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

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

A few weeks ago I heard a news item about Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, the richest man in the world. It seems he has decided to leave Microsoft to devote most of his attention to working on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This is a foundation he set up some years ago, that has an endowment of about 30 billion dollars, and gives away about 800 million dollars each year. The money is used to provide medical care and education, especially in poor countries around the world. I thought that was pretty impressive until I heard this week that Warren Buffet, the second richest man in the world, has given another 30 billion or so to the Foundation to help provide even more health care and education.

I got to thinking about these two stories when I was reading the second lesson today. Paul is writing to the Christians in the church in Corinth. In this particular part of the letter, Paul is encouraging the people of the Corinthian church to follow through on a commitment to assist the churches in Macedonia (probably the Thessalonians and the Philippians.) Paul talks about a balance between the Corinthian's abundance and the Macedonian's need. Paul writes about a "fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need."

Several of the translations I read kind of filled in with the interpretation that today, when you have a lot and they have little, you can help them. That way, one day when you have only a little, and the Macedonians have a lot, they can help you. The only problem with that interpretation is that the Greek doesn't explicitly say it that way. The Greek is a little vague. Another way to interpret it is that there is, in the present, an abundance and a need on both sides of the fence.

This idea, that the Corinthians have a need really intrigued me. Could it be that there is actually a balance between the Macedonians need for assistance and the Corinthians need to give assistance? Is there a balance between the Corinthians' abundance of resources and the Macedonians abundance of opportunities to help someone? Is it possible that we have a need to give? Take Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, for example, why would those two very wealthy men, give away so much money? What makes any of us give and be generous? Personally, I don't think we give just because of guilt or sense of obligation. I don't think we do it for the positive feedback we would get. I think we simply need to give, we need to be generous with the blessings God has given us. And I think this need to give has at least three dimensions.

First of all, we need to give for the very practical reason that we cannot constantly receive. We can not receive things and not, at some point, give, let go, or let something go back out. Everything in life is a cycle. You breathe in, and then you breathe out. We take in food and water, and it goes right out – in energy and waste products. In a house, you can't just take things in, eventually things have to be used up, thrown away, recycled

of given away. Most of us have plenty of stuff. Quite a few of us probably have too much stuff: stacked in corners and bulging out of closets. What we need is to let it go. We need to give it away to someone who can use it.

This by the way is not a new problem by the way. St. Basil the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century said, *“The bread that is spoiling in your house belongs to the hungry. The shoes that are mildewing under your bed belong to those who have none. The clothes stored away in your trunk belong to those who are naked. The money that depreciates in your treasury belongs to the poor.”*

The second dimension of the need to give is what I call simple human connection. Giving connects us to people and not giving cuts us off from people. If Bill Gates had not done something to give back some of his wealth, that he got by selling things to average people, the average people would start to resent him, maybe even revile him. But by giving back to society, Bill Gates makes connections, as one human being to another.

The best connections are when our giving is totally self-less. When we give to people we are not already connected to, with no expectation of any kind of return favor. One really wonderful example of that is the story of the town of North Platte, Nebraska. As World War II was getting started, the troop trains that were carrying soldiers from their training camps to their first assignments went through North Platte. Early on, the town got wind of a rumor that the Nebraska National Guard, with their boys, would be coming through town the following day. So they arranged to meet the train, with their boys on it, with food, cigarettes, books, letters, and love.

Except when the train pulled up, it was the Kansas National Guard instead. After a brief moment of awkwardness, one of the women gave the gifts she had intended for her son to one of the men, and the rest of the crowd followed suit. Gifts were given, hugs and prayers and love were shared.

But, that was only the beginning. Every day for the next four and a half years, the people of North Platte met every troop train that came through town, giving them sandwiches, cookies, hot coffee and cold drinks, magazines and snacks for the train. Over six million soldiers were blessed by this little town. Years later, when the soldiers who had come through town were being interviewed about their experiences there, there was one common reaction. When they recalled the generosity of this little town, they wept.

And finally, the third dimension of the need to give is the spiritual dimension. We need to give because if we refuse to give, if we choose not to be generous, our spirit dies, little by little. And I believe, the more wealth we have, the more we need to be generous, otherwise our wealth becomes a curse and not a blessing..

There is a comic strip in the Sunday funnies called Prince Valiant. It is set in the times of King Arthur, knights and adventures and all that. These past few weeks the strip has been about a greedy man’s quest to find the hidden treasure of Solomon’s gold. The greedy man finds the treasure, and the old, old man who is guarding it. After proving himself to be especially greedy, the old man is ready to let someone else have the treasure. Too late, the greedy man realizes that now he is actually cursed, he is imprisoned by his own greed. Now he is doomed to spend the rest of his life care for nothing other than jealously guarding “his” gold.

Wealth can be like that. Wealth can rob a person of joy and love. If a person pursues wealth more than anything else, it will become a prison. Giving one's wealth away opens up that prison. Giving away wealth, sharing our abundance, helps us keep it in perspective. Giving away part of our wealth will enable us to see the good that can be done and will give us joy to be able to do it.. That is how it is that generosity begets joy. And joy opens our hearts to still greater generosity. It's a wonderful vicious cycle.

And what wonderful grace it is that God has designed things so that when we meet our need to give, to be generous, we also know joy.