

"A TENTMAKER'S FAITH"

May 26, 2019

2 Cor 8:1-15

The Apostle Paul was the original church planter. At the time of his work in the 60s—the first century 60s-- travel was difficult, communication was slow, and tensions in the Christian community were high. Persons of the faith were exploited and threatened from the outside and divided within their communities by both theological belief and social position. Paul pressed on, inspired by the Holy Spirit, driven by his calling, and supported by patrons along the way. One of those patrons was the tentmaker, Prisca of Corinth. Paul addresses the fledgling church in 2 Corinthians 8:1-15. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church:

Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province.

Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts.

I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could - far more than they could afford! - pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.

This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives.

That's what prompted us to ask Titus to bring the relief offering to your attention, so that what was so well begun could be finished up. You do so well in so many things - you trust God, you're articulate, you're insightful, you're passionate, you love us - now, do your best in this, too.

I'm not trying to order you around against your will. But by bringing in the Macedonians' enthusiasm as a stimulus to your love, I am hoping to bring the best out of you.

You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us - in one stroke he became poor and we became rich.

So here's what I think: The best thing you can do right now is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale.

Your heart's been in the right place all along. You've got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it. Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can't. The heart regulates the hands.

This isn't so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you're shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end you come out even.

As it is written, Nothing left over to the one with the most, Nothing lacking to the one with the least.

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Women played a prominent role in the earliest Christian churches, including those associated with the apostle Paul. They served as evangelists, pastors, teachers, and prophets. Some were wealthy and provided financial support for the apostle; others served as patrons for entire churches, allowing congregations to meet in their homes and supplying them with the resources necessary for their gatherings. [Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2008]

I am one of these women: Prisca is my name, wife of Aquila of Corinth. Tentmaking is our trade; we make a decent living, because we make high quality products that we sell to local merchants and also to the Roman government.

We are Jews from Pontus, Aquila and me. When the Edict of Claudius came in the late A.D. 40s, all of us Jews were expelled from Rome. We lost everything we had. We ran for our lives to Corinth, and it was there where we met Paul and our lives changed.

We became Christian under Paul's tutelage and were baptized. Though it was quite dangerous, my husband and I hosted a home church for new Christians, mostly Gentiles. Paul and other apostles remembered us to others in their letters to their first century congregations. Paul later wrote of our sacrifice; he honored us, in his words, "for sticking our necks out for his life." To us, it was just right; our giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in our lives.

Exposed to the story and message of Jesus Christ, our lives will never be the same. Alive in the Spirit and determined that this message will not die, we bring the Good News to the Gentiles. These are good people who need Jesus to alight their love, compassion, and justice hearts. Under the cover of night in our church home, our people sing songs, witness to their stories, and pray together. By day, we make tents alongside Paul, so that we can support ourselves and him, and his message of freedom in Christ. Amen! Alleluia. Amen!

It has been an up-rising, an epiphany experience for my husband and me. Aligning ourselves with this fiery preacher and leader, we feel closer to God and I now understand what Jesus was calling on Jews and Gentiles to do together. It is about *stewardship*, our free declaration in a captive world. What is ours is really God's, and we want to use it for the common good.

Corinth was a nasty place in which to live. It was full of corruption and dirty living. Brian McClaren described it as "tough, mean, and selfish, a place that deserved its reputation." Many religions were practiced. There was rampant temple prostitution, thievery, and violence; Corinth was not a safe place. What redeeming qualities Paul saw there, heaven only knows, but it was through his strong, unwavering faith that that he devoted his resources, time, and considerable talent to establishing a Christian presence there.

Paul's efforts took hold; good people were desperate for a place to belong. They were begging to find meaning in their lives. They were hungry for the *Gospel of Jesus Christ*. We were with these people day and night in our home church. We worked and pooled our *God-given* money; we prayed, and preached, and invited others to join us. It was stewardship and evangelism as partners in pure form, a covenant commitment for a more meaningful life. Our efforts opened doors and hearts to the *Gospel Good News*, to serving those with less resources, all as Jesus asked of us.

Alive with the energy of the Holy Spirit, we next followed Paul to Ephesus, where we were inspired to preach and teach on our own. There we met Timothy and Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew. Apollos accurately preached the message of Jesus, but he had not previously been baptized and so he preached from his head, not from his heart. What a glorious sight to see him immersed in the healing water! He caught the infectiousness of the Holy Spirit like us, and then devoted the rest of his life to the ministry of our Jesus Christ.

When at last we were allowed to return to Rome after the death of Claudius in A.D. 54, we trickled back cautiously to the city, only to find our Jewish Christian home churches had become dismantled. There had grown a strong *Gentile Christian* presence in their place. It has been hard for us to assimilate into their community, for we still feel our Jewish roots. We have had difficulty hearing the

Gospel in this voice. We have lived carefully and cautiously. Our sense of stewardship, previously so free and easy, so natural, has become lost in squabbles over polity, leadership, and worship style. It has been a trying time for us, and we were greatly tested in our faith.

I wonder if you experience this dynamic in your churches today. Do you often find in yourselves living a distracted and close-minded spiritual life that blocks the way to Gospel joy, justice for the poor, and commitment to our important commission? Christ calls us to change lives for the sake of the Gospel—first century lives and 21st century lives. That is the up-rising of stewardship, but our earthly trappings get in the way.

Paul witnessed first-hand the power of money. He was very suspicious of it. He told us that loving money was the root of all evil. He said that what really counts is not gold, but above all else, the contentment that comes from desiring God. Time and again he warned us that the drive to accumulate money wastes our lives. Brian McClaren summed up Paul's message better than I can. Paul said that "our real ambition should be to build a big account...of good works—acts of generosity and kindness on behalf of those considered the last, the least, and the lost."

That's why Paul encouraged our tentmaking; he wanted us to have enough money to provide for our needs plus more to share with others. McLaren speaks for Paul in these words:

We realize that the systems of this world run on one economy, and we in the commonwealth of God run on another. In our alternate economy, those who have a lot don't hoard it; they share it. Those who have been given much in terms of money and power feel not a sense of privilege and superiority but a sense of greater responsibility for their neighbors who are vulnerable and in need. We measure our well-being and holiness by the condition of the weakest and neediest among us.

In the Roman Empire, and I suspect in your culture as well, people exhaust themselves to get rich, and in so doing they cause much harm. Some steal from the land. Some exploit people of the generations. Some forget the Gospel altogether, blinded by the power and position money gets them. This way of thinking is dirty economy, and "those who profit by it gain the world but lose their souls."

While these people are saying "What's yours is mine," Christian justice requires us to reframe this statement to say, "What's mine is God's, and I want to use it for the common good." As McClaren reminds us, "we call that attitude *stewardship*."

You see, I make tents. That is what I do for the kin-dom of God. I make tents so that I can provide for myself and my family. I taught Paul to make tents so that together we could support our ministry and not drain the shallow coffers of the churches.

I make tents and I do what I can so that future generations will hear the word of Jesus Christ and be renewed in it. I can't see the future; the future—*your present*—is out of my hands. But my

stewardship attitude is meant for your future, the future of our faith, for the endurance of Christianity.

McLaren teaches us how to re-order our relationship with money. We set aside what we have into three pots. In one pot, we have what we need to live on and what will sustain our families. In the second pot, we have what we need to save, for saving is wise. Even ants know to save to save some of their summer's work to get them through the winter. In the third pot, we tithe the largest portion we can for God's work of compassion, justice, restoration and peace.

It's true that not all of what we tithe goes to the direct pursuit of justice and peace. Some of this third portion goes to people like Paul, Silas, and Timothy, pastors and leaders who grow the church and feed the people their spiritual nourishment. Some of it goes to people in need, people without clean underwear, people without shampoos and soap, people who don't have enough to eat or live on. Some of it goes to people far, far away, many who have never heard of Jesus or God. We give this money as an expression of God's love and ours, for as McLaren explains, "that's what stewardship is, really: love in action." This is what Paul meant by giving as the natural outflow of God's purpose working in our lives.

I can't see the future. After I die the church may die, too. It certainly will fade away unless others take up where I leave off. If Jesus meant anything to the people who loved him and the people who

heeded his message, if Jesus means anything to us of the first century new churches, if Jesus means anything to you of the 21st century churches, then stewardship must travel hand in hand with the Gospel message. As the Gospel message endures, so does stewardship—love in action. We change lives by making our tents, providing for our needs, saving what we need, and giving a healthy portion also to the work of the church.

Open doors. Gospel hearts. Changed lives. Paul sends his greetings to you, his faithful churches, his disciples in the faith.

May it continue to be so.