

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 1, 2018

Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Theme: “Ready or Reluctant?”

I have a bag of snacks here, Cheetos. We used to hear, “Cheetos, cheese that goes crunch.” We don’t hear that anymore. I don’t know if that is because the Frito-Lay folks found something more effective or the fact being that it’s not really the cheese that’s doing the crunching. I have some Cheetos and you don’t. Maybe you want some. Maybe you are really hungry and even need some. The solution to that problem would be for me to share. But I could be reluctant to do that. It’s not a very big bag and it could be that I need these Cheetos worse than you do. How do I know you will make good use of these Cheetos. On the other hand I could be ready to share and even happy to do so.

Giving is often a touchy subject. Are we ready or reluctant to give? Here’s why it’s a touchy subject—we don’t want anyone to touch our stuff. Let me share a little observation. Our culture has changed morally and mostly not for the better. Many, most, of the Ten Commandments may be seen as suggestions, advisements, or even archaic burdens. But the 7th Commandment still holds weight with most people. “You shall not steal.” ‘Right, don’t be messing with my stuff.’ There is a readiness to hang on tightly and a reluctance to let go.

Today Paul holds up an example of those who were begging to give to encourage others to join in the giving, those who may have been begging off. The old nature has a really tight grip on stuff. It could even be a death grip, reluctant indeed. So how does one move from reluctant to ready; what’s the key? The key to giving is giving.

Paul has put before the Corinthians an opportunity to give. Our text is not the first time they have been made aware of this opportunity. It's an opportunity to give for the relief of the saints (8:4), those saints being the poor in Jerusalem. There had been an earlier offering, years earlier from the church at Antioch of Syria. "So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." (Acts 11:29-30) This was before Paul's first missionary journey. Now Paul is spearheading another relief effort. We read in Romans 15, "At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. **For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.**" (Romans 15:25-27) The Gentiles who had the spiritual blessings by way of the Jews through Jesus could now share their material blessings to help those with material needs in Jerusalem.

Paul is giving the Corinthians one more opportunity to excel. "But as you excel in everything-in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you-see that you excel in this act of grace also." (vs 7) Would they be ready or reluctant?

There is always opportunity give before us, needs. A lot of it is for the work right here so the Gospel may be preached, the Lord's Supper celebrated, baptisms done and as that happens the saints are strengthened to live out faith, a living out that reaches out beyond us to those around us. Our giving here does go beyond us. We send 10% of our offerings received on to the Mid-South District. If you want an accounting of the how the District uses that money there is a copy of this year's budget on their Website. Some of that money goes to helping train workers in Tanzania and Madagascar, some for planting

churches in the District, and of course there is all that goes with staffing such as salaries and benefits. You give in many other ways. One big way has been your support of the South Sudan Evangelical Lutheran Church.

There is always opportunity and need. Is it meet with readiness or reluctance? There may have been some reluctance in Corinth. The collection work had already begun. We read in 1 Corinthians 16:1, “Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches in Galatia, so you also are to do.” In our text we learn, “And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also desire to do it.” (8:10) So it had been started, but had the ball been dropped? Paul had spoken of a painful visit (2:1). Did that bring hard feelings? Maybe if they gave there would not be enough left for them. The great majority were probably not wealthy people (see 1 Corinthians 1:26).

How is it with you and me? Are we reluctant? ‘I’m just barely getting by. This bag of Cheetos is not very big. It has to last me all month you know.’ ‘And I’m not sure if I want to give to them. I don’t know those folks. They look different than me. We can use the money here.’ Or, on the other hand, ‘I do know those folks. I don’t like the way things are being done. There is no false teaching and no immoral life style going on, but it is just not the way I want to see things done. I can always get my Jesus itch scratched somewhere else.’

Giving can be a matter of trust. Could it be some did not trust Paul? He received no support, or little support, for his work among them. Maybe he was up to something. Could it be all this gathering was to line the pockets of one Saul of Tarsus? Trust is important. Transparency in handling gifts is a good thing that helps create trust. But at the same time hanging on, squeezing tight with the potential wrong doing, maybe even in

the form of supposed conspiracy as an excuse, is not a good thing. It is a trust issue, a matter of not trusting God's provision? So just give those Cheetos are really good squeeze, cheese that goes smush.

There is release from reluctance. The Macedonians, those Thessalonians, Philippians, and probably Bereans had let go. "For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." (8:2) They were not squeezing the bag. They were ready and releasing. Paul writes, "They gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the grace of taking part in the relief of the saints." (vs 3, 4). Imagine that, begging to give! The key to their generosity is giving was giving. "And this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord, and then b the will of God to us." (vs 5)

They had been released to give by their release from sin. It happens because of God's giving Himself. "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 by His poverty might become rich." (vs 9) How rich was He? The cattle on a thousand hills is nothing to Him. It is estimated that the combined wealth of the three richest men in the US (whose last names start with B, B, and G) have a combined worth of 263 billion. Such wealth a mere pittance, less than a pittance. All was His. All glory and honor and power was His.

He became poor for us. How poor? Born in a manger, unlike the birds of the air and the foxes of the field, no place to lay His head. He was despised, rejected, betrayed, condemned and crucified. He laid the use of His power aside that this might happen. He became sin for us that we may be rich indeed. By His poverty we have become rich. We are only poor beggars before God. We have nothing to offer. We were devoid of

righteousness and very rich in sin. But in Jesus we have the great exchange. He takes our sin and gives us His perfect righteousness. We have the wealth of forgiveness and richness of righteousness. Are sins are washed away in Jesus and we are clothed in Him, the rich garments of salvation. And one day there is the glorious riches of the saints.

The Macedonians knew. They knew that riches that was theirs in Christ. Do we? Of course, certainly, why wouldn't we? What does that look like to those outside of the faith? Do they see those trusting God's provisions and living accordingly and do they see those reluctant to let go of other gods?

We have release. We have been released, released from the death grip. We are released from its grip. The law that condemned us has been satisfied in Jesus. The jaws of death have been ripped apart by Jesus' resurrection. Because of this our grip on death is also released, that is we let go of the attitude, the faith, that our well-being is found in the items of this life. We have been freed to live in thanksgiving.

We give more than our money, more than our time and skills. We give ourselves. We see the need, the opportunity to check on our neighbor, to teach Sunday School, to work with the youth. We may have just the skills for those things, or maybe the talents to fix and maintain things. Perhaps we have been given a heart for helping. There very works God would have us do He puts before us to do and our doing happens as we are His workmanship in Christ Jesus. It's not 'let me be,' but "Take my life and let it be."

"Let me, let me!" We give from what God has given. "On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper." (1 Corinthians 16:2---first, not last, not leftovers, but priority, off the top) "For if the readiness is there (reluctance has been repulsed, you see), it is acceptable according to what a person has, not

according to what he does not have.” (8:12) “Each must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7)

We remember God’s economy of supply. We can just keep squeezing the bag if we like. What we will have is crumbs. We can give off the top in trust, thanksgiving and joy and enjoy the gifts entrusted to us. Remember Who’s really holding the bag. “As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.” (8:15) “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6) We don’t give to get, that is, give to get rich. That’s not the motivation nor the promise. We give from what has been given trusting God to supply what is needed. And yes, there is a harvest. “For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, it is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.” (9:12)

There is release from reluctance freeing for readiness. The key is giving. Christ has given Himself and now in faith we give ourselves to Him and others. And the giving just keeps flowing. For Jesus’ sake. Amen