

Giving GRACEfully
September 29, 2013

2 Corinthians 8:7-12

You know, I have heard pastors who begin stewardship sermons with an apology - something like, "well, it's that time of year again, so here I go."

But I think that Christian stewardship is such an important part of our calling as followers of Christ that I would never apologize for talking about it. So - here I go, but without apology.

I recently read a fascinating account of a trip to a church in Serbia that was made by a group from First Presbyterian Church in Defiance, Ohio.

I want to share some of that with you. And you might wonder what in the world a church in Serbia has to do with stewardship and giving, but stay with me.

As you no doubt know, Serbia is one of the countries that made up what was Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia, this particular church had been ...well not really persecuted...but had been through hard times.

They had suffered under a socialist regime. Their leader – Tito – was not part of the Russian communist block, but functioned a lot like that.

There was a degree of freedom of religion. You could be a member of a Christian Church, but if you were, you would not get employment with the government.

And since over 60% of the people were employed by the government, there were a lot of people who chose not to be church members during that time. If they did go to a church at all during the Tito years it would only be for a funeral or maybe an occasional baptism.

This all changed in the 1990's when the communist party fell, and the country of Yugoslavia broke up into Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Herzegovina.

Serbia includes the very area that Paul speaks about when he is talking about the Macedonians – an ancient place as far as Christian church activity is concerned.

Some of the people from the Ohio church on this trip said they wondered how the church worked financially – but they didn't ask. They did find out a little bit at a church in one of the towns they visited.

A leader of that congregation asked them how they financed their work – whether or not they received money from the State, as was the case for the Eastern Orthodox Church in Serbia.

They explained how we take offerings as part of our worship. The person questioning asked – then what about at baptisms and funerals – what do you do then? They explained that those are worship services, and we do them as part of our ministry.

The man got highly upset, and started talking faster than their translator could keep up. He told them that they were stupid, and didn't know what they were talking about.

There were some pretty animated exchanges before the man calmed down and they were able to ask him how things were done there Here is what they were told.

Each person has dues to pay – a set amount every year. These dues are used for paying for the needs of the congregation...the buildings, the pastor...all of the things that allow the church to run.

When someone wants their child baptized, they need to pay all the dues they owe – not only for that year, but for all the previous years.

When someone is to be buried, all of their back dues need to be paid as well.

After hearing that, the Ohio folks later talked with some of their English speaking hosts about this. They were told that many people who had not been to church for years, still wanted to be buried with a Christian funeral, and this was costing the families huge amounts of money in back dues.

I thought as I read all that - I'm sure there were many people baptized before the Tito regime, in the 1940s, who were dying now. Can you imagine the cost, if they had to pay dues for all those years before they could have a funeral?

I also thought about some of the churches I have been to and read about here in the United States. Historical Churches. Those churches had assigned seating. You paid more for the better seats, which were the ones up front. (I know – today – they would be the ones in the back of the church.)

I remember that in one particular church there were framed maps of the assigned seating from their founding until sometime in the middle 1900's when they stopped doing that.

This way, you knew who the important people in the church were. They were the ones that paid for the most expensive seats in the house.

Well, as I was reflecting on all of this, particularly about a system of paying annual dues or assessments to belong to a church, it got me thinking: Why do we give to the church? And also, why do we choose to fund churches the way that we do?

There are so many other models out there – yet, we choose as a congregation to put money into an offering plate every week. And we disperse it according to a plan that our session approved earlier in the year. And then, when there are special projects or needs, we choose ways of funding those that are voluntary - I mean, we don't kick anyone out if they don't give.

But why? Why do we do it this way? Why not charge people

- annual dues, like civic clubs and other organizations do
- or a required 10% of your income as in the Old Testament
- or an entry fee, like a movie theater or athletic event
- or fee for services, like the priest of the Old Testament charged for sacrifices
- or some other means. Why have we chosen the way that we do?

It is certainly not the only Biblical model – but it is one Biblical model. And this lesson from a letter Paul wrote which Ron read is one of the places we learn about why we should do it this way.

First, we do so “voluntarily, according to our means”. Let's think about that for a minute. Later this year, the session will approve a budget for 2014.

This budget will be what the expected needs of the church are in order to function, but of course it will be based on what the expected income is based on your pledges that we will receive today.

Now, in the Presbyterian church the congregation doesn't vote on the budget. That is the responsibility of the active elders, your elected leaders.

But of course we publish the budget every year and most of you know what the numbers have been in past years, and it is very tempting to think something like...well, this is what is needed, this is how many church members we have, this is how many people are in my family, so this is how much I should give.

Giving to a budget is like a woman I knew who had 4 children. Every Christmas she drew up her Christmas list for each of the children. At each store she went to she made sure that she kept the receipts.

A few days before Christmas, she put the receipts into four piles, one pile for each child. She then added up how much she had spent on each of her children.

For whatever child she had spent the most on, the shopping is done – for each of the others, she then figured out how much she needed to spend on them, in order for it to be exactly the same amount on each child.

Even if it meant buying sticks of gum – you know, she is going to make sure...TO THE PENNY... that she spent the same amount on each child.

At first the kids thought it a little strange that some of them were getting little pieces of candy – or gum, and others weren't. As they got older, they realized that this is what was happening. They even talked to her and told her that she wasn't obligated to give the exact amount to each child.

Now that her children are grown, they are able to joke about it – but let me ask you –Do you think that the children really counted up to see if the value of their gifts matched up to the penny – I don't think so. In fact, definitely not, according to them.

Actually, to some degree it took some of the fun out of Christmas for them. It took some of the sense of this being a gift given out of love – out of care – out of just giving for the sake of giving.

“My piece of gum wasn't given voluntarily – it was given as a kind of debt”. One of her children said.

We give voluntarily. Not as dues or a bill. Actually, Paul calls it a grace to be giving. Think of that. It is a grace that is a response to a greater grace. We respond in love to the love that we have been given. We respond with grace to the grace we have been given.

And we do it personally. If you want to see what someone finds important, just look at their checkbook, or in today's plastic society, credit card statements.

That may not always be 100% accurate, but I'm willing to bet it's pretty close. To a large degree, what we value is reflected in what we spend our money on.

This is why it can be a strain on marriages. If one spouse values having a big house and the other doesn't, for example, they will argue about the cost.

If they find it important to spend time with grandchildren who live far away – that is an expense as well. What we value is reflected in what we spend our money on.

And so families need to talk about what they are going to spend. Hopefully that is based on what their income is, although there are so many folks today who have tried to live beyond their means, and we are seeing the results of that.

Hopefully in those family discussions the matter of giving to the church is included. And I know that many committed Christians adhere to the Biblical principle of tithing.

Of course, they can get hung up over things such as is it 10% of gross or after taxes or over bills that they feel they have no control over, or.....

Well, those are matters of conscience that have to be thought through and resolved.

You and I each give personally to the church. We think through what we are able to give. I'm not planning on coming to your house and having that conversation with you – unless you just want me to.

Giving is personal. And it is, or should be, a response. We give in response – and it is a personal response -AS WE ARE ABLE.

Now some might say it would be fairer if church membership required a set amount – that is what the Church in Serbia does. But I believe that you are able to weigh what you can and should do.

Even if I knew your income to the penny, you would never hear me suggest an amount for you to give. That has to be between you and God.

You know what the gracious gifts of God mean to you, and only you can decide what is the appropriate response for all that God has done for you.

And that's another reason we choose the model of giving for our churches that we do. We talk a lot about free will, which itself is a gift of God.

God never forces himself on anyone. He doesn't want puppets who have no choice. God wants us to come to him because we want to, because we choose to.

It is the same with our giving. God's desire for us is that we give lovingly, by choice, recognizing God's grace in our lives and recognizing that our giving is also a grace.

At a comparative religions conference, the wise and the scholarly were in a spirited debate about what is unique about Christianity.

Someone suggested what set Christianity apart from other religions was the concept of incarnation, the idea that God took human form in Jesus. But someone quickly said, "Well, actually, other faiths believe that God appears in human form."

Another suggestion was offered: what about resurrection? The belief that death is not the final word, that the tomb was found empty. Someone slowly shook his head. Other religions have accounts of people returning from the dead.

Then, as the story is told, C.S. Lewis walked into the room, tweed jacket, pipe, arm full of papers, a little early for his presentation. He sat down and took in the conversation, which had by now evolved into a fierce debate. Finally during a lull, he spoke saying, "what's all this rumpus about?"

Everyone turned in his direction. Trying to explain themselves, they said, "We're debating what's unique about Christianity."

"Oh, that's easy," answered Lewis. "It's grace." The room fell silent. Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim.

After a moment someone commented that Lewis had a point, Buddhists, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It's not a free ride.

Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions.

Someone else observed the Jewish code of the law implies God has requirements for people to be acceptable to him and in Islam God is a God of Judgment not a God of love. You live to appease him

At the end of the discussion everyone concluded Lewis had a point. Only Christianity dares to proclaim God's love is unconditional, an unconditional love that we call grace.

Christians boldly proclaim that grace really has precious little to do with us. Rather, grace is all about God and God freely giving to us the gifts of forgiveness, mercy, and love. How can we not respond to that?

And finally, we have chosen to fund our churches in the way that we do, because it reflect what Jesus did. He chose to give himself.

It always comes down to Jesus, doesn't it? He is the reason for our gathering together – and the reason for our choices. He did this, not for what he could get out of it, but because of our need. And he even took it a step further.

You see, he entrusted what he did to people like Peter and Paul – with all their faults and shortcomings, who, going many years down the road, entrusted all of this to us – with all our faults and shortcomings. I find that amazing.

And so we gather – by choice. And while we gather, we respond...personally...by choice...conscious of the grace we have received.

Do any of you remember Dr. Laura Schlesinger, who used to have a radio program giving personal advice to listeners who would call in with their problems and questions. She always ended her radio program with what I think is very good advice. She says, "Now go do the right thing."

As we make our pledges in a few minutes, I am confident that each of us, in response to God's free gift of grace, will do the right thing.