

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 6

June 28, 2009

2 Corinthians 8:7–15

Mark 5:21–43

I've been uptight lately, worrying as a rector about stuff that could lead me to think I'm CEO of a growing business more than pastor of a flock whose Shepherd continually reassures us that he came that we might have life and have it in abundance (John 10:10). The present economic meltdown in which we find ourselves has created a climate of fear and uncertainty in many sectors of our society. It's contagious, like the H1N1 Flu Virus that seems to have now come to Greenville. And, like many viruses, there are measures we can take

to immune ourselves from being infected, especially when it comes to a mind-set of scarcity even in the midst of cost-cutting measures taking place across the board, including our church.

We're close, for instance, to bringing a new organist to St. Paul's.

Andrew Scanlon is a talented young man with a generous spirit willing to come to Greenville to take two part-time jobs, one in ECU's School of Music's Organ Department and the other as our Organist/Choir Master, without even a short-term guarantee of job security in either position. Where someone else might see 'danger,' Andrew sees an opportunity.

I almost completely ignored our second lesson from Paul's letter to the Corinthians when preparing for today. But I didn't, even when I realized that this is Paul's Stewardship Appeal Letter to the gentile community in Corinth. (God forbid that the rector of an Episcopal Church give a stewardship appeal sermon before the Fourth of July!) You'll have to wait until August to get my Stewardship Appeal Letter, but I'd like to talk today about the one Paul, our patron, wrote to the Corinthians.

Paul makes an appeal to the gentile community in Corinth to 'pony up' in helping to support the poor Palestinian Jewish community of Christians in Jerusalem. He uses the Macedonian community as an example of a Christian community which, while depleted of much of their resources because of persecution, shares the little they have without even being asked to do so. Paul tells the Corinthians that no one can be forced to be generous. It's a gift. It comes from

God, like grace. "I can't tell you how much to give," Paul tells the Corinthians. "Self giving must always be according to one's means." And this gets to the heart of Paul's appeal: the grace of giving comes from a God-inspired generosity, a generosity most visible through the example of Jesus, who, though he was rich, that is, though he shared fully in God's divinity, did not cling to his richness but emptied himself, becoming poor for our sake and for the sake of the Good News of God's Kingdom. Paul cuts to the chase, pointing to the generosity of the human Jesus as the standard for our own giving. He doesn't get into any sermonizing about 'monkey money' – which leads me to a story. It comes from a clergy CREDO II renewal experience I participated in last fall in Richmond. Phyllis Strupp, a member of faculty, was speaking on Generosity as a Way of Life, when, all of a sudden, she pulled out lots of green stuff from her pockets. She held the dollar bills before us and asked, "Who feels as if they're nothing without it?" There was silence. And then, she threw the money down before her and said, "It's nothing without you." And yet, she said, that when it comes to money, many of us still have the mind-set of a monkey looking for bananas. Phyllis challenged us clergy in the same way Paul exhorts the Corinthians in today's lesson. She asked the question: how close or far away are we from the mind of Christ when it comes to the grace of giving. Not having the mind of Christ should make us anxious as baptized Christians and members of the church, not how much money we have or don't have.

Paul's stewardship appeal concerning the grace of giving and the generosity of Christ concludes with a reference to the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness and the daily practice of collecting the manna to sustain them. All worked together in gathering the manna. Some ended up with little, some with much. All then shared what they had gathered and so all were filled. The thing about gathering manna, however, was that it was only good for the day. You couldn't bank it or save it for a rainy day. (It's why we say, in the Lord's prayer, give us this day or today our daily bread.) We've got to wait and trust and ask again tomorrow. It is, as always, easier to talk about these things than it is to put them into practice. What really nudged me to talk about Paul's stewardship appeal in our second lesson today was a phone conversation I had last week. It started with a note on my office door from a parishioner asking me to return his call. It's been a long time since we talked with one

another. He had called me about five months ago to tell me he had lost his job – and he asked me to pray for him. I couldn't help but wonder, when I saw his note asking me to call him, whether or not he had found a job. That, at least, was the news I was hoping to hear. I was prepared, however, for the worst, willing to offer whatever support I had to give. But it wasn't like that at all! He hadn't found a job yet, though he's had a few interviews and even a few offers, but they're pretty far away from Greenville and North Carolina. "It might be worth uprooting and moving," he told me, "if it weren't for the fact they just don't seem like a right fit." Like the Israelites in the wilderness, he seems to trust the manna he has today and is confident that God will help lead him through these difficult times. His purpose in calling was to simply let me know how grateful he was that we had announced here at St. Paul's, soon after he lost his job, that First Presbyterian on Elm and Fourteenth Street offers a Monday morning prayer for folks out of work and in need of support. He told me in a very upbeat way how important this group has become for him. "We pray together and then meet afterwards, offering one another hope and practical suggestions in facing our respective challenges – and we keep in touch through emails during the week." What he didn't know, however, was that his call and message touched me in a way I didn't expect. It was a gift, a sort of wake-up call for me to not worry about things I have no control over, but to trust, as he does, that God's generosity in Christ will touch and heal and lead us into new and abundant life through the grace of our giving.

Amen.

Bob Hudak

St. Paul's Episcopal Church