

Clustering for Maximum Effect 4 Pentecost B, Proper 8B

Though I have never seen the Sequoia trees of California, known as Redwoods, I am told they are spectacular. Towering as much as 300 feet above the ground. Strangely, these towering trees have unusually shallow root systems that spider out just under the surface of the ground to catch as much of the surface moisture they can. And this is their vulnerability. Storms with heavy winds would almost always bring these giants crashing to the ground but this rarely happens because they grow in clusters and their intertwining roots provide support for one another against the storms.

When we are together, either as a family or a church, we provide this same support. Pain and suffering come to all of us. But, just like those giant Sequoia trees, we can be supported in those difficult times by the touch of one another's lives. The knowledge that we have someone; that we are not alone; that there is someone who is willing to touch us, hold us, keeps us from being destroyed.

Ancient Jewish law had a way of helping its citizens get out of debt. It was a sabbatical seventh year when those who had fallen into bankruptcy could finally be free of an indentured slavery forced upon them by a landlord to repay their debt. But our first reading suggests that people of faith had trouble with forgiving such a debt. Some viewed their neighbor with hostility and contempt. A warning is given: heed the cry of the poor or suffer guilt before God. Do not begrudge them in your giving but give liberally.

The principle of equity was a part of this early moral code of living. It recognized that people would fall on hard times and those who have would be required to help those who have not. God wants the community of faith to be generous with itself. That generosity was motivated by receiving an incentive of blessing from God and avoiding transgression.

We have heard for generations that God loves a cheerful giver and that God will bless those who tithe. Television evangelists speak of how God will bless materially if we are faithful in giving. This is false teaching and bad theology.

Some will quote scripture to support their argument such as Luke 6:38: "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." That certainly is

a promise we can take home but hear this clearly – the scripture supports equity in substance not getting a return for your investment. The incentives we want today for investing in someone or something in the kingdom of God does not translate into hard cash or favors. We shall see in our second reading that there is yet another motivation for giving.

If the church at Corinth was fairly well-off, we might say they were members of the “upper crust” of Corinthian society. But what would we mean?

According to *Ye Olde English Sayings*, “Visitors to Anne Hathaway’s cottage (near Stratford upon Avon) are given this explanation while looking at the bread oven beside the fireplace in the kitchen: ‘The bread was put, as a raw lump of dough, straight into the bread oven. No bread tin, it just sits on the floor of the oven. The oven is heated by the fire and is very hot at the bottom.

‘When the bread is done baking and taken out to cool, the base of the loaf is overcooked, black and also dirty. The top of the loaf is done just right, and still clean. The bottom of the loaf is for the servants to eat, while the upper crust is for the master of the house.’”

That illustration may horrify some us. It is still true in many places that people are treated that way. It is not a sin to be what society would call the upper crust. The apostle Paul appealed to the upper crust society of Corinth in his letter read today. He brags to Macedonia of Corinth’s willingness to help the church in Jerusalem, their knowledge of Christ, their faith, their speech and Paul hopes, their eagerness to give generously. Paul has decided to follow the advance delegation of Titus and he does not want to be embarrassed if the church in Corinth does not come through with its pledge.

The apostle Paul leaves for the church a legacy of giving that is the model for all its members. He tells the Corinthian church that they need to read about what Gentile Christians in Macedonian churches are doing for poor Jewish saints in Jerusalem whom they have never met as a result of the promise the Corinthians had made to Paul to help.

By holding up the example of Macedonia’s generosity in the midst of their own extreme poverty Paul’s plea to the Corinthians serves as a charge to model Christ’s own behavior in sacrificial giving for the sake of another. Paul’s plea concerning the collection goes far beyond the appeal to be faithful in giving money. For Paul, the collection itself has far-reaching implications.

The key for understanding Paul's teaching may be contained in the word "contribution." It is significant that the term often translated here as "contribution" is the term commonly used for fellowship or partnership (*koinonia*). Paul sees this generous undertaking to help the poor saints as a clustering of God's people to show the world the generosity of Christ to Jew and Gentile alike. For Paul the church should not be divisible along Jew-Gentile lines or any other lines for that matter (Galatians 3:28). This collection is representative of a partnership in Christ.

He did not need to command the Macedonians to give nor will he order the Corinthians to do so (v.8). He reminds them of their debt of service in Christ: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (v.9). Therefore, Paul instructs the Corinthians to be like Christ in their giving. They are partners with all Christians not just their own church.

Now it is time for me to brag about how well we have done with the challenges to ministry despite repairs, increased staffing and outreach. The challenges are still with us and so I make my appeal to you to tithe – that means ten percent of everything that God has given us. Our financial resources, our time and our gifts all belong to God. If anyone thinks they will keep them and keep them going in their children then let me recall the words of Tycoon, Warren Buffett, who this week announced a donation of 37 billion dollars to the Gates Foundation for research. He was asked why he didn't leave more to his kids. He replied that he had been generous to his children all his working life and now it was time to give back to others.

The time has come to realize that some of you will be answering phones and typing up bulletins when Rita our secretary retires at the end of this month. Trying to fill her shoes and afford it will be a great challenge to our ministry and giving. You may know that our debt on the roof is down to \$109 thousand and we have taken out a mortgage to try and pay it off in three years before interest rates climb again – and they will. There are more repairs to be made in the basement of this church where water is leaking into the men's bathroom. Repairs to the outside of the office are needed as well with rotting wood to be replaced.

These are great challenges to us and they will stretch our love for God, for God's people and for this community. We have so much catching up to do with our Outreach. People see the need. I know it is

difficult to understand that what we see in our bank accounts is for this church's future. A living church cannot live on dead people's money but on those who are alive and are in partnership with each other.

Like the giant sequoias we much become a cluster of roots interconnected so we can continue to stand tall and proud of our history, our contribution to Janesville and most of all our love of Christ who for our sakes became poor that we might become rich in grace.
Amen