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Title: #beCHURCH: be GENEROUS

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Text: [2 Corinthians 9:10-15](#)

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Today is the fourth sermon in a series of four about how we can be our best and BE CHURCH together. The first in the series was about worship. In my sermon that day, I said that worship should have an UPWARD focus in praise of God, an INWARD focus in prayer and reflection, and an OUTWARD focus as we go into the community to serve.

Next was the importance of connecting with one another so that we coalesce as a unified team as we serve. We are better when we know one another's stories. Last week was serving – being helpful inside the church and beyond the building. This week gets personal. This week, we'll look at how our generosity identifies us as Christ's followers.

I ran across a story this week about a preacher giving a sermon to his congregation. The church was one in which people respond by giving their approval and encouragement to the preacher DURING the sermon. If you did that here, you might get some looks and you'd likely throw me off my game. This preacher was encouraging his congregation and said, "Now let the church walk." A man on the front row gave his approval and said, "Amen, let it walk." A few minutes later, the preacher said to the congregation, "Let the church run," and the man on the front row said, "Yes, preacher, let it run." Coming to the climactic end of the sermon, the preacher said, "Let the church fly," to which the man replied, "Amen, let the church fly." Finally, the preacher said, "Now, brothers and sisters, it's going to take money to let the church fly." There was this awkward silence from the man on the front row until finally, he said, "Let it walk, preacher, let it walk." ¹

The question for us as a church in the coming few weeks is do we want the church to walk or do we want the church to fly? Paul's second letter to the emerging church in the city of Corinth can help us on our way to an answer. Paul encourages the Corinthians not to forget the source of their blessings when he says, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing increase the harvest of your righteousness." (2 Corinthians 9:10).

We spend our lives working hard and sowing seeds that bear fruit: seeds of love that surrounds us with families and friends; seeds of education and training that have led to our jobs and responsibilities; seeds of financial resources that have grown into the things we enjoy from dinner out to a vacation to a special gift for a friend. At whatever stage of life we find ourselves, we enjoy blessings from these seeds planted. Do we have all we want? Most people would say NO – do we have all we need – if we are honest, the answer is almost always YES.

Paul knew the Corinthians had all they needed, and that they had a need to share it. He is in the process of collecting an offering to take back to the church in Jerusalem to show them that the churches he has started are living out the gospel by being generous in their giving. Paul tells the Corinthians that he is sending some folks to collect their portion of the offering and he expects the Corinthians to demonstrate their generosity. So, the ninth chapter of 2 Corinthians is Paul's stewardship campaign cover letter. Pastor Danny and I wrote a similar cover letter this week although but it will never make it into the canon of scripture. If you are a member or participant in the life of Geist Christian Church, you'll find it in your mailbox this week.

In Paul's cover letter, he reminds his readers in Corinth that they have been blessed for a purpose. He writes, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God." (2 Corinthians 9:11-12). In other words, God has given you all you need, you have all you need, so now make sure others have what they need. When we do this, we express our thanks to God through our generosity.

Notice that Paul doesn't mention an amount. He doesn't say, "A gift of \$10 is the silver generosity level and comes with a cute angel lapel pin, but a gift of \$100 gets you the gold generosity level, complete with a 'God Loves Me' sweatshirt." Paul doesn't set a minimum or maximum to define generosity. Paul knew that our attitude when we give is more important than the amount. God is less concerned about how much we give and more concerned about how we give. Just before our reading for today is where Paul says, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7). It doesn't say that God loves a rich giver or a poor giver, it says God loves a cheerful giver.

Is it possible to be a cheerless giver? Absolutely! We can give begrudgingly - we can give because we feel we must and be grumpy about it. And just to be clear, the church won't turn away a gift given without joy. But the decision to give isn't between you and the church. I'm not the one looking at your heart when you give. It's between you and God. Looking at our own lives is proof that God is by nature a giving being, and one of the ways we reflect God's image in us is when we are giving as well. Giving is in our nature - it feels good to give.

I love how one church pictures it. We're all on this spectrum between an emerging giver and an extravagant giver. I don't know where you are on this spectrum, but what Paul tells us is simple: try taking it to the next level and find joy in your giving. If you are an emerging giver, try being an engaging giver - if you are engaging, try expanding - if expanding, try extravagant - if extravagant, find new ways to spread your joy in giving. Make it your aim to become a more generous giver. ²

Shortly after my ordination, while serving in my first church out of seminary, I admit that I didn't understand any of this. It wasn't because I didn't have models growing up. My maternal grandparents were as poor as church mice as they say but they were generous. Their giving to God through their church was always the first commitment to be paid - off the top - before the utilities, before the rent, even before groceries, because they knew that giving to God first, rather than with the leftovers, was the only appropriate way to acknowledge what Paul calls "the surpassing grace of God."

While I knew that in my head, it hadn't transferred to my heart. I had school debt that had to be paid, I had rent and utilities and, I liked to eat - some things never change. There was never anything left for God. Listen to that sentence again and you'll hear the problem - "there was never anything left for God." I was trying to give God leftovers and there were rarely leftovers. When I married Ruth, she had a little bit different view of giving than I did. Let's just say that she carried the same traits as my maternal grandparents when it came to giving generously.

As newlyweds, we began tithing. A tithe is 10% of one's income and dates to the book of Genesis. In Genesis 28, Jacob has his dream about the ladder reaching to heaven and receives a blessing from God. When he wakes from his sleep, he builds an altar to honor God and proclaims, "and of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." (Genesis 28:22b) Jesus confirms the concept of a tithe when he is talking to the Pharisees in Matthew and says that "tithing must be done with a deep concern for justice, mercy, and faithfulness."

There's a story about an ambitious young high school student who told his pastor he had promised God a tithe of his income. At that time, he was making \$40.00 per week mowing a couple of yards and tithing \$4.00. The young man grew up and did very well. His career took off and he quickly climbed the income ladder. In a few years, his income increased until he was tithing \$500.00 per week. He called on the pastor to see how he might be released from his tithing promise because he thought it had become too costly. The pastor replied, "Yes, there is something we can do, we can ask God to reduce your income back to \$40.00 a week; that way, you would have no problem tithing \$4.00." ³

From those early moments of our marriage to this moment, I've thought about giving differently. It was no longer leftovers, but first fruits – it wasn't done begrudgingly but with joy – it wasn't done to pay the bills but as an act of worship. This is driven home every time I worship in Puerto Rico and the time of offering becomes the most joyous part of the service. People dance down the aisles to place their gifts on the table.

I've learned over these years that generosity is more than just a transaction. Generosity is more than writing a check. Generosity is transformative – for the recipient and the giver. Our giving is our proclamation that God is abundant and God's grace meets our needs. It is a way for us to say we have enough, despite the culture that tells us constantly we need more. Our giving is a spiritual discipline that transforms us. God gave abundantly to us and these blessings enable us to be a blessing to other people. By so doing, we continue to grow into the likeness of Christ. By our giving, we claim our part in God's redemptive work in the world by helping to provide for the least, the last and the lost at a level of giving that is both challenging and based on scripture.

Paul boasted to the Macedonians that the people in the church in Corinth were eager and prepared to give. He wanted to make sure that his boast would not be hollow, so he sent people ahead to help get things ready. The people in the church in Corinth were learning what generosity meant and how life-changing it could be just as I was learning 25 years ago.

Generosity is something you can learn and grow into – it just means you must exercise that generosity muscle a bit. If you don't know where to begin, start with gratitude. That is the very first step, just being grateful for what you have. Begin thinking about being a steward of your resources rather than possessing your resources. Being a steward implies that what we care for while we are on this earth is not ours but belongs to God. Every decision about how it is spent is done by looking through that lens.

In the packet you will receive this week is information about how your gifts will be used. I commit to you that every dollar received will be used wisely. I hope you will prayerfully consider your part in God's plan for Geist Christian Church in the coming year. In that packet, you will find a pledge card or you can pledge online. Your pledge helps us be good stewards of God's resources as we plan for the upcoming year. With all of us giving, at your level, we can do great things for each other, for the community, and the world.

Giving is an important part of our Christian discipleship. It is how we grow in the grace and love and knowledge of God. Today, I want to invite you to think of your giving to God as part of your discipleship and consider whether God is calling you to take a step up in giving. If you are an emerging giver, try being an engaging giver - if you are an engaging giver, try being an expanding giver - if an expanding giver, try being an extravagant giver.

God is pleased when we give from the heart. Because that's where giving started—from God's heart, with the gift of Jesus Christ. We honor God when we give cheerfully, freely, generously, and intentionally. We also honor God when we grow in our giving because this is part of the change Christ works in us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

With God's help, this church can walk. With God's help, this church can run. With God's help and all of us working together, this church can fly. Oh, yes, it can fly.

¹ Illustration from "Let It Walk Preacher" by Robby Patterson found at <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/24295-let-it-walk-preacher>

² Image about steps in more generous giving from "What Happens When You Give," posted March 31, 2019 at <https://dashhouse.com/what-happens-when-you-give/>

³ Illustration found in "Giving to God: How Should We Give?" Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells found at https://pastorwellerumc.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/131117_sermon_2-corinthians-9-6-15.pdf