



## Investing in the Neighborhood

### 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

June 21, 2020

From the time we are just young children in the church, we begin to hear and learn the stories of our historic faith. We learn about the Exodus and the parting of the sea, and Noah and the great flood; we learn about Daniel in the lion's den, and Jonah in the whale; we read about Jesus and the many encounters he had as he walked, preached, and performed miracles from Galilee to Jerusalem. These stories of our faith all point to a God who liberatingly frees the oppressed, who calls us to faithful discipleship, and who presents Christ as Lord.

From an early age, we learn about Jesus, who gives us this new example of love, living as the incarnate God. In his witness to God's will, Jesus doesn't just befriend those who were cast out from society, he breaks the chains of their oppression so that they might never again be cast out again. We learn how Jesus doesn't just help the blind man find his way, but instead, he gives sight the blind man. We learn how Jesus doesn't just give a ride to the lame man, but instead, he makes it so the lame man can walk. We learn how Jesus doesn't just take the leper a meal to eat, but instead, he cures the leper so that he might be welcomed back into society. The miraculous healings of Jesus do not offer temporary relief for those whom he encounters, Jesus breaks the cycle of their oppression, so that they may have a new life – a full life – a life lived amidst community.

The story we learn of our faith is one of creation, sin, death, and redemption. In redeeming creation, God sent Christ to break the chains of sin and death that had long ailed the creation. This is why Christ doesn't offer temporary solutions, Christ offers lasting and eternal solutions. Christ doesn't offer technical changes to fix small matters, he offers adaptive changes to alter the course of one's life for the better. Christ doesn't seek to help someone for today, but he offers love in such a way that they are set up to have a new life henceforth.

Over the past month, we've been asking this question, "What makes us the church?" We've named that part of it is acknowledging the image of God in each person, and that God has gifted us each as worthy individuals. We've claimed that it involves essential work to fulfill an eternal mission, and that the eternal mission looks different in each temporal moment of life. Last week, I offered that the work of the church is to be a *Community Catalyst*, sharing and proclaiming God's love in the midst of the community that invites the diversity of God's tapestry.

My self-reflection from last Sunday, and my questions of critique on how we engage in the community, carries over a bit this week, as we continue to ask, "What makes us the church?"

The Church was instituted by God to be a living witness and testimony to the goodness of God in the world. This is work that was begun by Christ, who instructed us and empowered us to do the same. This is work that was initiated among the believers in the formation of the Church at Pentecost with the gifting of the Holy Spirit. As we think about our work as the church, and ask, “what makes us the church,” we should be reflecting back on those stories many of us learned as children. The work of the Church, and our work as disciples who make up the church, should look like the work of Jesus. It should offer lasting, total, all-encompassing, and community-redeeming freedom and new life to all who are lost, unloved, our seen as outcasts in society.

In his book, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*, Rev. Michael Mather says we cannot honestly talk about this work without talking about financial oppression, often referred to as poverty.

Prior to coming to Washington Street, I served as the Minister of Mission at a larger church in Western Fairfax. As the Minister of Mission, I had sole signing authority over a community assistance fund, which gave out roughly \$10,000 a year in utility and rental support. It operated in a similar manner to our Pastor’s Discretionary Fund here at Washington Street. Many churches have funds of this nature, each designed to offer financial support to those living in poverty. Admittedly, I’ve always had a hard time discerning how these funds should be used, and who to give them to. I’ve sat through more conversations than I can count where someone explained to me their full life situation, what had led to the current shortfall of available resources, and why this money was so necessary at the moment. If I’m being honest, I’ve been skeptical more than once during these conversations.

But my skepticism isn’t usually what keeps me from paying someone’s bill. If they have the need, I do *want* to help. My challenge isn’t the desire the help; my challenge is trying to figure out how paying their bill helps accomplish the work of the church. Not because the church isn’t called to offer food to the hungry, or housing to the homeless, or support to the needy. Yes, we are called to offer support as we are able, and these are all areas of need we are often able to offer support.

But Rev. Mather asks a poignant question that puts words to thoughts I have never been able to express. He asks, what if our focus wasn’t on helping the poor, but on ending poverty?

Those who need financial assistance, those who are struggling to pay their bills, those who had unexpected expenses that drained their savings ... each is created in God’s image, each is invited to know God’s love, each is called to know the saving love of Christ. Like the leper, or the lame, or the blind, they are asking for help. And I can’t help but to wonder, why are we so quick to pay a bill that just staves off the ill effects of poverty, rather than offer transformative change that ends poverty? Like shoeboxes filled with trinkets, why are we so grateful for an opportunity to “show love,” rather than living out the witness of Christ’s love that changes someone’s life forever?

I know this is a deeply complicated issue ... and I know every back-seat driver and armchair quarterback has an opinion about it. Solving poverty is like solving racism – the two are more intertwined than we are often willing to name. The work involves long-term structural changes at every level of politics: from the town, to the county, to the state, to the nation, to the global community. Yes, like most of the work of the Church, it's a political issue – it involves the *polis* – the city and the people. It means advocating for things like educational equality, and housing equality, and healthcare equality. It means making it so the next generation doesn't face the same lack of opportunity as the last generation.

But honestly, when it comes to the church, these seem like scapegoat answers. Writing the problem off as distant and time-consuming is just another way to push responsibility off to someone else to solve the problem. It's easy to push the problem off, especially when you're not the one hoping your water doesn't get cut off tonight.

Perhaps we should reframe the problem in a way we can respond – as the Church – like Christ – to not just offer temporary support, but to literally give someone new life. What if we didn't just offer band aids to mask the problems? What if we addressed the problems head on? In that case, we'd have to dig a bit deeper to identify the root of the problem.

For this, I turn back to Rev. Mather, who says it more bluntly than I probably would. Since he's already written the book, I'll just use his words. In all the work I've done to offer support for the poor, "I'd missed the simple point that being poor means you don't have money."<sup>i</sup> If we can convince ourselves the problem is something else – like education, health, etc. ... we can ignore the issue of money. But at the core, that's why the poor exist, they don't have enough money – or access to money.

We know that when Christ got involved with people's poverty, they didn't get a temporary fix, they were healed – that were transformed – they were freed from their oppression. Now, the Bible doesn't talk a lot, at least not directly, about healthcare equality – that's a fairly modern invention; nor does the Bible talk much, at least directly, about educational equality – that's still being invented; but the Bible does have a lot to say about money equality. Jesus talks a lot about money. The epistle letters also talk a lot about money, especially in regards to the work of the early church.

Here, we turn to our reading in 2 Corinthians.

Paul had been teaching and preaching in Greece, and he'd set up multiple churches throughout the country. The Church in Jerusalem is in the midst of a Church-wide collection, seeking funds from all of the early churches to alleviate the financial poverty of the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is looking to encourage the giving of each of the churches he's begun back to the "mother church" in Jerusalem. Here, he's writing this letter to the church of Corinth, a church he helped begin, which was located in the Southern region of Greece, not far from Athens. Corinth was a hopping trade town, a port city at the end of the Gulf of Corinth, and was therefore a fairly wealth community.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul is referencing the church in Macedonia. Macedonia is located further north in Greece, away from the busy mercantile cities like Athens and Corinth. It was also an area that had suffered badly under Roman rule. For all these reasons, money was lacking – the Macedonians lived in poverty.

Paul begins this section of the letter by saying that, even in their poverty, the Macedonians were extremely generous. He says in verse 3, that he didn't ask them to give (they lived in poverty, so Paul had intentionally not asked them to give), but that they gave of their own voluntary desire. Each member of the church gave as they had means. And they didn't just give, "they begged earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of the saints."

Quite honestly, Paul seems somewhat surprised. He's surprised because he didn't expect them to be able to give, or to desire to give. He saw them as little more than an impoverished people who had little to offer. But, in reflecting on their gifts, he says, "they gave themselves first to the Lord, and then, by the will of God, to us." *Paul names that their generosity was a response to their trust in the Lord.*

A few years ago, I found an old beat up folding chair by the front door of the church. I didn't know what it was, or how it had gotten there. No was around, and the chair was in terrible shape, so I threw it away. The next week, at the Monday morning Open Table Breakfast, one of our guests asked me if I had gotten the chair. He said he didn't have much to offer, but that he felt it was right to give of what he had to the church. I couldn't say anything other than 'thank you.' ... A few days later, I found an empty duffle bag and another folding chair at the front of the church. This time, there was a note, which read, "Again, I'm sorry I don't have more to offer, but this is my tithe this week."

Like the widow in Mark, chapter 12, who gave her two copper coins, one does not have to have great wealth to be faithful in their giving to the Lord.

After naming the unexpected giving of the Macedonians, Paul focuses back on the giving of the Corinthians. He begins in verse 8, writing, "I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others." ... He's not setting any hard and fast rules for their giving, and it's not a direct comparison to the Macedonians, but make no mistake, Paul is calling them out.

He continues in verse 9, writing, "You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that through though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." He's comparing the sacrificial giving of the Macedonians to the sacrificial living of Jesus. "What the Macedonians have done in sending money to Jerusalem can be put on the same plane as what Jesus did in living and dying for us. Our [modern day] appeals for charity are often based on humanitarian considerations; Paul derives his from the personal dedication of believers to God."<sup>ii</sup>

As he fleshes this type of sacrificial giving out, he offers that one should give according to their means. They aren't being told to give more than they have, but that they should give in *proportion* to what they have. In doing so, he's not offering any kind of hard and fast rule; he's not inviting a flat 10% tithe like we often see in the history of the Biblical story. But he does say, "if the eagerness is there," meaning, if you are dedicated to God, then "the acceptable gift will be one that is in accordance to what you have."

Paul is writing to a fairly wealthy community, but he's writing in an age of scarcity. It was a mercantile and agricultural world, where wealth was severely limited. So, Paul adds in this caveated explanation as he continues in verse 13: I'm not asking for you to give to the needs in Jerusalem so that it might create need in your own community, but I am offering that a fair balance should exist between your abundance and their need, so that their abundance might support you in your need. Your giving should help create a fair balance. Paul doesn't want the Corinthians to give so much that their giving might force their own poverty. "It would be pointless to create poverty in Corinth in order to ease it in Jerusalem."<sup>iii</sup> What's he's looking for is to use the abundance in Corinth to help remove the poverty in Jerusalem, and thus, to get rid of poverty.

In his conclusion in verse 15, Paul references back to the Exodus, speaking of the manna that was given from heaven, writing, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

With little hesitation, it's easy to acknowledge the power of money in the world today. It's easy to see how money continues to flow in the direction of the wealthy, while maintaining the hurt and pain of those in poverty.

And if I may, I'd like to take the posture of last week, and say, I'm not sure I have all the answers on how we fix this as a local church – but if we are going to answer the call to be who we, as the church, have been created to be, it is beyond time that we start to have that conversation. Do people need to have their utilities bills paid so they don't lose their water or electricity, absolutely. But is paying a bill for someone living in poverty once every 12 months really redeeming? Is this Christ-like work? Does this free someone from financial oppression? Is this really the work of the church? ... Perhaps we need a "yes, and ..." type of response.

No, I don't have all the answers, but I do have a lot of questions. Questions for us as individuals, like, do we not have enough money among the wealthy in our community to invest in more than keeping someone from being evicted? Do we not have enough money amongst our community to do more than placate someone's temporary need? Are we scared by the cries of scarcity, and miss the abundance that exists in the world today? Do we not think that we can give more ourselves, without fear of toppling into poverty? Or are we so bent on maintaining the power status quo, that we won't give up that which buys our power?

I've also got questions for the community, and for our nation, like, do we really think investing in the tools of war will help us find peace more than investing in our communities and

individual lives? Do we really think that keeping more people from entering our borders will really relinquish the grips of poverty on those already living here? Can we do more at the local level than ensure there are enough below-market rate housing complexes? Instead of asking people to pay less to live here, can we pay them more so they don't need to pay less?

And yes, I even have questions for us as a church, like, are we really investing in the transformation of the community? Are we offering support that helps rid our community of poverty, or are we happy to just put food in someone's fridge for the night? Are we giving money to the right people, or investing in the right partners, to see Christ-like transformation happen? How are we atoning for the sins of our past, for our participation in dividing wealth, in order that we might proclaim God's power more faithfully in the future?

Again, I'd love to hear your thoughts. How can we use the financial gifts of the community, not to perpetuate poverty, but to transform lives? How can we be more sacrificial in our giving, to be more participatory in the shalom-making of community? How can we use the gifts of God, entrusted in our care, to invest in others – not to silence them?

God has blessed this world with more than we would ever need. And yet, so many still go without. I pray that God may lead us so that our work as a church and our engagement as individuals may mimic the work of Christ, to proclaim God's love in such a way that the lame shall walk, the blind shall see, the outcast shall be welcomed back, and that all who feel the weight of oppression might be free. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Michael Mather. *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Ernest Best. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Second Corinthians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.