

June Huber
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 1, 2018

Side by Side

I imagine that you're wondering why I'm in the pulpit this morning, so let me explain. I've just completed my first year of a two-year training program in spiritual direction, offered at a retreat center called Richmond Hill. Spiritual direction is a relationship in which one person helps another person to more fully attend to God's presence in their life. I like to think of it more as a "guide" than a director. When I become one, with God's help, I won't tell you which path to take; instead, I'll help you to find your own way. One of my personal objectives in this program is to more fully develop my ability to understand and explain scripture – so here I am.

In today's lesson from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul is giving some advice to the Church at Corinth. (I say "advice" because he specifically says in verse 8 that he's not giving them a commandment.) In order to better understand his advice, I had to go back and read the preceding verses 1 through 6, which serve as an introduction. In these verses Paul says that the Churches of Macedonia, through God's grace, were very generous with their assistance to the Christians in Jerusalem. Even though the Macedonians suffered from "extreme poverty," their "abundant joy ... overflowed in a wealth of generosity." They gave not just according to their means, but "beyond their means." And they "begged for the privilege " of sharing in this ministry to the saints.

In today's lesson, in verses 7 through 15, Paul advises the churches at Corinth to do likewise, and this is how he does it. First, he compliments them, saying that they "excel at everything," so they can excel at this too. Then he challenges them by saying that this is a test of the "genuineness" of their love. He reminds them that Jesus gave everything he had for their sake, even his very life. Then he challenges them again, saying that they were "eager" to start, so now it's time to finish the job. Then he softens it a bit, saying that God doesn't expect them to give beyond their means. Finally, he explains that there should be a "fair balance" within the Christian community at large. They should give whatever they can and, return, they will receive whatever they need.

My training at Richmond Hill has taught me to look at different translations of the Bible side-by-side in order to better understand a specific reading. There are several "Parallel Bibles" in our church library that make this easy. In my comparison of today's reading in the King James, New Revised Standard and New International versions, one word that is repeated in all of them is "grace."

What is this grace? We at Grace Church probably ought to know, but do we, really? I wanted to understand it better, so I did some investigation of what gets translated into our English word "grace." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *chen* means "an act of assistance in time of need." In the New Testament, the Greek word *charis* means "a favor done freely, without expecting something in return."

Paul wrote a lot about grace; in fact, he referred to it at the beginning and end of every one of his letters. In today's reading, Paul talks about the "grace that God gave the Macedonian churches," and exhorts the Corinthians to complete a "similar act of grace," to excel in this "grace of giving," and to remember the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

When it comes right down to it, grace is love. God's grace is the love that he has for us, so freely and unconditionally that he gave his only son to die on the cross for us – all of us. Our grace is the love we have for each other, so freely and unconditionally that we can support each other -- with our time, talent and treasure – without expecting to be repaid in equal measure.

That brings me to verse 14. The King James and New International translations say that there should be "equality" in our giving, one to another. The New Revised Standard Version instead says that there should be "fair balance." The second translation makes more sense to me. If you have a lot, you can give a lot. If you have very little, you can't give very much, but it might still be generous. The two amounts aren't equal, but they are in "fair balance."

I'd like to share a story about the cross I'm wearing. I was on my way to Richmond and I stopped at a gas station. There was a man there who looked like he was panhandling. He came up to my car and I opened the window. Instead of asking for money, he handed me this cross and said, "God bless you." (He makes these crosses out of leftover electrical wire.) Of course, I gladly gave him some money and said, "God bless you too." Our transaction was an example of

reading of today's lesson in different translations resulted in my stronger understanding of Paul's message, so our side-by-side support of each other results in a stronger community, bound together by God's love, God's grace.

I was going to end the sermon here, but this morning I read something that fit perfectly with our subject. In "Holy Longing," Ronald Rolheiser writes, "To be in an apostolic community ... is to stand, shoulder to shoulder [or side-by-side] and hand in hand, precisely with people who are who are very different from ourselves and, with them, hear a common word, share a common bread, and offer a mutual forgiveness so as, in that way, to bridge our differences and become a common heart."