

“Getting Dirty for Jesus”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 28, 2015

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Note: I am indebted to Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock’s book “The People’s New Testament Commentary” (2004) and Ernest Best’s “Second Corinthians” (1987, Interpretation Series) from which I drew deeply for biblical exegesis.

Holy Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 8: 5-15 (from The Message)

⁵⁻⁷ This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives. That’s what prompted us to ask Titus to bring the relief offering to your attention, so that what was so well begun could be finished up. You do so well in so many things—you trust God, you’re articulate, you’re insightful, you’re passionate, you love us—now, do your best in this, too.

⁸⁻⁹ I’m not trying to order you around against your will. But by bringing in the Macedonians’ enthusiasm as a stimulus to your love, I am hoping to bring the best out of you. You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us—in one stroke he became poor and we became rich.

¹⁰⁻¹⁵ So here’s what I think: The best thing you can do right now is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale. Your heart’s been in the right place all along. You’ve got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it. Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can’t. The heart regulates the hands. This isn’t so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you’re shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end you come out even. As it is written,
Nothing left over to the one with the most,
Nothing lacking to the one with the least.

2 Cor. 8: 6-7 (from The Jerusalem Bible)

“...Titus has already made a beginning,
to bring this work of mercy
to the same point of success among you.”

2 Cor. 8: 6-7 (from New Revised Standard Version)

⁶...so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking of grace among you.

⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking of this grace.

Getting Dirty for Jesus

They say that most people wish to serve God -- but in an advisory capacity only.

Getting Dirty for Jesus

The Macedonians in Jerusalem were in rough shape.

There were plenty of pockets and areas of scarcity and poverty across the land,
yet when Titus and Paul made an appeal for churches to collect goods and coins and offerings of aid for the Macedonians, Christian folks stepped up to the cause.

So Paul and Titus appealed to the hearts and minds of the people in the church in Corinth.
They invited the church to collect an offering of resources and to be engaged in the real needs of their sister community.

As Paul and Titus made their way from one Christian church to the next,
Paul anticipated that the church in Corinth might raise an objection. The scriptures point to a number of congregational conversations in Corinth that highlight the cantankerous nature of the church. Yet the Bible also points to incredible acts of generosity and deep faith.

Paul thought the Corinthians might say,
“There are limits to giving; others may give more in offerings;

yet, they have more.”

So he was ready to respond by telling them to only give in proportion to what they have, and to offer whatever they can best manage.

There would be no sense in creating an impoverished community in Corinth

in order to ease the pain in Jerusalem.

This was an age of scarcity;

Paul and Titus had no illusions that most folks were tightening their belts to get by.

Yet Paul and Titus pursue the conversation with the church.

They do so by using theological terms to connect the local church

with the needs of their distant neighbors.

They speak of the offering as a collection only once.

More often they speak of offerings for the sake of
serving others
as designated or related to grace.

*“We want you to know, brothers and sisters,
about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches
of Macedonia”*

*“...Titus has already made a beginning,
to bring this work of mercy to the same point of success
among you.”*

2 Cor. 8: 6-7 (from The Jerusalem Bible)

*“Titus to bring this relief offering to your attention,
so that what was so well begun could be finished up.”* The
Message

*“Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge,
in utmost eagerness,*

*and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also
in this generous undertaking of this grace.”*

2 Cor. 8: 6-7 (from New Revised Standard Version)

Grace is purely defined as love in action.

An offering of goods and services and compassion for
someone in need is grace.

Paul speaks of the offering to be bestowed upon their
Macedonian neighbors as a:

Generous act

Generous undertaking

Generous gift

Blessing, Thanksgiving

Relief, Glory

Sharing

The Greek translated into Sharing is also related to Koinonia,
which is often translated as Fellowship or Partnership.

All of which has to do with partnering and sharing
the life, faith, and material resources of the church with other
people.

Let us speak of the offering of our goods and services and compassion

as a visible, manifest extension of ourselves,
and let us speak of this act of grace in theological terms.
This is what Christianity is about.

The Christian Faith is not self-interest; it's not even enlightened self-interest.

Jesus Christ stands our commonsense ideas of what is what on their heads.

Jesus demolishes the idea that everyone always acts in his or her own self interest.

Here Paul and Titus point out to the church in Corinth – and by way of the Bible to us –

that ordinary people, quite poor people in fact,
are giving a substantial portion of their limited resources
to help people they have not yet met,
all because of their faith in Jesus Christ,
and all because of Jesus Christ's faith in them.

The church in Corinth gave themselves to the cause of service above self

because they chose to follow the God of Grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

They came to believe that at the heart of the universe
is not the struggle for survival
but rather a self-giving love
that has the power to conquer evil and death,
and unite us in a glorious love that lasts forever and ever.

Getting Dirty for Jesus

No one should be excluded from the opportunity to give, to serve, to love,

to be a part of the grace that changes the world
one soul, one home, one relationship at a time.

Our giving of ourselves is grounded
on who God is,
what God does,

and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

To give oneself to God is to give oneself to other people.
To give oneself to other people is to give oneself to God.

The Gospel commands those who would follow Jesus
to have empathy and compassion for one another.
Every social program, every fiscal policy,
every church and temple and mosque ministry
needs to be held up next to the measuring stick
of whether it hurts or helps, harms or heals
the widows, the children, the broke and broken in our midst.

There are no nameless or faceless children of God.
Every plight and plea for mercy moves the heart of God.
The Lord dares to command anyone who would listen to provide,
and then to live into the trust
that one day the recipient may well become the provider.

One day in the early 1950s
my parents sent my eldest brothers David and Jonathan outside to
play.
We lived in one of a row of tenements in Spanish Harlem.
There was a safe play area nearby,
and our mother could watch from her window as the boys went down
the street.
David and Jon were around 5 and 4, respectively.

When they walked out the front door
immediately a man on the street stopped and said,
“Let me take your picture.”
David and Jonathan had been taught to be wary and not take candy
from strangers,
so they shrank back, uncomfortable,
and leaned into each other in the corner of the doorway on the stoop
as he snapped away.

A short while later a poster was put up in churches and temples
across the city.
The poster featured two children in play clothes, with huge eyes and

frightened looks,
huddled together in a slum tenement doorway.
Buffy and George Calvert were quite surprised when they saw the
poster,
and recognized their own children!
The poster read: *These Children
Need Your Help!
Please Give!*

These days Jon laughs when he recalls
that morning on the stoop and subsequent
poster,
and he says, *“Hey, it’s still true. Send
money! I can put it to good use!”*

The Lord does provide.
We who have received a little or a lot have
become God’s providers.
May we trust that at the intersection of
scarcity and generosity, grace abounds.

Getting Dirty for Jesus

That was our congregation’s theme for missions between 2006 and
2009
right after Hurricane Katrina.
We honed the theme into living testament
each time we joined together for community service projects in the
congregation.

We sent groups of church members and friends
to rebuild homes after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.
We also sent out work crews from our congregation
to minister to church members and friends.

One of my favorite stories occurred the weekend
we sent out crews to help church folks who were homebound
yet needed a simple project or two done around their home.

Johnny Lee and Jay Norton went to the home of a saint of the

congregation.

They repaired her leaky carport and adjusted and scrapped windows that were sealed shut.

She said, *“Oh, the light fixture in the hall closet is broken. Could you fix it?”*

So Johnny and Jay took the fixture apart and pulled it out the wall and then drove to the hardware store for a replacement.

Upon returning they found that the replacement fixture was the wrong size,

so back to the hardware store they went.

After finally getting it installed and wired correctly, Johnny had this inkling of an idea.

He screwed in the original bulb from the hall closet.

You guessed it: the original bulb was kaput.

The only repair the hall closet fixture needed was a new bulb.

Johnny and Jay can laugh and tell the joke on themselves,

yet don't you know that in their heart of hearts

they feel really good about their efforts

to serve the needs of a widow in God's land.

And we can join in the laughter because we are all a part of the story.

When we serve, when we give of ourselves for the glory of God,

when we collect offerings and share our grace in the church and community

– near and far –

then our stories overlap, hearts are warmed, and lives are changed.

We are bound together by the grace,

the Generous act

Generous undertaking

Generous gift

Blessing, Thanksgiving

Relief, Glory,

Sharing

the Koinonia, the Fellowship or Partnership,

all of which has to do with partnering and sharing

the life, faith, and material resources of the church with other

people.

Here is where I quit preaching and get to meddling.

Speaking of mission, as much as we talk about community service, in the past few years -- outside of Chalice Thrift and generous offerings –

First Christian Church of Decatur has actually done relatively little in comparison with what we can do and be.

By the grace of God, Jesus Christ will rejuvenate this significant church

through Autumn 2015 mission projects and a major 2016 new mission ministry.

Our plans may evolve to include:

- ü Building a Shade Structure in the church park in October;
- ü Holding a mission Sunday in September with hands on projects in social hall and holy communion;
- ü Investing at least one autumn Saturday and one spring Saturday to do work projects in homes of shut-ins, targeting church members or friends.
- ü Establish a planning team to spearhead the potential launch in January 2016 of a weekly free meal for families in the church and wider community;

Betty's sister Ann in Yorktown attends Hampton Christian Church. Ann tells the story of how her congregation in Virginia went through a spiritual process of discernment.

Three of their church gifts are being hospitable, a commitment to community service, and accessibility of the church buildings and grounds to the wider city.

The church folks asked aloud,

“Why not partner with the local food bank and serve a meal one night a week

to whomever is hungry, including the rich and poor, young and senior?”

Why not, indeed!

So that is exactly what her church launched this past winter: *The Welcome Table*.

Their offering is free food and a place at the table

for anyone and everyone, every Tuesday evening.
Immediate benefits:
increase in participation, increase in storytelling, and increase
in joy.

Jesus sent his disciples out two-by-two to do pastoral care
and community service.

Jesus will do the same in Decatur.

Our Deaconate is committed to reaching out to homebound
members and friends.

Our Eldership is meeting on July 12. I plan to attend.
I will invite any Elders who want to make Pastoral Calls with
the Pastor to sign up.

During the summer (while I'm on sabbatical)
they can go with Acting Pastor Barbara Sims-King.
In the fall they can go with me, and I with them!
Two-by-two we'll connect with shut-ins and church and
community families
in need of T.L.C. and prayer.

Our beloved Lily Delk had a vision recently.
She brought her vision to our Monday Morning Prayer
Ministry
as an initial conversation about beginning Prayer Circles in
the church,
including day and evening groups, some in homes and some
at the church.
Let's see how this plays out as a potential source
of deepening our collective spirituality and interactions.

What each of these visions and plans and prayers share in
common is joy.
Joy in working and serving in Christ.
Joy in connecting with one another while sharing tools, time
and talents.
Joy in...

Getting Dirty for Jesus

During World War II,
England needed to increase its production of coal.
Prime Minister Winston Churchill called together labor
leaders to enlist their support.

At the end of Churchill's presentation he asked them to
picture in their minds
a parade which he knew would be held in Piccadilly Circus
after the war.

First, he said, would be the sailors who had kept the vital sea
lanes open.

Then would come the soldiers who had come home from
Dunkirk

and gone on to defeat Rommel in Africa.

Then would arrive the pilots who had driven the Luftwaffe
from the sky.

Last of all, he said, would parade by a long line
of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps.

Someone would cry from the crowd,

'And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?'

And from ten thousand throats would come the answer,

'We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.' ”

(Don McCullough, *Waking From the
American Dream.*)

Paul and Titus and Jesus Christ affirm
that not all the jobs in a church are prominent and glamorous.

Sometimes getting dirty for Jesus is the least fun role there is.

Yet it is often the people with their “faces to the coal”

who help Jesus Christ accomplish His mission
through the Church,

who can tell the story and share the joy.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!