

January 31, 2016

Set Something Aside Every Sunday

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I Corinthians 16:1-14

[The Collection for the Saints]

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. ³ And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

[Plans for Travel]

⁵ I will visit you after passing through Macedonia—for I intend to pass through Macedonia—⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go. ⁷ I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

¹⁰ If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am; ¹¹ therefore let no one despise him. Send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I am expecting him with the brothers.

¹² Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. He will come when he has the opportunity.

[Final Messages and Greetings]

¹³ Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love.

Today we are in I Corinthians 16, verses 1-14. It's practically nothing more than housekeeping details before Paul signs off the letter. You might think I've skipped to this passage to match this week in which you've received the annual stewardship letter asking for your offering pledges. That's in fact not true; the stewardship letter is weeks and weeks late. That it matches this passage is pure coincidence.

Did you know there are preachers who dislike preaching stewardship sermons as much as congregations dislike hearing them? Not me though. I love it. No preacher

anywhere has it better than me. I never have to scold or guilt or seduce in any way whatsoever – because I lead a generous people. You say what you will do and you do what you’ve said. And I cannot tell you how grateful I am, and how envious my colleagues would be if I were one to brag.

Therefore, my entire stewardship sermon is this: I thank God for you. Please keep doing what you are doing. Amen.

The first-century church was Jewish in the beginning. Composed of Jews who were taught from birth that Gentiles were inherently lower-class human beings. Some Pharisees had a prayer that went, “Thank you Lord that I was not born a woman, a dog or a Gentile.” That racism carried over into the baby Christian church and eventually split it from the synagogue altogether.

Early on, the Holy Spirit made it clear to Peter and to Paul that the Gentiles were destined from the beginning for full inclusion in the kingdom of God, that Jesus’ death and resurrection was – as we say weekly – once and for all. By way of the Holy Spirit, they wrote this theology of inclusion: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism – which was a Bible verse before it was an Aretha Franklin album. One church; one body; once and for all.

But theology is a talk. Prejudice is a way of life, a thousand ways of life.

By prejudice, I mean:

deeply ingrained thoughts, feelings and attitudes

- that reside within every human being about other human beings;
- that may seem uncontrollable, but are not;

deeply ingrained thoughts, feelings and attitudes

- that change only by effort and intention – in our case, when we decide to be Christian first, instead of white first, or American first, or female first, or heterosexual first.

And one way to think and feel differently – the way Paul suggests here – is first to behave differently, and let thinking and feeling follow later. Toward that end, Paul got the idea of “the collection.” He talked about it all over, to the Galatians, Romans, Corinthians. The Jerusalem church was nearly all Jewish and poor. And, at least in Paul’s telling, suffering greatly.

The church had many widows, and there was a famine. He tells his Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia and Rome to please collect as much coin as they can spare

for the Jerusalem church. And we know from Romans 15, they did it. They collected the offering and sent it along to their Jerusalem brothers and sisters.

²⁶ for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.

It was a huge project – and it was genius! Because Gentiles had to give generously to Jews, and Jews had to receive graciously from Gentiles. Both had to be Christian first. Whatever they remembered, whatever they were taught, however they felt, whatever they thought, Paul presented them with this opportunity to DO the right thing to BE Christian – whether they feel like it yet or not.

The text offers us the same. Doing what we know to be true and faithful and graceful, whether it feels true or faithful or graceful or not. “Set aside something every Sunday – from what extra you earn,” Paul tells them. “Don’t wait until I get there.” *Make it a new habit, starting now. It will be a bigger gift – which is good. But better yet, you will be a stronger, better church, for the transformation happening in each one of you, as you act out this one new habit week after week after week.*

Generosity and humility are just words until they take human, Christian shape in the simple, but not easy, act of setting aside a portion of one’s own livelihood for others, and not just any others – *particular* others. Here is Paul’s genius. It worked – partly. Like almost everything – partly. The offering was given, collected, and received. But integration of Jews and Gentiles in the church – *that* failed.

Larger forces were also involved – namely, the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 A.D. and Judaism changed forever. As my friend, Rabbi Mira, said, “When a Jew marries a Christian or converts to Christianity, it’s like the Holocaust all over again; another family line is lost.” She wasn’t being ugly. She was being sad.

But the failure of the church to integrate then doesn't mean we give up, does it? Of course not. There is still plenty of racism to go around. Thanks to our own state legislature – plenty of new prejudice; new opportunities to be Christian first, toward brothers and sisters we would otherwise thank God *not* to be.

“Thank you, Lord, that I am not a bigoted bakery owner.” To which the Lord responds, “Hmmm, I think we need a dozen cupcakes, and guess where we are going to buy them? Yep, that’s right, from her bakery.”

Sigh.

“Sigh! Sigh! Sigh!”

And if I want to FEEL like going, I’ll never go. Spiritual Habit: doing what we know is right, however we feel; whatever the world teaches us to think; for love. For the same

love that brought Christ from heaven to us. Not for righteousness. For love. Love as a habit – doing what we could never do if we only do what makes sense, what feels right. A practice, practiced week by week by week by week; not for a season, but for a lifetime, knowing that by such practice, we are becoming the people and the church God made us to be. Would you pray with me?