

1 Corinthians 16:1-2

Joyful Generosity #5, October 29, 2017

Theme: First and Proportional

INJ For several weeks this Fall we have talked about Joyful Generosity. We have been reminded that everything is God's. The Psalmist says: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it." When we view life as a gift from God, it is a refreshing perspective! Our God is a God of abundance, not one of scarcity. He has filled our lives with good things! We talked about the statement of Jesus: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." There is a close connection between our hearts and our money. Last week we discussed generosity that is motivated by God's gospel activity. David's large gift – five billion dollars! – to build the temple in Jerusalem was Joyful Generosity!

Maybe you're thinking, "I don't have five billion dollars." Of course you don't have five billion dollars! Yet God has given us everything we do have. It is all a gift from his undeserved love. The Lord advises us on how to use it to his glory, too. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, do as I directed the churches in Galatia to do." Paul was gathering an offering for the people in Jerusalem. He wanted all the congregations to participate, so he shared some of the most practical giving advice in the Bible. He said: "On the first day of every week, each of you is to set something aside in keeping with whatever he gains."

Who is the apostle talking to? "Each of you is to set something aside." How many people were to participate in the offering? "Each of you." The way the IRS works, you can earn quite a bit of money before you have to pay income taxes. God doesn't work that way. Thanksgiving isn't just for the rich or well-off. It's for "each of you." God has blessed every Christian. Every Christian gives thanks to God.

Here's how: "On the first day of every week, each of you is to set something aside." Does your sinful nature scream at you: "If I give my money to God, I won't have enough for myself!" Mine does. How do we drown that selfishness that lives in us? Look at what God gave. His only Son! The best and most important gift is yours in Christ Jesus. In baptism God gave it: Sin is forgiven! Guilt is overcome! Death is defeated! God gave you a Savior – not a little thing, but the best thing.

God's undeserved love moves us to give thanks to him. He doesn't limit us, either. He says, "Everything you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God

the Father through him." Everything is our gift to God, whether washing dishes at home or putting an envelope in the offering plate. It is all for him.

Not all of our thanksgiving goes into the plate at church, but some of it does. So how should we decide what to put in? God wants us to give to him first. God knows you're not King David with billions of dollars. He knows that you need money for lots of things – that's why he gives it to you! Consider thanking him first: "On the first day of every week," before everything else, the Christians were to "set something aside" for a thank offering. God moves his people to say, "You first, Lord!"

In the Bible there is a concept called "firstfruits." Firstfruits giving was one of God's commands to the Israelites. When they started harvesting their crops, they donated the first loads to the Lord. They said, "You first!" When new animals were born, they gave God the firstborn. "You first!" Even when a firstborn child was born, they gave a special offering for that first child. "You first, Lord!" What was the point of firstfruits? It reflected their trust in God. Even after a long winter, they gave a special gift first to the Lord. He would give more. They trusted in him. "You first!"

I think you know why God says, "First." How many of you have a lot of money left at the end of a pay period? "God first" easily deteriorates to "God gets what's left!" And who has anything left over, ever? God moves us to thank him first. With every blessing, God wants us to say to him, "You first!" When your check gets deposited in the bank, say to God, "You first!" Before the bills. Before the mortgage. Even before the IRA. "You first!" A Proverb says: "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." God gives us the faith to give thanks first, and to trust that he will give us more.

Does a smile break out on your face when you say, "You first!" Or, do all the other things that you need seem overwhelming — the house payment, the car payment, school, food, clothes, prescriptions, bills? Add it all up, and what's left? Is there any thanksgiving for God? Isn't it all to be done for his glory? People talk about the "tyranny of the urgent." The things we leave to the last minute become so urgent that they push out the really important things in life. It happens with our time and our abilities, doesn't it? We do what is urgent, and the most important thing in our week, filling our faith with God's Word and Sacrament, gets skipped.

Do you like leftovers? For me, that's usually lunch. Leftovers often taste better than the original – except for leftover taco salad. Meat, sauce, cheese, lettuce, chips – all together: good! Leftovers – not so much. You must eat it all the first day, because old lettuce and soggy chips and once

melted cheese all stuck together – it's the same stuff, same ingredients, but it just isn't the same. What is it we are offering to God? "You first" or "Have some leftovers"? Even if, in the end, it might be the same stuff, it's not the same. "You first" and "leftovers" are a world apart.

What's amazing is that God is the one Father who never gives us leftovers. He gave us Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus suffered and bled because he put you first. He paid the price for every time I am selfish. For every time you have been less than thankful. For every leftover. Jesus died to forgive our sins. God put us first, sending us his Son. We thank him for his undeserved love!

"You first, Lord." But how much? That's a big question. God says: "On the first day of every week, each of you is to set something aside in keeping with whatever he gains." God doesn't give a number. He moves our hearts to give thanks. Some of what he has provided will be our gift to him. It will be in keeping with our income. It will be from a heart of faith. So how much? Give in keeping with what God has given you, with an attitude motivated by the gospel: God first. My best.

God's best wasn't a one time gift. God's best was his Son, who died and rose again. God's best is still coming to us. He gives his Holy Spirit to assure us that even in difficult times, our Savior loves and cares for us. God gives his Word and Sacraments to feed our soul and to calm our fears. God gives us the best we can ever imagine, promising that when this life ends we will live with him forever in heaven. God has given first and the best to us, and we give thanks to him with Joyful Generosity.

Let's think a little more about giving thanks and the phrase "in keeping with whatever he gains." God teaches percentage giving. In the Old Testament, he commanded his people to give a percent — ten percent or a "tithe." Ten percent of crops, herds, fruit, everything. They were to look at what God had given them and give ten percent at the temple. The tithe was part of God's Old Testament laws meant just for the Israelites. Since Jesus came, it doesn't apply any more. Yet God still urges us to think in terms of percentages: "in keeping with whatever he gains."

When we hear that we don't have to give ten percent, there's often a problem. "I don't have to give ten percent?" "Good. I don't want to give God that much. I want to spend my money on me!" That's our sinful nature talking – that's not faith. Faith wants to give thanks to God generously and cheerfully! God doesn't force us to give anything. Instead, he says, "Give your best from a thankful heart." It is Joyful Generosity! The truth is, if you don't want to give thanks, then don't. God wants your

heart to trust him above all. Giving thanks and giving offerings will follow.

I know that God has your heart. You love Jesus and you trust in him. You come to hear his words and to receive his Sacraments. You want to give thanks to God. So how much should you give? It is a personal choice that reflects this pattern: "God first. My best." I can't tell you what your best is. Don't look at anyone else, either, for comparing. I will encourage you to think in percentages. Look at everything God has given you! Give thanks to him with everything! Some of it will come to church. Pick a percent that reflects your forgiven and joyful heart of faith.

Using that no-longer-required ten percent as a guide makes for easy math in your head. If your family makes \$50,000 a year, ten percent would be about \$100 a week, \$5,000 a year. If you make \$20,000, it'd be \$40 a week, or \$2,000 a year. How much has God given? All of it! I'm not telling you what to do. I just want you to think about percentage giving. Ask yourself: Does that put God first? Is that my best?

King David's best was five billion dollars. Our Gospel today showed us a widow whose best was two little coins. When Jesus saw her, he praised her. The widow gave a few pennies. David gave five billion dollars. In God's sight, they both gave exactly the same: It was Joyful Generosity! God's advice for giving offerings is wonderful, because he doesn't want us to compare ourselves with anyone else. He reminds us that he has blessed every one of us. Everyone, give thanks to the Lord! God first. My best.

There is a neat connection with the practice of "firstfruits" in the Bible. The first of everything always went to the Lord. There was a special Festival of Firstfruits at the beginning of the harvest season. When the first sheaves of grain began to ripen in the spring, they were to take them to the temple. It happened during Passover week on the day after the Sabbath — on a Sunday. They couldn't eat those first heads of grain. They were God's — the firstfruits. They gave to God and trusted that more would follow.

Do you know what big event happened on Firstfruits Sunday? Easter! Jesus rose from the dead on the Sunday after the Passover. As Jesus rose from the dead, Jerusalem was filled with people bringing their first fruits to God. God says about that: "For as in Adam they all die, so also in Christ they all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ as the first fruits and then Christ's people, at his coming." The whole point of first fruits is that you trust God to give more. Jesus rose from the dead on Firstfruits Sunday, and you know that more will follow. Everyone who believes in him — me, you — will rise to live with him forever. Our God has put us first in every way. We want to give thanks to him: "You first. My best." That is Joyful Generosity. SDG Amen.