

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Kathryn Freeman
Let Love Be Genuine. Finish the Work.
2 Corinthians 8:7-17
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In 1965, a young, white, Princeton Seminary graduate and minister sat with his wife watching the local news in disbelief. He could not believe his eyes. He watched men and women in Selma, Alabama, led by a college student armed with just a backpack and a woman in her Sunday best being beaten for peacefully protesting for African Americans to have the right to vote.

This young minister had his hands full with his own ministry. He was dealing with an affordable housing crisis among his neighbors. He was preparing for a fight with city officials over the conditions of public housing in his community. He had a young family. He had a plan. A plan to only serve in this Massachusetts community for a few years and then return to the pastorate somewhere else.

But as he sat watching the beatings on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, he was outraged and his heart was stirred. And when a charismatic young minister issued a call for clergy from across the country to descend on Selma. James Reeb talked it over with his wife and decided to put aside his plans to join the cause of voting rights for African Americans in the South.

James Reeb would ultimately never make it across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, but his love for his neighbors was genuine, it was other-centered, and it was not limited by geography or race or theological agreements. He could have chosen his safety, security, comfort, his ministry (which was a good ministry, people need housing) and it would have been perfectly reasonable. In his eulogy, Dr. King said “{Rev. Reeb’s} crime was that he dared to live his faith; he placed himself alongside the disinherited black brethren of this community.... He was a witness to the truth that men of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers.”

In our text today, 2 Corinthians 8:7-15 Paul asks the church at Corinth to demonstrate a similar nonspatial love through direct financial assistance to the poor in Jerusalem. Paul’s message to the Corinthians and my message to you today is to **let your love be genuine and finish the work. Let your love be genuine finish the work.**

Corinth was a strategic trading and military outpost because of its location on a peninsula. The city was home to large population of former slaves, a mix of various immigrant groups including Jews, it was a city of wealthy merchants and artisans, the impoverished and an intellectual elite.

This melting pot was reflected in the church at Corinth, and because there was not an established aristocracy like in Rome. People came to Corinth to take their shot at making a name and place for themselves in the upper echelons of society.

Members of the Corinthian church wanted to make a name for themselves. They are pursuing their version of what we might call today “the American Dream.” This Corinthian dream for wealth, status, fame had seeped into the church. The church was plagued with an intense factionalism as people were less interested in love, unity and the counter cultural kingdom of Christ than having the best pew, the nicest clothes, the highest title, and following the right or most impressive leader. In other words, the Corinthians were treating the church like any other social club in Corinth—a place to jockey for status, to display wealth, and knowledge. Of course, we can all agree that the way to make a name for yourself in our world and the way to make a name for yourself according to Scripture is very different, but often like the church in Corinth we fail to live the truth we know in our heads.

The Corinthians know all about excelling in head knowledge. Look with me as Paul praises the Corinthians for excelling in “faith, knowledge and speech” in verse 7. The Corinthians placed a high value on the gifts like miracles of healing, teaching, prophecy, and knowledge because these are the gifts that were also prioritized in their culture. There is nothing wrong with these gifts, but Paul calls them beyond the gifts that are personally beneficial. He wants them to excel also in gifts of grace. Your translation may say the grace of giving.

Paul depicts giving as a grace, it is an ongoing ministry based on the underserved gift from God. The responsibility to live generously is rooted first in saving act of Jesus Christ. The grace Christ extends to us then has horizontal implications for our lives. We have received grace and then give it to others—this grace is both spiritual and material.

Turning back to the text, Paul is asking for material grace for the poor in the church at Jerusalem. Look at verse 8, Paul is not commanding them to give, but he does say “I am testing the genuineness of your love.” David Garland says it is the abundance of gifts of love and grace that determines whether the gifts of faith, speech, knowledge have any validity. **Paul is saying the genuineness of their other gifts is determined by the genuineness of their love for others.**

Indeed, Paul had previously told the Corinthians the same thing in 1 Corinthians 13 where he said “If I speak human or angelic tongues^[a] but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal....if I do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Paul wants them to show that love is central, love is real. When I was in middle school, for a science class project I had to collect rocks. One of my favorite rocks in my collection was pyrite. I loved pyrite because it was shiny like gold, I also discovered that pyrite is sometimes found with small amounts of gold. But if you know pyrite by its popular name “fool’s gold” then you know it’s not really gold. It might look like gold, but when you sift it or even hold it you quickly realize it’s not the real thing. Pyrite is pretty to look at, but you cannot use it as currency. Pyrite is fake gold just as a love that is spoken, but not sacrificially lived out in deeds is fake.

The first way to demonstrate genuine love is through emulating the others centered, self-sacrificial love of Christ.

In verse 9, Paul says “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Paul contrasts Jesus’s

wealth and power as the Son of God with the depth of poverty in his condescension to become man, but also Jesus' poverty as a man having been born in an inn, living an itinerant life and his death on the cross (the most humiliating death).

Jesus' life was so radically other centered, he sacrificed power and privilege to make a bridge back to God for humans hopelessly separated for eternity. We have received an underserved grace from God, and we can demonstrate our genuineness of our love for God through the love of our neighbors. Our love is other centered because it is first centered on God.

As Catherine of Sienna said, "I have put you among your neighbors: so that you can do for them what you cannot do for me—that is love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit for yourself. And whatever you do for them I will consider done for me"

His love for us was so great that he willingly sacrificed his life to free us from sin and to give us eternal life. Our Christian concept of freedom is very different from the American concept of freedom, we have been freed to serve and sacrifice for others. By the same grace we have received from Christ, we give this same grace generously to others.

Christ's sacrificial and radical other centeredness is the whole story of Christianity. This story is in stark contrast to the story told in Corinth and our society where self-centeredness and self-preservation are the norm.

Paul is asking the Corinthian church to demonstrate the genuineness of their love by completing an offering for the impoverished in Jerusalem. Paul is telling them and us that our love is proved real not just by how we love and treat those in our preferred in-group.

Howard Thurman says neighborliness is nonspatial, meaning your love for others is not limited by geography. You as a follower of Christ have obligations that extend beyond zip codes, kinship networks, race, gender. Paul implores the Corinthian church to give to support the poor in the churches of Jerusalem because the body of Christ transcends boundaries.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

It can be easy to say what effects those in Gaza or Myanmar or Minneapolis or East Waco has no real effect on my life. I excel in faith, speech, and knowledge here. I regularly attend Sunday school, volunteer at my kids' school, say hi to my neighbors. But Paul suggests that Gospel demands more.

The reality is our love is proven genuine by its other-centeredness and not by our comfort or success in our own lives. This is what Paul is saying when he points to the example of Christ Jesus.

One Genuine love is other centered and extends beyond our comfort zones. Two, to demonstrate our love is genuine is by offering it willingly as an offering to God.

Notice in verses 11 and 12 Paul tells them to give according to what they have. Because the amount of the gift does not matter. It is the heart behind the gift. Paul wants the Corinthian church exhibit genuine love by giving willingly and not by his command.

For Paul, the amount of the collection is of little importance. The true significance of the offering is as a tangible example of the unity between the Gentile churches and the church in Jerusalem. One commentary says, “the collection shows that Christian faith overcomes the deepest racial barriers that formerly separated Jews and Gentiles.” Paul wants all of us to understand that since we belong to Christ, we also belong to each other.

We must give from hearts grounded in hope and love. Our human tendency is to be guided by our own fears and anxieties. I am sure the Corinthians were plagued by doubts about giving to strangers in Jerusalem. If we give to them, what happens when we need a new roof or hymnals, or my husband loses his job?

We hoard because we worry, we do not have enough. But God is a god of abundance. There is enough for both you and me. We do not have to be motivated by fear or selfishness. We give freely because genuine love and radical grace has been given to us.

We can give freely not out of fear of loss, and we can give freely without anxiety about whether we are doing enough or worry about the results.

With all that is going on in the world, compassion fatigue is real. Compassion fatigue is that feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of injustices plaguing our world and it can be easy to be trapped by analysis paralysis, to shut down or check out. But rather than giving into those feelings, give what you can knowing the amount may vary by stage of life, financial circumstance, familial realities, etc. I think this also why it's important for our acts of love and justice to be rooted first in Christ.

Understanding our love as others as an offering first and foremost to God also helps us trust him with the results. We can give willingly and sacrificially whatever financial or societal privileges, food and clothing we have to treat our neighbor's burdens as our own.

While we cannot solve every problem, we can give what we can—motivated by genuine self-sacrificial love and by equity.

Genuine love is other-centered. It is given willingly, and the third way we demonstrate our love is genuine is by being rooted in the principle of equity and justice.

Look with me verse 13, “it is not that there should be relief for others and hardship for you, but it is a question of equality.” The principle undergirding the entire project is equity or equality as rendered in my translation and others. The word in the Greek is the same ((ee-sot'-ace). He is asking them to give based on the principle of essotace meaning equity, justice, or fairness.

Dr. Cornel West says, “justice is what love looks like in public.” Paul implores the Corinthians and us to make our love manifest through our pursuit of equity and solidarity.

One of the authors in “True to Our Native Land” says in these verses Paul depicts the act of giving is an act of solidarity not charity. Through our ministry of grace, we demonstrate our solidarity with those in need. At the heart of solidarity is the notion of justice. Equity and justice are partners. Equity recognizes that we might need a different allocation of resources at different times to ensure that everyone has enough. Paul is making the point that the ministry of grace does not impoverish one to enrich the other but is part of God’s divine purpose to promote and establish the flourishing of both the haves and the have nots.

When Paul writes this letter the church in Jerusalem has a material need, but the church at Corinth has a spiritual need. Even if the financial situations are not ever reversed, they will benefit from the leadership of the church in Jerusalem and testify through their public witness to the unity & solidarity that is only possible through Jesus Christ. The mutual giving between the congregations is based on an expansive view of grace and responsibility to other parts of the body of Christ.

Paul concludes in verse 15 with a reference to the story from Exodus 16. You may remember God promises manna from heaven and tells them to gather enough for that day. They can gather extra on the sixth day so that they do not work on the Sabbath, but otherwise they are only to take what they need. It was a demonstration of the sufficiency of God to meet their needs. What happens? Some gather more than they need, and others gather less but when they went to measure it there was no shortage and those who had gathered more saw it spoiled.

Paul includes this story to cap his argument that God’s justice demands equity, and this applies to equality of sharing. Paul highlights the church in Macedonia’s lack of material wealth in verse 2 to make a point. The church in Macedonia had given sacrificially despite their own extreme hardship and dire poverty out of a genuine love for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Paul was asking them to co-laborer with the Macedonians who were so bad off, Paul initially rejects their gift. If they can give so you, can you.

The Corinthian’s love is made concrete through the equal sharing of burdens—giving from their surplus to meet the economic needs of those in Jerusalem.

For us, if some injustice inflicts on part of the body of Christ such as unjust police practices or food insecurity. Equality of sharing means it’s our burden too, so we must be willing to give our time, talent, and treasures to meet the needs of others. Trying to take more than you need, hoard it or clutch desperately possessions and places that will disappear on the day of judgement is a waste of energy.

Our anxiety over our possessions and our places and our capacities keep us from true generosity and genuine love. We worry our resources will be depleted. Our world says “more is more,” but Jesus says less is more, poverty and loss are the way to riches and gain. Mutual giving, Solidarity. The freedom to serve others these are the way to flourishing and fulfillment according to the Gospel.

God does not ask us to live generously and self-sacrificially to punish us. He is asking for a tangible show of solidarity within the household of faith. Just as the Corinthian participation in the collection for the church in Jerusalem demonstrated unity where there had formerly been hostility. We too have a ministry of reconciliation, bringing an end to the natural and man-made hostilities that can arise between theological camps, genders, races, classes. We serve a transcendent God, and we show the world that through our illogical and transgressive solidarity.

Paul has told them to ways to demonstrate the genuineness of their love. Paul instructs them to finish the work.

Juneteenth and 4th July are both celebrations of a work in progress. The declarations on both days were of ideals. Freedom for the formerly enslaved, a land where all people could pursue life, liberty, happiness. But the work was not done in this country just by the stroke of the pens that wrote those documents. There is still work to be done to make those words true.

Last summer, according to some estimates 20 million people participated in some form of march, rally to bring justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. Yet, this summer we have seen a massive backlash to teaching the full history of racism and white supremacy in this country and discussing current events. We are emerging from a pandemic that so far has claimed 600,000 lives and disproportionately impacted women, black, brown and indigenous Americans because of existing gaps in access to healthcare, childcare, and economic security.

And the question is will the good intentions and reading lists of last summer translate into tangible actions this summer and the summers to come? Scholar Linda Bellville points out that “the tragedy of life is not that we lack good intentions but that we fail to turn them into action...our generosity may start as a response of the heart, but it must move on to an act of the will.”

Of course, y’all have done and are doing some amazing work through your bible studies and Sunday school classes. Through acts of service and justice in Waco and other places. But hear me as a sort of Dory to your Nemo, just keep swimming.

Paul recognized that the Corinthians had started the offering for the Jerusalem Church in verse 10 “last year.” But for some reason, we are not told in these verses why they stopped. Maybe they were experiencing compassion fatigue. Or maybe because they disagreed with Paul’s methods, they were unwilling to support his mission? Or maybe they were just burnt out and tired?

Whatever the reason. Paul is saying talk is cheap. Put your money where your mouth is. Good intentions are a good place to start, but sometimes genuine love is easy and comes naturally but more often it is an act of our will in submission to the call of God on our lives. Sometimes no one will understand. We won’t understand, but we must choose obedience. We have to choose to continue to show up when it’s painful, when we feel defeated, when we are unhappy with the outcome. God’s grace is sufficient and not dependent on our circumstances, but as his hands and

feet in this world it does require our willingness to join him in the work of reconciling all things to himself.

Paul wants the Corinthian church to keep going to finish the work of the collection to understand that the path to wealth in the kingdom of God is based on a willing self-sacrificial love. It is a love that transgresses man-made boundaries, and it is a love that demands justice.

In 1955, the secretary of the local NAACP chapter refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on the bus. She was arrested for her act of resistance to a regime that was inherently unequal that degraded human beings created in the image of God based on skin color. Her act of defiance encouraged others to rally to her side-and boycott the local bus system until the unjust system of segregation on city transportation was ended. A local women's group printed flyers calling for a boycott, the group led by Professor Jo Ann Robinson appealed to a young minister to be their spokesperson and negotiate with the local leaders. Churches organized carpools and those with cars went out of their way to drive neighbors to work or school. Some committed to walking. Virginia and Clifford Durr, a local white Christian couple who had long been involved in local causes paid to bail Rosa Parks out of jail and helping to fund her legal. Local attorney and minister Fred Gray took the case to court. For 380 days, in a display of self-sacrifice, using the gifts and resources they had, these regular men and women gave of themselves until the work of ending racial segregation in Montgomery's public transportation system was complete. We might not be so fortunate to see the ends of our strivings, some scholars suggest Paul's collection project failed, but there will be a record of our genuine acts of love and solidarity maybe not in the history books, but for the One for who made the greatest act of love and solidarity in human history and holds all of human history.

Let us join that great cloud of witnesses in displays of genuine love. Let us finish the good work He began in and through us.

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