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HEART of GENEROSITY: What Can I Offer?

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**HEART of GENEROSITY:
What Can I Offer?**

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This week we embark on a new sermon series called, “The Heart of Generosity.”

I love the word “heart” in the Hebrew imagination.

The “heart,” *lev*, is not the seat of feelings and sentimentality, the way we sometimes think of “heart” today. Instead, it is a combination of what we might call our gut and our conviction. We sometimes use “heart” this way today. For someone to take heart, is for them to have courage. For someone to have heart, is for them to live from a place of authenticity. It is that kind of heart—the seat of our action, what drives us, our inner truth that makes us move.

God’s heart is not merely a feeling toward us and the world God has created. But the actions God takes because of who God is.

Our hearts, too, drive us to action in the world.

What is the heart of generosity in Scripture?

As we hear these words of the Apostle Paul, written to Christians in Rome around 58CE, I invite you to listen for the heart of it.

But first, please join me in prayer:

Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God,

There are many things that motivate us to act.

We hear messages daily that we should be afraid, ashamed, more or less worried or angry.

It is hard to parse why we want the things we want, and why we do the things we do.

We pray for your voice to cut through the noise,
and for your word to form our hearts,
that all we do will be done out of your love and grace. Amen.

Scripture

Romans 12:1-13

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.^[a]

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one

another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Living, Breathing Worship

Are we reasonable in our worship?

Imagine yourself sitting in a worship committee meeting. I don't want to trigger anyone this early in the sermon, but just as an exercise. Imagine you have been given a blank slate for what worship will look like. What would be reasonable to include?

Prayers, songs and hymns—perhaps organ, perhaps guitar—Scripture, a sermon, maybe periodic creative expressions through dance or art or solos. You may find freedom to play with the structure and content but see it reasonable to move the congregation from gathering to hearing the Word to responding to the Word to being sent. You may find it reasonable to welcome those who are in their Sunday's best and those in their Sunday's most comfortable.

For most Presbyterian churches there is at least one thing that would be completely unreasonable. Going over an hour. We will try to be reasonable today.

Presbyterians have shorthand for what we find reasonable: Decent and in order. That which is thought-through, structured, respectful, and respectable.

That is not considered reasonable by everyone.

In different cultures, denominations, times throughout history, worship has looked and does look different. Three hours long, testimony from congregants, dancing in aisles, call and response—reasonable depending on where you are.

Our human reason is held captive to our context—to our time and culture and expectations. So, Paul in this morning's New Testament reading calls us to a higher reason, a reason that transcends context and gives us a Kingdom view.

What is reasonable worship from the vantage point of God's Kingdom? What is logical to a mind transformed by God's grace?

Listen again to these first two verses of Romans 12. I'm going to give you the Yinzer translation of Scripture so we can hear the plural "you's." They are many and important.

I appeal to yinz therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present yinz bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is yinz reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that yinz may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul says to the Christians in Rome that their reasonable response to God's mercy ought to be presenting their bodies, together as a community—their flesh and blood, hands and feet, talking, breathing, physically-living-in-this-world bodies—as a living sacrifice to God.

He continues with this kind of bodily language. The Christian community is a body and is part of the larger body of Christ moving, healing, offering grace, forging peace in the world. We have been called and gathered to be the church, a worshipping community, responding together to God's grace.

For those streaming online or dealing with chronic pain or mobility challenges or illnesses, you are fully included in this body. Christ's body knows no human-made boundaries or exclusions. Each individual part is needed, is valued, is essential.

Yinz, all your presence, participation, voice, discernment, gifts, your full, complicated life is essential if the church is to reflect who Christ is.

Because of Grace

Paul was writing to a challengingly diverse community in Rome. There were folks who were Gentiles and those who were Jewish; those who were wealthy and those who were poor; those with social status and those without; those who served others and those who were served; those who had at

one point or another bowed to Caesar and those who would never do such a thing. This was not a club of likeminded people getting together to enjoy one another's company.

This was truly a community gathered by the Holy Spirit, compelled by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to claim him as Lord.

Now they had to figure out what that meant for how they lived, worshiped, and served as one body.

Paul gets to the heart of it. What brought these disparate people together was God's grace.

They had come to know this itinerate preacher named Jesus as their Savior. They had come to know his way as the path to abundant and everlasting life. They had come to trust in his word. They had come to accept his life, death, and resurrection as their freedom from sin and death, as their freedom to live as new creations, as citizens of God's kingdom. Paul says to the Romans, and to us...

Because of the grace you have received, offer your whole selves as worship.

Because of the grace you have received, not earned, do not think your offering is better than anyone else's in the body.

Because of the grace you have received, from a God who knows you and loves you, know that you have something to give.

Because of the grace you have received, live with grace for one another.

A Transformed Community

God's grace is the animating force of the body of Christ, the animating force of the worshiping community, the church. Grace enlivens each of us to be transformed. Not into superhuman, perfect Christians. But into the fullness of our true selves.

Another way to translate this is that we are transfigured. As Christ was transfigured to show his true glory as God's beloved Son. We are transfigured to reveal who we really are; to live fully as the beloved children of God we were created to be.

Grace does that.

From grace flows the gifts of encouragement, compassion, ministry, teaching, prophecy, leadership.

From grace flow the marks of a transformed, a transfigured, a beloved community.

Paul writes thirty imperatives in this chapter. Thirty things that these Roman Christians ought to do. But not from shame or guilt or even obligation.

Because of God grace, Paul says...

Let love be genuine

Hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good

Love one another

Outdo each other in showing honor

Rejoice, be patient, persevere

Share with the community

Be hospitable to strangers

He goes on to talk about praying for those who persecute you and never paying back evil for evil. Overcome evil with good. From grace flows a way of life that affects every relationship, every interaction, our everyday lives. As a community, a body, we are rooted in Christ's grace to do the things that he does.

Planting Blueberries

Years ago, I took a group of students to Pittsburgh Project in the North Side. We typically went during the summer for a service camp, but this was a weekend in the fall. The Pittsburgh Project was creating a garden in a vacant lot in their neighborhood. We were there to prepare the soil for blueberries to grow. I'm not much of a gardener—I try, but I kill just about everything I plant—and at this time I knew very little about the needs of different types of plants. I learned that blueberry bushes need acidic soil to flourish. They also have shallow roots, so you have to be careful about any weeds or other plants that could uproot the blueberry bush. We spent the day mixing peat moss, compost, and native soil. We put down cardboard to keep out weeds and because the soil that was already there wasn't good quality.

It took two years for those blueberry bushes to yield fruit. But after that they flourished year after year.

From the good soil of God's grace, grow our gifts, our offerings, a community of worship that reflects God's Kingdom. It takes time to flourish. But in different soil—in shame or resentment or obligation—that fruit will not flourish.

The Present Age

How much is the good fruit of grace needed today?

Almost 2000 years ago, Paul urged the Roman Christians not to conform to their day and age—Not to worship Caesar as lord, not to view the emperor as a savior, not to turn a blind eye to suffering around them, not to be arrogant or strive for status and power, not to view the stranger and foreigner, the “other,” with hostility, not to seek freedom through violence, not to set up walls based on gender, ethnicity, or religious practice.

How much still is a Christian community gathered in grace and responding with grace to the call of Christ needed in our time? How much still is a place where all are welcomed, loved, valued, and able to contribute needed in our age?

In this season of fierce division, dehumanizing rhetoric, and violent responses stemming from fear, anger, and shame that too many people have taken root in, the body of Christ is still a gift of grace to this world.

Yinz, each of you, as a part of Christ’s body, are a gift that we need. The fruit that grows from the soil of grace here matters far beyond these walls.

What Can I Offer?

Grace compels us to worship God with our whole lives. Grace compels us to follow Jesus with our flesh and blood, breathing,

speaking, day-by-day lives. Grace compels us to use our gifts and to honor the gifts of others. Grace is the soil for the fruit of the Spirit in our church and in our lives.

That is lofty and beautiful, but I don't want you to walk away with an ethereal idea of offering your life because of God's grace.

Take a moment and really ask yourself, *"Because God's grace what can I offer?"*

Yes, we will ask you in the coming weeks to consider what to pledge or what to give to fund this worshiping community. And today, we will ask for your voice at the congregational meeting.

We have asked those who have been nominated to serve the church in particular ways.

But maybe we haven't yet asked for the gift you have that you have to offer.

Maybe you see a gift of our community that we ought to offer to beyond the church.

Because of God's grace, what will I offer?

This season of generosity may our hearts be moved by God's grace. Amen.



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