

"Rich Though Poor"

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

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On the face of it, our scripture reading this morning--Second Corinthians 8:1-9--appears terribly out of place, completely devoid of any Advent or Christmas significance for us. Instead of angels and shepherds surrounding the Holy Family at a manger in Bethlehem, rather than wise men on camels following a luminous star overhead, it concerns the very practical matter of Christian stewardship. And why preach a sermon that seems to involve a matter of stewardship during such a special period as Advent, and just one week before Christmas arrives? Didn't we deal with that LAST MONTH, when churches are preparing next year's budget and people are less stressed about their OWN money matters? Well more about that LATER. Here in our text, the Apostle Paul is encouraging the wealthy Corinthians to do the same thing that any stewardship committee would responsibly promote- he is exhorting them to be very liberal in their giving. He was organizing an offering to be taken in Corinth for the church in Jerusalem, a congregation he had deep affection for and much the same way WE'RE taking a special offering this morning- the annual Christmas Offering which is one of the four major contributions taken each year on behalf of the Presbyterian Church. The Jerusalem church, which had been the first church established and was the Mother Church to a whole host of other congregations, was now facing poverty and heightened persecution. To emphasize his point, the Apostle refers to the generosity of the churches in Macedonia, how--though poor and in trouble THEMSELVES--they gave all they had- far more than anyone had expected for a church none of them had ever visited and on behalf of Christians they didn't even know. In fact, their generosity was SO great, Paul was reluctant to accept it until they finally convinced him to.

In his letter here to the Corinthians, he tells them that the supreme motive of ALL Christian liberality is Jesus Christ HIMSELF, that the poor Macedonians responded so generously because of the example Christ had set for them. They understood all-too-well how even in their poverty, it was Christ who made them rich. Well now it was the wealthy Corinthians turn to open THEIR hearts and to demonstrate THEIR love, even as the MACEDONIANS had. Paul reminds them that though Jesus Christ was rich, yet for their sake he became poor so that by his poverty THEY might become rich. If the example of Christ himself could NOT inspire them to give generously and selflessly even as it had those Macedonian Christians, then in spite of all their wealth and comforts, it would reveal how they were REALLY among the poorest of the poor.

To my mind, Paul's writing here raises some interesting questions. The first is how, in light of Jesus's humble background, he could have in any way been considered RICH? After all, wasn't his family so poor that instead of a hospital, he was forced to be birthed in the back of a filthy one-stall garage? And wasn't he nothing more than a simple carpenter who eventually became the main means of support for the rest of his family after Joseph--his stepfather--had died? And once his ministry had begun, didn't he find himself, much like Stella DuBois in *A Street Car Named Desire*- constantly "dependent upon the kindness of strangers?" It's hard not

to look at his life and conclude that Jesus was really nothing more than a lower class tradesman (which meant one step above being a peasant). Practically speaking there seemed to be nothing to suggest that there was anything RICH about him.

Certainly, if you were to measure his life by the size of his bank account or real estate holdings, it'd be quite laughable to call him "wealthy" in ANY sense of the word. But as we know, there are OTHER ways to measure wealth. In Proverbs 13:7, it says "One person pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth." Jesus was in the latter category, one who was poor yet rich all the same. The New Testament tells us that before he undertook his life and ministry here on earth he was the Logos, the Word of God, a member of the Trinity and therefore pre-existent WITH God. In heaven, he had enjoyed a ROYAL existence- life beside the throne of his Heavenly Father. But THAT was not what made him rich. Rather, it lay in those deep and abiding relationships Christ enjoyed, in those loving, trusting relationships he maintained with his family and his disciples but even MORE, with his HEAVENLY FATHER whose words he had come to speak and whose will he had come to perform- THEREIN lay the basis of all his TRUE wealth.

Likewise, there are no richer persons in the world than those who enjoy true and lasting relationships with other people- with those who love and trust one another, who enjoy laughing together and playing together and even crying with their family and friends. Last Sunday evening, I participated in an on-line memorial service for a Jamaican pastor who had served as a Presbyterian minister and missionary for almost half a century. My friendship with him began some thirty years ago when we were both clergy colleagues in Newark, New Jersey, but over the decades it deepened and expanded to where he wound up becoming one of my dearest friends. Due to the pandemic, this service had to be held via the internet but the upside was that it allowed me and other friends of his from all over the world to come and express our love and thoughts regarding him without leaving the confines of our own living rooms. Originally planned to last no more than an hour and a half, the service lasted almost twice that as everyone seemed to find it impossible to say what was on our hearts in the three minutes we were supposed to limit ourselves to.

It was so uplifting to hear how this humble servant of God, who had traveled all over the world sharing the "Good News" of Jesus Christ, touched so many lives in the process. His life was characterized by faith and love; by humility, charity, and good humor, He was an wonderful orator and in almost every church I ever pastored, he served as the preacher at my installation, as well as the main speaker during the many Missions Emphasis Weekends I organized. Thousands of copies of his autobiography *Alfred Johnson: Ambassador to the Global Village* have been sold since its initial publication almost a decade ago with every penny of profit going to missions either in Jamaica or in Africa. I told his wife Abegail how much I will miss him but my life and ministry has been ENRICHED BEYOND MEASURE due to his friendship and the example he set for me. To AGAIN quote the author of Proverbs, "The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it." (10:22)

One of the most poignant passages in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* occurs in the opening chapter where old Scrooge encounters the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley. When Ebenezer sees his agony, how he is forced to wander the earth and observe its misery

while contemplating his own failure to do anything about it when he was yet alive, Scrooge reminds him that he could take some comfort in knowing he had been good at business. This leads Marley to explode: "Business! MANKIND was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, ALL, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" With these lines, Dickens was merely echoing the sentiments of Christ himself, how life as it was originally intended is foremost about cultivating relationships of love and trust with others and NOT merely enriching or aggrandizing ourselves at their expense as Scrooge and Marley had done.

If the number of human friendships is a reliable indicator of a life well lived, then how much more are our lives enriched when we add to it a personal relationship with the living God through his only-begotten Son Jesus; when we know we are loved and cared for by the same Heavenly Father who watched over Christ. Regardless of our social or economic status, for us to live in fellowship with one another as well as our God, to enjoy deep and enduring friendships even as Christ had with the Father and the Father with HIM- that is to be rich INDEED! And believe me, that is wealth which no economic recession, no stock market collapse, no corporate bankruptcy, no burst in the housing bubble, and ABOVE ALL, NO PANDEMIC can EVER take away from us!

But continuing, Paul says of Christ that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became POOR. This then leads us to FURTHER ask, "How then did Jesus suddenly LOSE all his wealth?" Paul tells us that "he BECAME poor" for our sake. No one took away any assets from him- his poverty was purely voluntary. As Jesus said of his own life, "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." To the Christians in Philippi, he wrote: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but EMPTIED HIMSELF, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF and BECAME OBEDIENT UNTO DEATH, even death on a cross." Because he understood that relationships of love and trust were the only TRUE AND LASTING assets in life, Jesus thought NOTHING of sacrificing his own needs and desires—EVEN HIS OWN LIFE--in the interests of conveying the Father's love and reconciling a fallen, broken world back into relationship with him. For Christ, relationships were EVERYTHING, and it was his willingness to abandon those prerogatives that were his in heaven to become poor and lowly here on earth that was the ULTIMATE proof of that love.

Of course, for Christians, the most improbable and absurd event in all of history took place on Christmas Day, when the Divine Logos assumed human form. THINK of it- the Creator becoming one with the creature which meant assuming all the limitations that accompany our humanity. This included undertaking all our lowliness, sharing with us all our weaknesses, experiencing all our temptations, and even dying our own death. Of course, this can't help but lead us to inquire WHY? WHY would anyone give up EVERYTHING, sacrifice EVERY privilege, and endure EVERY indignity WHEN HE DIDN'T HAVE to. Why would he have willingly subjected himself to the same hunger and thirst, hatred and rejection, loneliness and despair which WE experience when he could have remained in a realm of ultimate security

and perfect love. The ONLY answer as to why “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” is pure and simple- because he LOVED us! In the inscrutable mind and mysterious purposes of God, WE humans, with all our faults and failings, our defects and deficiencies, somehow became his highest priority, the object of his greatest affection and commitment, and that is a mystery that the gospel singer Andrae Crouch found himself asking some years ago when he sang:

*I don't know why Jesus loved me.
I don't know why He cared.
I don't know why He sacrificed his life.
Oh, but I'm glad, so glad He did!*

Thus, because Jesus loved us, "for our sake he became poor." A God who remains remote and unapproachable might command our awe but never our love. Such a God may possess all power and wisdom and understanding but unless God enters into our condition and takes upon himself our burdens with all their accompanying risks and limitations, then God would remain no more than a theological abstraction, certainly not One to claim our heart and its highest allegiance.

Continuing, Paul says to the Corinthians that Christ became POOR for our sake, "so that by his poverty WE might become RICH." Jesus Christ entered this world and submitted himself to all its restrictions and limitations, even so much as dying on a cross, so that by his poverty "we might become rich." The great paradox here is that by this act of condescension, we are made rich OURSELVES. Though we were poor SPIRITUALLY, Christ enriched us with ALL SPIRITUAL GOOD; though we were poor by reason of sin, he made us rich in righteousness; though we were poor in that we were without God in the world, he gave us God--his heavenly Father--to become OUR heavenly Father as well. In sum, he sacrificed his divinity and showed himself poor that we might inherit the riches of his divinity and partake of his same divine nature. I believe James Stewart, the great Scottish preacher, expressed it best:

Do let us believe our own faith. "All things are yours in Christ," cries Paul--forgiveness yours, hope and peace and courage yours, the very power in which Jesus and the apostles lived yours; so that there is no trial you can't meet like a conqueror, no clamorous besieging perplexity you can't master with the glory of God in the here and now, no piercing thorns you can't wear as a kingly crown--through the grace of Jesus.

You KNOW that grace. THANK GOD with all your heart that you know it. THANK GOD for Him who though He was rich for your sake became poor, that through His poverty you might become rich.

This leads us back to the question I raised at the opening of my sermon: WHY this morning a sermon text concerning stewardship in Corinth instead of a birth in Bethlehem a week away from Christmas? Because as the birth of our Lord proved to be the event that inspired the Macedonian Christians to give well beyond their means, Paul is hoping it can also do the same for the Corinthian church. For the great Apostle, Jesus' entrance into the world in a humble manger wasn't simply a cute story for mothers and children to fawn over, nor was it some theological postulate for theologians and biblical scholars to discuss and argue about. No, it was the practical and tangible event of God breaking into human history to reveal his love for us by saving us from our sins and reconciling us to our God.

Similarly, may the love that Christ showed by sacrificing his privileges in heaven to share in the misery and suffering of his creation here on earth inspire and lead us to deeper levels of love and generosity in our OWN lives AS WELL. Our text this morning shows us the PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE of the Christmas message, that it is intended to stir us to immediate action even as it did those Macedonia Christians. If it were to remain nothing more than a sweet and appealing story filled with a lot of greeting card sentiment, one which we trot out every December just to make us feel better about the times and about ourselves, then we've MISSED THE POINT ENTIRELY. However, if by retelling it to ourselves we are led to realize on a DEEPER level just how great God's love for us was and continues to BE, then it takes on a whole new relevance for us. For if in the birth of that child, "the hopes and fears of all the years" were met in him that night; if through him, God's plan was set in motion to save us from our sins, from all those deepest, darkest, most destructive impulses INCLUDING DEATH ITSELF, then like those ancient Macedonians, we TOO should be able to find in that story all the inspiration WE shall ever need to lead more loving, caring, generous lives- and not just at CHRISTMAS time but ALL the time.

To conclude, HE then is the example for ALL Christians, and it is the SPIRIT of that example which the Corinthians are here urged to imitate. Similarly, may we become so immersed OURSELVES in this sacred drama that WE become inspired to show that SAME kind of love and generosity in everything WE do, motivated by that same activity of God in human history- the birth of his Son in that simple manger. For if we DO, then in OUR poverty, we shall prove OURSELVES to be RICH as well. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, the announcement of the birth of Christ came as a sunburst of joy to a world where grief and pain are known to all and joy comes rarely and never tarries long. This morning, we anticipate the birth of one who, though he was rich, became poor so that by his poverty WE might become rich- rich in LOVE, rich in FRIENDSHIP, rich in HOPE and rich in JOY. May we privilege such treasures as these over all others in our lives, understanding that unlike the riches the world seeks, THESE riches neither rust nor can moths consume them nor are they a treasure that thieves can break in for and steal from us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.