

November 16, 2014
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
2 Corinthians 8:10-12

No Small Amount

When I was a seminary student I was invited to a conference on church leadership. There was money involved. The students who were invited to the conference had all received a generous grant. At the conference we would talk about our grant projects, make connections with other people, worship, and go to learning sessions. At one of those sessions we met one-on-one with someone to talk about finances. We were told to bring our personal budgets.

There was no small amount of disgruntlement about this on the part of the students attending the conference. They wanted us to say what we had and what we spent in various categories? Someone, as a representative of this generous granting agency, was going to talk to us about what we do with our money?

This finance person was not a pastor, he was an accountant of some sort, a man of late middle age wearing a button up shirt and dress pants. The conversation we had was not the kind of overbearing experience for which we students had our hackles raised. I remember rehearsing in my own mind my personal financial concerns: At that point we had recently moved to Chicago from Tanzania and my husband was working as a teacher while I went to graduate school. We had bought our first house, a tiny coop apartment—turned out we bought it at the height of the market, and were also a bit above the recommended ratio of housing cost to income. So that I could study and go to class, we were borrowing money from my parents to pay for day care for our two toddlers. Things felt tight.

Layered on top of that feeling, though, was another, uneasy feeling, maybe a guilty feeling, an awareness of how relatively rich I was. I knew what it was like in other parts of the world. I knew what was like in other parts of this city. And I knew that many people with less than me didn't let this stop them from living and giving generously.

The accountant guy looked at my numbers. The first thing he said was, "Thank you. Thank you for being here. Thank you for working to be a leader. Thank you for working at stewardship." He said, "I see you that give to your home congregation. That's good, not all seminarians do," he said. "It's a concern. How will you be a leader of a congregations, how can you talk and preach about stewardship, if you aren't asking it of yourself?"

Now some years into ministry, I know that some of that may be particular to my generation and generations below me; we're not all that good at giving. As I speak with other pastors and study church trends, an emerging challenge is that younger generations have somehow not taken up the disciplined generosity that so characterizes generations before us. I think about that remarkable generosity when the mail comes in to IPLC, and there is an envelope, addressed to our church in careful script, a generous offering from a homebound member. Do you know last week we got in our first two pledge cards, mailed in from homebound folks?

But back to that conversation at the conference. The accountant said, "It is good that you are giving regularly. That is exactly where to start. You can start small, but give. Make it a discipline. Commit to it. And then commit to give a little more each year, commit to growing. See if you can't get it up to a tithe, to giving 10 percent." He said, "You will be surprised how good it feels." He said, "You will be surprised at the way it changes the way you feel about

things.” I thought about my tight feeling, and my uneasy, guilty feelings. He said, “You will live better off the 90 percent than you ever would have off of 100.”

Maybe that seems a strange thing for an accountant to say—it’s a different kind of math. It’s gospel math. It has something to do with numbers, but even more it has to do with trust, and with joy, and with a desire to grow in both. The accountant said, “For some time now, my wife and I have been increasing how much we give. As we have grown in giving, we have been so richly blessed.”

I hear just the same thing from people here, generous givers who say, “It’s one of the best things we ever did. We have never been in want. Not that that’s why you give...”

Of course not, it’s not a transaction, not a tit for tat...but somehow, I think this is what they were getting at, when you make it a practice, make it a discipline to be generous, it opens you up. It opens your heart up. It opens your mind up. It opens you up to what God is doing in you and in the world. It opens you up to better receive and share it, to be part of the abundant generosity and blessing that is what God is all about. That’s what I want to be about. I want to be a person who is trusting, and joyful, and generous.

The apostle Paul writes in 2nd Corinthians 8 that to become this kind of person, you not only have to want it, start it, desire it—you have to do it. Like the accountant told me, just start with something, some amount, and then keep working at it, keep growing.

I’m still working at growing in stewardship. I’ve come a long way since that conversation; and I want to continue to grow. I hope you, too, will join me in that.

But the first thing I should say to you is what that accountant said to me: Thank you. Thank you for being here. Thank you for being stewards of this church. Thank you for all the work you do as leaders of this place. I am amazed at the giftedness and generosity that goes on here.

I need to admit that I still experience uneasy feelings about current and future financial concerns—in my own life, in our life as a church. But I have also experienced and heard of such blessings, transformations, opened up hearts and minds, a better way of living.

That we are all living, that we all woke up this morning and took a breath of frosty air, by virtue of our basic existence as human beings we are all recipients of a very generous granting agency. We call it, God. We call it grace. And in this conference, in this life of faith, this gathering together for worship and learning and making connections, there is money involved.

I don’t remember that accountant’s name. We’ll call him Paul, like the apostle. He said, you can want it, and you can do it. And we don’t even need to be good with numbers to understand gospel math: it is in giving that our abundantly graced lives are made even richer.