



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
27 June 2020
Sermon: Your Present Abundance
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁷ Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

⁸ I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰ And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹ now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹² For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³ I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴ your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵ As it is written,

“The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.”

What do we owe to each other? This is a scene from the season 2 finale to NBC’s *The Good Place*, with Ted Danson reprising his classic role from *Cheers* as bartender, speaking to Kristen Bell, playing a perhaps-more-than-tipsy character named Eleanor Shellstrop.¹ In this moment, Eleanor has lost all patience in living a principled life. If you haven’t seen *The Good Place*, I won’t go on into all the intricacies and plot points behind this important scene. I lift it up simply because, like the show in general, it addresses deep questions of morality: What does it mean to

¹ *The Good Place*, “Season 2, Episode 12: Somewhere Else,” *Netflix.com*, video, 22:11, Air Date: Feb. 1, 2018.

be a good person? Why do good in a seemingly evil and uncaring world? Eleanor begins the scene saying, “You know the problem, really is with being a do-gooder?” Again, remember, she’s a bit tipsy.

Ted Danson the bartender replies, “What’s that?”

Eleanor: “No one cares. I mean some people care, a little bit. The twerpy little twerps at the environmental place they care. But I was a good person for six months. That’s like, five years. And it felt okay, but not as good as I thought it would. And what did I get for it?”

The bartender replies, “Ah, now you’re talking about moral dessert.”

Eleanor: “Exactly. Wait, I am? What?”

Bartender: “Moral dessert is the concept that if you act with virtue, you deserve a reward.”

Eleanor: “Right! If I’m not going to get a reward somehow, with like a tiara or one of those big, what are they called, diagonal word belts.”

“[You mean] a sash?” the bartender replies.

Eleanor: “Sure, then why should I do good things?”

The bartender goes on to talk about the inner voice of conscience. Eleanor insults and ignores him. The scene closes with Eleanor asking for the tab. “I got to go home. What do I owe ya?”

The bartender finishes: “The real question, Eleanor, is what do we owe to each other?”

What do we owe to each other?

Two centuries ago the apostle Paul asked this same question to Christians in Corinth, but he framed it in the basic truth claims of faith: What do we owe each other, in light of Christ’s life and death and resurrection for us? “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” The context of this verse is a matter of stewardship. The church in Corinth has some

means, and Paul is encouraging them toward a “generous undertaking” for Christians in need in Jerusalem. The Corinthian church had actually pledged this offering some time ago, but time has passed, and in the meantime, Paul had a falling out with members of the church. And with internal fights, the passage of time, and the daily struggles of their lives, some in Corinth were no longer willing to complete their pledges – I know such congregational drama is hard for 21st Century Christians to relate to, but bear with me here. Rather than getting into a debate, Paul asks them this basic question of the faith: What do we owe to each other, in light of Christ’s life and death and resurrection for us?²

Do you ever ask yourself that question? If I truly believe that I have been graced with the gift of life and breath by a good and creating God, who in the person of Christ and by the power of the Spirit, travels with me in the joys and hardships of my life, what then is asked of me? What do I owe my community? What do I owe to others as a child of God?

The Bible study group this Wednesday pointed out the Paul never actually mentions money in the passage. But if you read between the lines, you see there’s a concrete ask behind these verses. There’s the immediate concern: The church in Jerusalem has a need; the church in Corinth has resources. “It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need,” he says. 2 Corinthians, chapter 8 makes a great stewardship season passage. Because, when we talk about what is owed in community, both within and outside the walls of our church, there is a concrete ask. As we will say again in our time of response after the sermon, your offering of time, and talent, and funds supports and makes possible the continuing ministry of our community, along with the ministries of numerous ministry partners in our town. And, funds are owed outside the church in our wider community. We call this ‘taxes.’ And beyond,

² See Ernest Best, *2 Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 79-82.

and more deeply, the recent town halls in our city discussing the history of harm and trauma that Black communities have endured at the hands of white dominant governments and communities have proven that, when we talk about what is owed today, the talk must come down to funds and resources, resources stolen and taken, reparations owed.

What do we owe each other? In the life of community, it is also more than money. It's about how we show up, how much of ourselves we give to community, how much we space we make for others to be who they truly are in community, rather than fence them in with our boxes, hierarchies, and expectations. It's about that open heart that we spoke about last week. How do you hold back? "I am testing the genuineness of your love," says Paul.

Floyd Dell and Max Eastman were pioneers in the early socialist feminism of the 20th Century. Dell was an esteemed literary figure of New York's Greenwich village, most well-known for his editorial work for the radical magazine, *The Masses*. Eastman was Dell's contemporary, co-worker, and friend, also a popular figure in the village, known for his stances against American involvement in the First World War and for his publication of *The Liberator*, a magazine that printed some of the most well-known American writers of the time: e.e. cummings, Claude McKay, Ernest Hemingway.

Ijoema Oluo, in her book *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America*, recounts the history of these two male feminists. *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks famously wrote,³ and Oluo agrees: "There are good guys," she writes, partners in the struggle. But not "when they are interrupting us in group discussion, or telling us what they think we should read to become better feminists like them." And frankly, she says, "There are some dudes who clearly got into this whole feminism thing because in it they saw a new opportunity for

³ bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Sea End Press, 2015).

personal gain.”⁴ Dell and Eastman, Oluo argues, were two such men. Both were at the forefront of women’s liberation movements in the early 20th Century, but as their lives showed, over and over, they couldn’t help but make the movement about themselves and their needs rather than the values they espoused. They were both for expanded ideas of marriage and women’s empowerment in relationships, but in their own marriages, they were notorious philanderers. For both, sexual liberation seemed to mean liberation from their own vows, and both their wives left them after years of betrayal. Dell would enter into viscous public fights with other female feminist leaders, berating them for not being as feminist as he was. Eastman founded the New York Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage, which, Oluo says, sounds great, but Eastman himself admitted that the work of the league was nothing more than simply to exist: “no member would be called upon to do anything,” he said.⁵ Male feminists, for Eastman, deserved to be praised for just showing up, rather than actually working for the cause.

And ultimately, both Dell and Eastman went on to betray the causes that made them famous. In his later years, Dell renounced feminism and became a proponent of the traditional family roles of the early 20th Century; only men should work outside the home. Eastman became a public supporter of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anticommunist persecutions. Ijeoma Oluo lifts them up as illustrations of dishonest ways to enter community, *Mediocre* male feminists who centered themselves rather than the people pushed to the margins they claimed to fight for.

Perhaps this sounds familiar. Perhaps you have a Dell or Eastman in your own lives, companions in a common cause or struggle who lord their position and power over you. Perhaps you see yourself in Dell and Eastman – I do, sometimes – wanting to give yourself fully to a

⁴ Ijeoma Oluo, *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America* (New York: Seal Press, 2020), 52. The following details come from Oluo’s section on Dell and Eastman on pp. 51-63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

cause or community but having trouble letting go of the scripts you have been handed, hierarchies, exclusions, and judgments, blind-spots and prejudices. It is hard to let go of the ways we have been formed in our individualistic, sexist, racist, classist, homophobic culture; for this, and countless other reasons, it is hard to give ourselves to community, to make space for others in community. For those who have been hurt, especially hurt by churches, churches who claimed to be open but set walls around who could show up or how they could show up, it is hard to trust again that a community will make space for you.

It is hard to give ourselves to community. It's Eleanor, who tried to be good for six months and then asked what's the use when nothing came of it. It's Corinth, who took back their pledged support when things got hard. It is so many of us right now, not out of selfishness or ignorance, but out of exhaustion, from 15 months of pandemic losses, and loss close to home, lost school years, lost jobs and businesses, and so many lost loved ones, and others close in our hearts suffering. It is no wonder, that we sometime find ourselves asking today, can I give myself fully to a community right now? Can I open my raw and hurting heart to others?

What do we owe each other? In June of 2021, this is the question, in uncertain and grief-filled days, in a deeply divided and mistrustful country, in exhausted times. Each of us, out of our own prayerful discernment, must decide when and how to give ourselves fully to community, to this faith community and beyond. Any time you invest your time and your heart to a community, it is a leap of faith. And as you do it, when you can do it, remember, remember "the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Christ lived and died and lives again in you, and for you, in all we carry, in the triumphs and tragedies of our lives. And not just for you, but for everyone you meet. And so Christ calls us and frees us, to listen first and seek to

understand one another, to empower rather than lord power over one another, and to partner together for mutual liberation, investing our resources, our talents, our time, our full, incomplete, and imperfect selves. What do we owe to each another? To stop, to listen, to discern, to see, to see Christ in you, and in me, and all around us, to see Christ in the chance to be community again, and again, and again. This is our present abundance. Amen.