

WGUMC September 10, 2017 2 Corinthians 8:1-12
"WGUMC Homecoming"

The picture we get of the first church in the Book of Acts is that of a group of people who gather regularly in each other's homes to learn and pray and eat together. [Acts 2:42] It says nothing about committee meetings, nothing about building maintenance, nothing about fundraising events. To this pastor, it sounds like paradise! But that picture of the early church is being seen by a later writer through rose-colored glasses, because we get a very different picture of the first Christians in the letters of Paul.

One thing we know about the church in Jerusalem is that it attracted a lot of widows. Women who had lost their husbands had no way to earn a living, no social security to fall back on, and were at the mercy of families who often couldn't or wouldn't provide for them. But these women saw how the Christians cared for one another, how they shared their

property and possessions so that there was not a needy person among them. [Acts 4:32]

As you can imagine, in no time at all, the Jerusalem church had more widows than they could support, and their leaders asked Paul if he would take up a collection for these poor widows as he traipsed about the Mediterranean, teaching and preaching the Gospel. This is what he is doing in our reading today from 2 Corinthians, and I have to say that he has a pretty effective way of doing it.

Paul wants the Corinthians to give to the Jerusalem widows' fund, and so he makes an appeal to their pride and to their competitive spirit. He starts off by singing the praises of the Christians in Macedonia. They were undergoing severe affliction. They were living in extreme poverty. But such is the grace of God that the Macedonian's abundant joy overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

Paul is saying, "See here, Corinthians. You think you have it bad. The Macedonians have had it much worse, and they still gave, according to their means and even beyond their means. They were so eager to give that they were begging me for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints in Jerusalem." Paul stops to note here that the Macedonians were not just giving to look good. They had given themselves first to God and because of that, they were able to give to the offering. So their gifts were a genuine thank you for the grace they had been given.

Paul knows how to work a crowd, and he understands human nature. He knows that the people in Corinth naturally don't want those Macedonians to get all the good press. And he's not above encouraging a little competition to motivate them.

Notice how he butters them up by saying, "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost

eagerness, and in our love for you [they even excel in being loved!]
—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking." In other words, you do everything else so well; don't ruin your record.

Paul tells them that this is a test. Paul is testing the genuineness of their love against the earnestness of the Macedonians. And how will he measure their generosity? By a very big yardstick, the standard set by Christ, who "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor."

Against that standard, no gifts are too big. But Paul is not preaching to billionaires. He is saying that if the eagerness is there, if their hearts are really in it, then there are no gifts too small, either. Their gifts will be measured according to what they have, not according to what they don't have.

Taking my cue from Paul, I want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has worked through the life of this church and in the lives of people who have given

very generously of their time, their talent, and their money to do what four or five years ago—as we were still climbing out of the Great Recession—seemed almost impossible.

When I first came to Willow Glen in 2011 and learned that the church had a \$240,000 debt, I swallowed hard, because that was about twice the size of my previous church's annual budget. I was approached by Brian Ganz and Dave Freeman and also Jerry Hutcheson. All of them were disappointed that the renovations had stopped with Woodhaven, and they all had ideas about what needed to be done to get on with it and to get out of debt. It took a couple of years to recover from our "severe ordeal of affliction," the Recession, but we eventually decided that it was theoretically possible to pay down debt and renovate Kohlstedt Hall at the same time.

Brian and Dave were joined by Jeff and Leslie Chamberlain, Kyle Mastrolia and Peggy Schlosser, and they formed a very formidable Mission Possible Team in September 2013. Their

wealth of generosity came in the form of their willingness to do something big for God, their "anything is possible" attitude, their commitment to getting the job done, their patience in waiting for the funds to come, their enthusiasm for square dances and pancake breakfasts and rummage sales, their countless hours of labor on top of their donated dollars.

They had some awesome assistants. Michelle Unger, Kindra Ahrens, Jose and Rosa Soler, and Linda Russo helped organize the fundraisers. And they had all of you, who made one-time gifts or multi-year pledges, who worked hard at the rummage sales and bought pancakes and auction items.

Together we accomplished more than we could have imagined. We not only renovated Kohlstedt Hall and the bathrooms, but the kitchen and Wesley Room as well. The sanctuary got new storm-worthy windows and the hallway got a new floor and coat of paint.

If you ever wonder whether it was worth it, Brian once shared a story about his conversation with one of the men from the recovery group that meets here on Wednesdays. He told Brian how much the renovations meant to him because the rest of his life was a mess. And to come to such a welcoming, peaceful space each week was a blessing to him. Likewise, every time I do a funeral and the women host a funeral reception here in the hall, I get expressions of gratitude from family members, some of whom grew up in this church. This hall says "welcome home" both to people who belong here and to those who have never been here before. And it sure has been wonderful to have the hall as our second home this summer while the sanctuary has been inaccessible.

The campaign took us four years because we promised you that we would raise the money before we spent it, and we did. We also promised that for every dollar we spent on renovation, we would repay a dollar of debt, and we did. And

with one last check, what we didn't think we could do, we have done!

Now, truth be told, we have a few projects left. The debt is paid, but the sound panels are not yet up. The projector is donated, but not yet installed. And we would like to add a camera and cabling in the sanctuary so that, while we are working on the lift replacement, folks who need the lift can see and hear what's going on in worship on the TV in the library.

The Trustees will be taking on these projects from here, and Michael Gallo, one of our members from the preschool, will be helping us get them done. While today marks the official end of Mission Possible, it also marks the official beginning of LiftUp! which is the name I chose until you come up with a better one for our campaign to raise money to replace the lift for the sanctuary. I'll let Jim Leonard tell you more about that during lunch.

For now, I want to leave you with the words of St. Paul and stir in you a spirit of competition. We aren't competing with another church. We are competing with the forces that say that we cannot succeed in what we are trying to do here, which is to sustain and grow a mid-sized mainline church in the midst of Silicon Valley. All the trends say that we shouldn't be able to get children, youth, and adults to follow Jesus in such a "spiritual but not religious" part of the world. Nor should we be able at the same time to be engaged in significant social justice ministry with the poor in our city and to send mission teams to other states and even another country.

But as strong as the forces of negativity are, they are nowhere near as strong as the faith in this community. That's because, like the Macedonians, you give yourselves first to God who then gives you the power and the grace to give to this ministry.

So, as you excel in everything—in loving and giving, in caring and sharing, and in making the impossible possible—I trust that you will also excel in this generous undertaking, and I thank you in advance for making this church a place where all God's children can be welcomed home. Amen.