October 28, 2018

II Corinthians 9:6-12

Lives overflowing with Thanksgiving

Roy W. Howard

We are nearing November 11, the Sunday when we will consecrate our financial pledges to the God and the Lord’s work at Saint Mark. It's the culmination of what we call Stewardship season; which is an unfortunate phrase since we know that stewardship is not season, it’s a way of life in Christ. And while we talk about money, we know the heart of stewardship is actually about relationships; our relationship with God and our relationship with others.

Talking about this is tricky because merely mentioning money in the same sentence with God causes the shame gremlins to scurry out from under rocks like scary Halloween creatures. Some of us are ashamed at how much money we have or don’t have; and none of us like creepy, crawly things messing with our minds. The result is often secrecy and silence and even worse anxiety that undermines a relationship with Christ. This relationship – the one with Jesus Christ who loves us and gave his life for us – is the actual heart of stewardship. The greater our confidence in God’s generous love for us, the less power shame gremlins have when we mention giving or pledging money as a response to God’s love.

Pastors, including this one, often put enormous pressure on ourselves to hit a home run to finish the season with a rousing victory! Yet, anyone who knows baseball knows that batting under pressure nearly always results in a strike out or inning ending double play. So it’s better for me – and I think all of us - when we are joyful and free, not under pressure; trusting in God who is the giver of every good and perfect gift. Knowing the grace of God in Jesus Christ is the reason Saint Paul describes those early Christians overflowing with thanksgiving.

*That’s what I want to talk about this morning: lives overflowing with gratitude.*

Let us imagine your life and mine – our life together – overflowing with thanksgiving. Like a great fall harvest with overflowing its basket. [PHOTO] Imagine *your life* overflowing with thanksgiving – name those things for which you are grateful; let the gratitude flow from your heart! *This is what gives birth to generous lives.*

This weekend is the Marine Corps marathon. That reminded me of the Marine I visited at Walter Reed hospital a few years ago after running the marathon. Some of you will remember James and his mother Janet. James lost both his legs in Afghanistan, and nearly his left hand, protecting his company. When I visited him he was shattered, barely alive. They were living on the prayers of the people and skills of the doctors. Janet kept saying *I’m so thankful he is alive*. After the marathon, in the hospital, someone asked, “how are your legs?” I could either laugh or cry, so I laughed and said, my legs are fantastic!

In those difficult days, Saint Mark surrounded them with prayer and made financial donations to the wounded warriors support group. Last week I contacted his mom for an update. Here is what she wrote, and gave me permission to share.

Dear Roy

By the Grace of God, I have only good news to report. Our prayers have been answered, and not a tear was in vain. James is now in his fourth year working as a trader with a large bank in Manhattan. PHOTO He has the most interesting and amazing group of friends in the world: Marines, Irish bartenders, stock traders, fundraisers and patriots, not to mention a lovely girl friend. He got a masters degree from the Stern School of Business at NYU and is so busy I’m lucky if he answers my texts. He comes home to our home on weekends when he can, it is all fully accessible now, thanks to Building Homes for Heroes-a top-notch charity with wonderful caring people. PHOTO

My love to you and your beautiful family and your church family as well.

I am sure your prayers and the caring congregation you minister to were an important part in our story of survival and now peace and joy.

With love,

Janet

*We are talking about lives overflowing with thanksgiving.*

How many things in your life can you be thankful for, which helped make you the person you are today?

What might flow from your life if everything – all your resources, your body, mind and spirit – were occasions for thanksgiving? And what might that look like if a congregation of ordinary Christians, like this one, became an ever-flowing stream of thanksgiving gushing forth to bring life to a weary world?

Last Sunday, Beth Irons mentioned that Godlieve Mukanya one of our members from the Congo is providing translation for our adopted refugee family from the Congo.

Here’s the backstory, Godlieve gave me permission to share. Several years ago Saint Mark gave $150,000 and many volunteers to build a Habitat for Humanity home in Burtonsville. We worked alongside the family of seven who had recently arrived as refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo. One year later on Easter, our Habitat family, Godlieve and her husband Mplata, with their children, came to worship Saint Mark and asked if they could join the congregation and begin supporting the Church. PHOTO Today they support the church even as we support Dr. Mplata who runs a health clinic to serve the poor in his home village.

*We are talking about lives overflowing with thanksgiving.*

You know this is possible, don’t you? This is not just sermonic hay making, with a dramatic flourish. The real possibility exits that your life may be so filled with thanksgiving that it bursts its narrow channel to bring life to others. This is the heart of Christian stewardship Saint Paul lays it out with that fledging congregation in Corinth. It’s not really any different for us. *We are talking about what happens when lives overflow with thanksgiving.*

St. Paul focuses on relationships when he encourages the Corinthian congregation to give generously to support the work of the congregation in Jerusalem. He tells them a few things that bear repeating for us.

•There is no coercion or pressure – it’s all an invitation to live your life not out of guilt or duty but from thanksgiving. You might say: a little guilt goes a long way; if the need is great, why not equal the pressure? Because God loves a cheerful giver.

• Which means the end point of all giving is joy. It’s a delight-filled opportunity to join with others in the multiplication of God’s goodness in the world. This is the deepest purpose of our lives: *to multiply goodness in the world.*

•This is why Paul says God will sustain God’s people in this pay-it-forward way of life.

At the end of the day: this is about faith; trusting that God will provide for God’s people living generous lives. *Count your blessings, name them one by one.*

I hope you will express your gratitude by giving generously to support the work of the Lord at Saint Mark. After all, God loves a cheerful giver.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.