

Sermon for June 28, Proper 8 B, 2009

I have to think that some of the Corinthians were sick of St. Paul and his talk about money.

He was a tireless fundraiser for the saints in Jerusalem.

This was a strange thing, for many of them were critics of Paul and his gospel.

Some might even have been his enemies.

Many in Jerusalem questioned Paul's sharing of the Gospel with Gentiles.

Even Peter seemed to be unwilling to break bread with Gentiles.

There must have been others who thought Paul was totally wrong;
that the Gentiles should keep kosher
that their male children should be circumcised
that the law must be kept and the gentiles out of the church.

But Paul nonetheless spent much of the little capital he had with the Corinthians trying to squeeze a little more out of them to send to the cranky Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Strangely unrealistic of him.

Hear how he tried to convince them, telling them:

"It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need."

His meaning is a little unclear but a couple of things are going on.

First, Paul was sure that it was fair to say that some Christians should not be too rich if others are too poor.

A fair balance, he says, is needed, an equitable sharing of the world's good things, of God's good things, so that no one suffers.

That was a point more easily made when the church was a small underground movement.

It is tougher now, with 2 billion Christians.

What are we supposed to do about the fact that we are generally very rich and the that hundreds of millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ live on the edge of or in hunger and famine and grinding poverty, in Africa, or Haiti, or down the street?

Paul seems to make the ridiculous argument that we should give a healthy measure of our money away in order to relieve their suffering, to achieve a fair balance between their need and our abundance.

Strangely unrealistic of him.

But there Paul is also saying that the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem have an abundance of their own that they have shared with the Gentiles of Corinth.

"their abundance may be for your need," as well he said.

He asks in the beginning of the third chapter of Romans, "What advantage has the Jew? Much in every way. For in the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."

They first received the Law and the Gospel, and if some were not sure they should be shared, they were shared.

The precious gift of the good news about Jesus was not hoarded but given.

And so Paul counted it a small thing to send some money to the Christians of Jerusalem, for they had shared so much with the Christians of Corinth, the Gospel, the Sacraments, the Holy Spirit, the saving confession that Christ has died; Christ is Risen; Christ will come again.

Paul's analysis of the transaction between Jerusalem and Corinth reminds me that places that are materially rich often struggle spiritually and places with material struggles often hope more sincerely for the

coming of the Kingdom of God.

I think we can all imagine the skeptical comments that some Corinthians offered as they read Paul's letter.

Send money to Jerusalem?

We need to keep it right here!

Let them fix their own problems.

If we become poor for their sake, then the only thing we have accomplished is joining them in their poverty.

What is the good in that?

Similar is the laughter of the those who surrounded the dead child in the gospel lesson.

Jesus proposed to them a outlandish resurrection and they laughed at him, doubting the power of God.

But that is how God consistently works, in foolish generosity and long-suffering love, by standards that are not human but unimaginably better.

"For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."

Here Paul is so bold as to render the incarnation of Jesus Christ in financial terms.

The richness of Jesus' pre-incarnation life was to be in the presence of the Father and the Spirit, in the very courts of God.

But he gave all that up for a human existence and not an easy one, for his entire earthly life was bent toward the Cross.

And by his willing poverty our frail human nature was infinitely enriched by the glorious mercy and grace of God, and so there is hope for us.

There was a transaction in the life of Christ, a check written, a transfer of funds, by which God shared eternal life and holiness with us.

Because of that glorious transaction of salvation, we can live in great generosity, for we hope not in wealth but in God.

We are God's heirs, joint heirs with Christ, recipients of an enormous inheritance.

So be sure, ours is an abundant life.