Declarations of the Heart©

2 Cor. 8:1-15,24; Rom. 5:1-11; John 3:16 **Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

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Today is the fourth Sunday of the Extravagant Generosity sermon series. Before we dive into the Scripture readings, I want to ask a couple of questions. You may have to take a moment to think about it but I hope you will respond.

What is it that causes you to want to give? What is the driving force behind your compassion or generosity? Why do you give to others; to the church? Is there someone in your life – previous or current – who has influenced your giving nature? Was there a specific event in your life? I realize that is a lot to consider but it all goes together.

The main question is: what it is that causes you to want to give?

One event in my life stands out for me. I was eight or nine years old at the time and had gotten over the measles and then went right on into having the chicken pox. It was not a great time for how I was feeling – and it was just before Christmas!

Our Christmas tree was up with the lights and decorations and of course, lots and lots of those foil icicles that our mom let us kids apply to the poor tree. There were clumps of those things all over the tree. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

My sick little self was lying on the couch looking at the tree and, while the tree itself was beautiful, in my mind, it was noticeably bare underneath.

I wondered when the presents might start showing up. The next day was Christmas Eve and I was hopeful it would begin looking a little different soon. You know, something with my name on it, something to shake and wonder about. There were four of us kids so there should be at least four presents there. So far, it wasn't looking too good.

Just before that time, my parents had separated. My dad left to go to North Carolina where he had been spending much of his time working – especially in the summer when he flew a crop dusting plane. My dad had been gone quite a lot in my lifetime so it wasn't so unusual for him not to be there. But I was aware of the separation and pending divorce. And I was especially aware of the sadness that seemed to be with my mom all the time.

For the first time in my young life, my mother was going to work. She got a job as a waitress in a local restaurant. She cried a lot these days. As the oldest child who was very close to her mom, I noticed these things and I wanted so bad to be able to make it better for her.

So, on this night that was almost Christmas Eve, we were at home. Mom was taking care of my two youngest siblings – both under the age of two. David and I had been watching something on television. And there was a knock on the front door.

Mom was carrying the youngest, Jan, who was just a baby when she opened the door. There on the porch was a group of people who I recognized from the choir Mom sang in at our church – First Presbyterian Church. They started singing a Christmas carol and mom stood there with the door open, crying. Finally, she invited them to come in and in they came saying "Merry Christmas!"

They were carrying boxes – wrapped presents! Quite a few presents, in fact. And there were boxes of food too. My beautiful mother was crying and laughing and telling them thank you over and over. I knew this was a very big deal. A gift from our church family. A gift of things we needed but an even bigger gift was given that I recognized when I saw my mom's face and the faces of those friends. It was a gift of pure, generous love.

I can't say that I really recognized it for exactly what it was at that age, but I knew it was something special and more than just things. I realized as I got older that I had seen firsthand the love of God right there in our living room; right there on the faces of those beautiful people. I saw new life – transformation – right there before my eyes.

About three years ago – maybe four – I had the joy of going with Barb and Walt to give Christmas gifts to one of our families whom our congregation had adopted. Three young children had just lost their mother who died of an overdose. They were staying at their grandmother's house, who of course, was devastated because of the death of her daughter. Their lives were full of pain and confusion. And it was Christmas time.

The gifts we brought to them did not take away their pain or their grief, but it did bring some joy in the midst of all of that. And it did speak to them about how God was loving them and caring for them through people who love God and who wanted to share that love with others.

In the first Scripture reading today we hear how Paul is asking the congregation in the church at Corinth to be generous. In fact, to fulfill the pledge they had made a year earlier.

There had been a conference in Jerusalem a year or so before this and some good decisions had been made. First of all, it was determined that Gentile's (those who were not Jewish) who became believers, did not have to become members of the Jewish faith to be part of the Body of Christ. Paul was very happy about that.

But the one thing that was asked was that Paul would help the surrounding young churches to see the need to help the Christian believers (who Paul calls the saints) who are very poor. Paul was happy about that too, as it was something that was very much on his heart.

So he and his helper, Titus, began circling around to the churches, compelling them to commit to giving to what was known as The Collection. And just as we do with our pledge cards, those churches pledged to give a certain amount over a specific time period.

Obviously, the Corinthians had fallen behind on their commitment. There had been some false teachers who came along and tried to convince the congregation in Corinth that Paul lacked integrity and was not to be trusted. It took some work to build their trust back up but Paul had

begun that work. Now he is asking them to fulfil their pledge with the enthusiasm they had initially shown.

Paul doesn't hesitate to give them an example. The Macedonians had suffered greatly over the Roman takeover and they themselves were very poor. In fact it was reported that they could have been excused from giving to the Collection because of their own poverty. Yet, they begged to be able to participate in this great, love offering.

Paul says "Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches (in Macedonia), pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors."

Those true colors he talks about were that they were "incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts … they offered far more than they could afford! – pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians." (2 Cor. 8:1-4)

Paul is persuading the Corinthians to finish what they started so that all have what they need. He says "you do what you can, not what you can't. The heart regulates the hands. This isn't so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you're shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end, you come out even. He says nothing left over to the one with the most, nothing lacking to the one with the least."

But why? Why would those churches who were struggling so, who were often persecuted and fearful of their very lives, why would they want to be generous in helping others, generous in their giving, extravagant even, as the Macedonians were?

I think the answer is one we all know. It is written in Paul's letter to the Romans, and even Jesus said it in John. God first loved us so much that he sent us his Son, Jesus, who would sacrifice everything so that we might have forgiveness and reconciliation with God because of our sins being forgiven.

Paul says to the church in Rome that while we were powerless (unable to save ourselves), Christ died for sinners. That's a very unusual thing, he says, that someone would die for a person considered an enemy of God because of their sin. But, out of this great love, God sent his Son to die for us so that we would be in a right relationship with God.

Paul says that God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The Macedonians, as poor as they were, gave because they had experienced God's amazing love. Christians everywhere respond to God's love with generous acts of giving – giving their resources, their money, their time, their gifts and talents. They are eager to share what they have because they have received so much from God whose love has been shared with them.

We too, are a part of that generosity club. For us, it's more than wanting to give because we are nice people. We have a deep, deep meaningful relationship with the One who gave His all to us. We don't give as payback. We could never pay it back.

But we give because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit and it is a great joy to respond to that love by sharing it with others the best way we can. It is by giving to the church so it can continue in ministry and mission. It is by volunteering to help with those ministries. It is by spending time helping others, being a listener, cooking a meal, making a phone call or visiting someone.

These acts of generosity and kindness are declarations of the heart. Expressions of our love for God because he first loved us. Let us be guided by that great love in all we do. Amen.

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