

“Genuinely Generous”
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27
2 Corinthians 8:7-15, Mark 5:21-43

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It's felt to me like quite a week--a lot of traveling for me, and then a sense of noticing in the world around us some things that seem hard. The continued violence overseas in Iraq and Iran, and as much as I would like to think the violence is far away, noticing it coming close again in the events around us. Some of us are much closer than others to the events of this week here in Moscow and the violence that came, again, close to home. It leaves me wondering how, in the midst of all that is going on in the world, do we deal with it. What do we do?

Sometimes that darkness seems to overshadow even the bright wonder of summer. So it was, as I again read this scripture, that I noticed the contrast. I noticed how in the world it seems that there is violence and evil, that there is shadow and darkness, and then I read what Jesus does in contrast to all of that. What does Jesus do but bring healing and life. In these descriptions of what he does as he walks among these people so many years ago, he brings healing. He brings life.

It was that remembering that helped me again. It led me to have some joy in coming together here to remember, together, that we serve one who brings healing and life. Indeed, as we look at what happens in these stories, particularly with the woman who comes up behind him and touches the hem of his garment, we see that his healing goes not only to the leader of the synagogue with whom he's going, but to the least among us. God's healing in Christ is not just for a few. Not just for the leaders of the synagogue, or whatever leaders or status group we might want to choose, but for all of us.

The interesting thing about him asking about who touched him and the fear that this woman comes with before him is that she had done something that was wrong. Since she was unclean and she had touched someone who was clean, the thought of the day was that she had defiled him and he could have had her punished. Instead, what Jesus does is to make sure to know who it was who touched him, I think, because he wanted to complete the healing. You see, he wanted to let her know that she didn't need to live in fear. He wanted to bring her into the family of faith. He tells her not what she expects to hear--that you need to be punished for what you've done--but that your faith has made you well. Go in peace. That is such an astounding contrast to what was expected. And it is perhaps very instructive for us. It gives us an image of the key to healing when he says your faith has made you well. It is faith--that which brings us here, our trust in the very graciousness of God, the wonder of who God is and how God comes to us, the love God would share with us--that is the key that brings healing to the woman and to the leader of the synagogue. It is trust that Jesus can do

this--heal and bring life--and it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, free or slave. It doesn't matter whether we have a thread of faith (the woman actually touched the hem of his garment) or whether we come with great confidence. God's love is for each of us.

As we encounter the wonder of that grace, as we see this contrast with the world, we are called to actually let go of the world and allow ourselves to know the wonder of God's gift in Christ and to be reminded that it is a gift of grace. Paul, in reminding us, (he has a purpose with the Corinthians and we will talk a little bit about that) but in reminding us, he goes back to the wonder of God's gift in Christ and what he has done.

So as we think about how we are different through the contrast of Christ with the world, where that leads us, the change that takes place with us, we first see the way Jesus changed the way of acting. One of the things he did was, in the face of the world's violence, continued to love and forgive. Even at the very end he says, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Instead of repaying violence with violence, he gives forgiveness, God's grace, God's love. And as we watch and see and want to follow him, we're called into that grace. That's where Paul helps me out as he begins talking to the Corinthians about the test of their love, the genuineness of their love. Following Christ is to remember what Christ did, that grace that he gives as we see it in the stories in Mark, as we think about it throughout his life and death and resurrection.

I've always looked at that word *grace* and always thought of it as "a surprising gift of love" because that's one of the ways it's been described to me. But I looked at the meaning for grace once again, mainly because in Corinthians it's translated generous. I found that is one of the meanings: a gift freely and generously given. That's grace--a gift freely and generously given.

When Paul is talking to the Corinthians he wants them to help out with some of the needs that people have. He invites them to be part of that grace by giving a gift freely and generously given. That's one of the ways, I think, that we begin to recognize and begin to live out that grace, to confront the world not with violence, but with generosity. We confront the world with the love God has given us and one way that's described is by being generous. I think about the times people have given of themselves, their time, their help, their generosity to me, and I can be overwhelmed. There are times that what I remember of my life are the times when people have been generous. It is that freely and generously given gift of time, support, help, an ear, a hug--as God has given us freely and generously of his love for us throughout our lives--we are called to give.

One of the things that is helpful, again, in Corinthians for me is that when I look at what God calls us to--this generous nature, living out the love God's given us--I sometimes feel like I can only do it if I do it perfectly. Or that's the image I have, of doing it perfectly. So I'm always wrong. I never live up to it. Paul helps me

see here that it's not just about doing it perfectly. He says the test of your love is against the eagerness of others. It's not so much about whether we've done it perfectly.

He goes on to talk about it as a balance. Sometimes we have to balance our lives in what we give. We can give out of our abundance. God knows that most of us have some abundance. He says what is important is not that we do it perfectly, but that we do it earnestly, that it is a giving that comes out of wanting to serve Christ, out of a response to the love given us, out of a recognition that it is God's way for us to be. We can be generous simply to puff ourselves up, or to show off, or to try to act a particular way, or to make people think a certain way about us. That's not what Paul's talking about. Paul is talking about when it comes from the heart, when we really want to try, when it's earnest, when we're trying even though we know we're not always successful, that it's not as full as we would like it to be. We're not sure exactly how it should be. But when we're earnest, when we experience and remember what we've been given freely and generously--the love of God.

Paul recognizes that sometimes we have abundance and sometimes we don't in most of the things in our lives. But I would argue that there is one thing we always have in abundance and that we can share, and that is God's love for us. It is always abundant. And as we're willing to open our arms to it, we'll always have something to share. And then we can be genuinely generous. Amen.