

## *The Natural*

2 Corinthians 9.6-15 (CEV)

October 10, 2010

“Giving is as natural to love as sound from the mouth.”

- St. Francis of Assisi

God came to my house and asked for charity.

And I fell on my knees and

cried, “Beloved,

what may I

give?”

“Just love,” He said.

“Just love.”

- St. Francis of Assisi

### *Reading*

<sup>6</sup>Remember this saying, "A few seeds make a small harvest, but a lot of seeds make a big harvest." <sup>7</sup>Each of you must make up your own mind about how much to give. But don't feel sorry that you must give and don't feel that you are forced to give. God loves people who love to give. <sup>8</sup>God can bless you with everything you need, and you will always have more than enough to do all kinds of good things for others. <sup>9</sup>The Scriptures say, "God freely gives his gifts to the poor, and always does right." <sup>10</sup>God gives seed to farmers and provides everyone with food. He will increase what you have, so that you can give even more to those in need. <sup>11</sup>You will be blessed in every way, and you will be able to keep on being generous. Then many people will thank God when we deliver your gift. <sup>12</sup>What you are doing is much more than a service that supplies God's people with what they need. It is something that will make many others thank God. <sup>13</sup>The way in which you have proved yourselves by this service will bring honor and praise to God. You believed the message about Christ, and you obeyed it by sharing generously with God's people and with everyone else. <sup>14</sup>Now they are praying for you and want to see you, because God used you to bless them so very much. <sup>15</sup>Thank God for his gift that is too wonderful for words!

Have you ever seen someone perform so well or make a difficult task look so easy, that you just had to shake your head and say, “She’s a natural?” I’m sure you have. Well, I have to

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tell you, back in the day I was a natural ...a natural hippie. I made it look so easy. I was tall and skinny with hair over my shoulders. I walked like a hippie and talked like a hippie; and if that were not enough to identify me, like all good hippies I wore patched jeans. You see, back in the day, patched blue jeans represented a badge of honor. My favorite pair was just about more patch than denim; the seat looked like a patchwork quilt, and the knees were double patched, inside and out.

But it wasn't all fun and games; those jeans were a bone of contention between me and my mama. She didn't like them at all, and was perfectly comfortable telling anyone who would listen. She longed openly for the day I would throw them out. Much to her chagrin, I never threw them out. The irony of it all is that when I grew out of that phase and became a seminary student; you know, a golden child preacher-to-be, mama could have thrown the jeans out and I wouldn't have cared. But did she? No; instead she enshrined them in my bedroom, hanging them on the door knob as I always had. I was touched by this, because it told me how much I was loved. Only love, you see, could have moved her beyond her loathing for those jeans!

While I was still wearing my patched jeans, I subscribed to the youthful philosophy of the day, which was summarized by the Beatles as, all you need is love. This may or may not be true; so I propose that we examine the assertion in the context of stewardship. That's right; stewardship. While it may be surprising to some, Paul makes it very clear in today's reading that love is the foundation of stewardship. And if we can embrace that love and the attitudes it engenders, we can become naturals at giving.

Before I go any further, I have to offer a public apology. In the past I have been known to criticize folk who preach a prosperity gospel. I have called them 'snake oil salesmen,' for goodness sake, probably thinking something far worse. Today I owe these good folk an apology, because after close study of Paul's message to the Corinthians, I realize that there is a solid foundation for a prosperity gospel in the New Testament. Paul, for example, says so clearly; if you freely give from your abundance to God, he says in so many words, you will be blessed beyond your wildest dreams. There is, however, a caveat. This blessing has to do with joy, gratification, and the pride that comes from seeing that 'all kinds of good things for others' that your generosity makes possible.

I know this is not the same as the loot, the riches, the bounty that the prosperity gospel folk promise; but it's the best I can do and remain faithful to the New Testament. God's blessing is always paired with generosity. God's blessing is always intended to result in generosity. But it's not half bad if you think about it; freely give from the abundance God shares with you, and you will be blessed beyond your wildest dreams; blessed with joy, gratification, and a life of meaning and vitality.

This makes me wonder about the difference between the folk who share from their abundance and experience giving in this way, and those of us who have to fight our self-serving interests every step of the way. You know what I mean, trying to figure out just how little giving we can get by with, trying to figure out if somebody's going to notice if we don't give, trying to figure out how we can buy that new electronic toy that is all the rage by cutting back on charitable giving. What's the difference between those of us who have to fight ourselves all along the way and those who give freely and generously?

In an interview on *60 Minutes*, Linda Gates offered some hint at an answer to this question. Linda is the wife of Bill Gates and, thus, has ready access to the billions produced by that juggernaut, Microsoft. But Linda doesn't exemplify the typical lifestyle of the rich and famous. She doesn't spend her time shopping on Rodeo Drive in Hollywood, she doesn't hang with entertainment celebrities; in short, she does nothing that flaunts her wealth. When asked about this she responded that such a lifestyle holds no attraction for her, because it brings no gratification. Her gratification, she said, comes from recognizing that infant mortality in developing nations can be reduced drastically with simple educational efforts. Or that clean water can be supplied to villages in a drought-stricken area for much less than one might imagine. Things such as this, she said, bring satisfaction and make life meaningful.

Linda Gates, it would seem, is a natural. She shares from her abundance with a spontaneous joy that springs from love. At least this is what St. Francis would say; that spontaneous sharing springs from love, and that love is the natural. How did he put it? Giving is as natural to love as sound from the mouth. Love is a natural when it comes to giving. That's why Paul can announce with confidence that God loves people who love to give. Love is a natural giver.

I would like to point out that Paul is not speculating here; he is not making abstract statements about giving that may or may not be true. He is simply reporting to the church in Corinth what he had experienced in his life. His giving was motivated by sheer love. For proof of this we need look no further than this passage. The collection for which Paul is asking is for the church in Jerusalem, which happened to be the primary critic of and competition with the gospel he preached. There was significant tension between the Jewish Christian church centered in Jerusalem, and the Gentile church represented by Paul. The leaders of the Jerusalem church had more than once called Paul to account for his teaching and preaching, and while they couldn't sign off on his gospel, they couldn't deny its effectiveness, so they maintained a very tense peace.

Here's the really surprising thing. Even though they were his critics, even though their brand of faith was the chief competition to his own, when the Jerusalem folk found themselves stricken and in dire need, the first person to stand up and make a call for assistance was Paul. He invited all of the churches in which he had influence, including the church in Corinth, to look into their hearts and to do one simple thing; decide how much love was there and give accordingly.

All you need is love? Could be, if it's the right kind of love. Not the free-wheeling, devil may care love that we hippie types used to brag about back in the day; but a deep, abiding love that has its origin in God and that fills our hearts and overflows into the lives of others. This is the abundance from which God asks us to share; the love that God gives to us. There is no coercion here; notice that Paul is very careful to make this point. He wants them – God wants them – to give freely, from their own sense of love for others.

Now this may sound a bit too easy. There seems to be no accountability here; love or don't love, give or don't give... your choice. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that stewardship does have its accountability. We are accountable for the stewardship decisions we make; but make no mistake, we're not accountable in the sense that we have to prove to God that we're worthy of grace, and we don't have to protect ourselves against divine punishment. We are accountable to use faithfully the abundance that God has shared with us. As long as we are faithful in measuring the love in our heart and giving accordingly, Paul says, we will have

more than enough to do all kinds of good things for others, and many will thank God for our ministry. That's all we can ask for; that we will be found faithful, that we will be found loving, and that many will thank God for the ministry of Overland Park Christian Church.