

## It is better to give than to receive

**Acts 20:32-38**  
**November 20, 2022**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor Dave Carlson**

In an article titled “Learn the Joy of Serving Others,” Colin Powel says, “Young people need to learn the paradox of giving – that when we help others, we get back far more than we contribute. Teens who tutor elementary school kids, or spend a few hours a month at a hospice, or give up a Saturday to clean up an empty lot, get to know the satisfaction that comes from making a difference in someone else’s life.”<sup>1</sup>

In today’s New Testament lesson, the Apostle Paul is speaking about this spirit of giving as the foundation of the churches he planted and his hopes for their future once he’s no longer with them. Speaking to the church at Ephesus, Paul says, “I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified.”

When Paul says our acts of grace and service provide us with an inheritance, the inheritance he’s talking about is the church itself. We have inherited this church from those who have gone before us, those who have given of themselves to build up and sustain the ministries of First Church here in Independence. And this inheritance goes all the way back to Ephesus and those other places where Paul planted the first Christian churches ever.

When Paul arrived in Ephesus, it was the second largest city in the Roman Empire, with a quarter of a million people teaming about and making their living. It was a hub of commerce serving millions more people from throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Not only did Paul step into this center of economic commerce, but Ephesus was also home to the Temple of Artemis, a pagan goddess that gave rise to acts of religious hysteria, magic and incarnations, sorcery and astrology. All of this flew in the face of the Christian faith Paul was trying to share with them.

Well today, we see the Christian faith up against much of the same thing, as our message about the blessings of weekly worship, study, service and fellowship gets crowded out by all the other aspects of life – things like video games, work schedules, school activities, and even the need for time off – none of it bad, unless it takes over our lives, and our society, as it has.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. Colin Powell, "Learn The Joy Of Serving Others," Parade Magazine, April 11, 1999, 5.

<sup>2</sup> <https://livingpassages.com/riot-ephesus/>

If we as a society allow our work and recreation, our activities and attitudes to actually crowd out church life, then we give up on the inheritance that Paul talks about, we give up on the church and all it provides. And I don't think anyone here wants that.

No, we're committed to seeing the church continue, seeing church life remain a central part of who we are as people, as families, as communities, as a nation. It's just so important! It's so important that Paul used his last few minutes with the Ephesians before departing from them forever to speak and pray about it.

Standing in one the world's largest centers of commerce – kind of like standing in the middle of Time Square or Wall Street – Paul says to the Ephesians, “I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. ... I worked ... to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

“It is more blessed to give than to receive” – this is the message of grace that is the foundation of the church, the foundation of a society in which all people are valued and cared for. That's all God wants of us. And yet we make it so hard, not realizing we're all in this together.

A Jewish rabbi once put it this way, telling the story of two men in a rowboat heading toward land. One man suddenly starts to bore a hole in the bottom of the boat right under his seat. Hearing the other man shout in protest, he says, “Mind your own business; this is my half of the boat.”

When will we learn that we're all in this together? We seem to have forgotten what the message of Christ is all about. Remember when grace and mercy could be seen and felt throughout society, before it was taken over by competition and divisiveness? I know you do. And what I want us all to see and understand today is that the church is one of the last places where grace and mercy are taught and valued and practiced. The church is where those who've been beat up by this world of ours can come and have their spiritual wounds healed and their inner strength restored, and their true needs met, with God's help.

To better see and to understand this, let's look for a moment at what grace and mercy are all about. What is grace? What is mercy? First and foremost, grace and mercy are unmerited. There is nothing anyone has to do or say to be worthy of an act of grace and mercy. It's just the right thing to do, as a fellow human being – giving someone a little grace, showing a little mercy.

Also, Grace and mercy are unconditional and given freely. We don't expect to get anything in return. Now, by the grace of God, we often do receive spiritual and sometimes even material rewards. But that's not why we do it, it's not why we approach people in need in the spirit of Christian love and caring.

Another thing about grace and mercy is that they are foundational, contagious, full of hope. They are what give rise to the best this nation has to offer. All of our economic success, technological breakthroughs and military superiority are nothing if they are not founded and upheld by the principles of grace and mercy, the principles that have us, as Paul says, “support the weak.” Knowing that as Jesus says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

That’s what grace and mercy are all about, and that’s why they’re so important, and that’s why the church is so important, no matter what others think and feel. In fact, the church is even more important, more vital these days because so many are missing out on this message, or they’re actively turning their backs on it, in the spirit of greed and self-centeredness.

As I said early during our announcements, today is Commitment Sunday. We are here today to take a stand for the spirit of grace and mercy, over and above the spirit of greed and self-centeredness. This is why you are active in this church and in other places as someone who cares for and supports those less fortunate than us, even as we sometimes receive support from others.

Can you imagine if it were not so, if the church ceased to exist for lack of trying? Lack of commitment? You don’t have to imagine it. The Book of Acts describes it right here, where it says, “When (Paul) had finished speaking, ... there was much weeping among them all. They embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again.” ... “Not see him again”

Paul was leaving them and the Ephesians found themselves weeping and grieving, fearing they would never see him again. And yet, we know Paul, we see Paul even to this day. We see his wisdom, hear his teachings, feel and share his compassion because of the church, because of the foundation he laid in the Spirit of Christ that sustains the church to this day.

God has not given up on the church, and neither do we. We would never give up on this church and all it does. Because we know, we know that out of all the places we could be right now, this truly is a place of grace and mercy, and as such, this is a sacred place that makes life worth living, for us and for all people. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of peace and plenty, with awe and wonder we come before you in thanksgiving for the beauty and abundance of our land and its people.

Our ancestors came from many lands, for many reasons, but by your mercy they found grace in the wilderness.

Your grace has supplied our daily bread without fail. We thank you. Your grace has provided the raw materials of success, as well as the wit and will to use them. Thank you.

You have freely blessed us with more than we could ever earn. You have sustained us in bounty we do not deserve.

Help us respond to your infinite grace through generosity to those in need, understanding for those in dismay, courtesy toward those who oppose us, forgiveness for those who wrong us and compassion toward all who need us.

We pray your healing presence and sense of peace upon all those we've been keeping in prayer. And we pray for us all, as we gather with family and friends this week.

Help us speak freely and naturally of your gracious love, so that our holiday table may abound with thanks as well as with food.

Through this time of thanksgiving and rest, lead us to continue in thankful living and giving, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we know pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**