

Go with the Flow
2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Last Tuesday, I walked downtown to the Old State Capitol. The Downtown Development District was meeting there in the old legislative chambers. It was great to hear about all the improvements occurring in our city. I was there to collect an award that our church had won. They've been recognizing businesses that maintain and enhance their property and buildings. So I got to speak to these business leaders for two minutes about our church. I tried to think of unusual ways to think about what a church like ours means to its city. It was fun to note that when you add up all our services and programs, First Presbyterian represents about 75,000 visits to our downtown each year. We're significant players in the arts community, offering quality theatre productions, hosting chamber concerts, dance productions, CD launch concerts, bagpipe practice and utilizing local musicians in our worship services. We launch flood relief efforts and racial reconciliation initiatives. We pray for, hire and support law enforcement personnel. We bless the dogs in the Krewe of Mutts parade. We have a school with a hundred children and a counselling center that sees thousands of clients. We've beautified our campus to complement the North Boulevard greenway and to offer green space to passersby. We have street festivals and live nativities. We're alive in this city. It's really important to a downtown to have vibrant city center churches. I could have gone on and on about our church, but tried to stop before they brought out the hook. I'm proud of our church. Our existence as a lively, loving community of Christians blesses our city.

But as vital as our life in this location is to the city, I think we play an even more important role in the Baton Rouge community. Our Sunday gathering serves to form and fuel Christians for going back into the city as those who live for Christ amidst all their daily pursuits. We're refreshing doctors and homemakers, artists and attorneys, teachers and business leaders, administrators and line workers, landscapers and government officials. This is the day and this is the place where we get to step out of the daily world to hear the greatest news ever told. We come here to be energized, convicted, shaped and sent by the love of Jesus Christ for his lost lambs. We see again how everything we do, *everything* we do, can partake of his Kingdom and advance his glory.

In particular, I think a good morning at church ought to give every single person four key affirmations.

1) You're not crazy. There really is something the matter with everything. The world is out of whack. The cause is the sin in every heart. We're curved in on ourselves. We want to be our own gods. And it throws everything off. The world is not the way God intended. You're not crazy about that.

2) You're not alone. There's a room full of people who know the tension you feel between what you believe and what life is like in the world. They weep with you as you look at this broken world. They pray with you as you say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done." They stand with you in the struggles, pains and sorrows of life. You're not alone.

3) You're part of God's plan. God has not forgotten his world. He has sent his Son into the world to redeem it. Jesus has broken the power of sin and death. That victory is working its way through the world. And you've been threaded into the story of Jesus. You are now part of the story that solves everything. You're in what God is doing.

4) You matter. You have a part to play in God's plan of renewal. You've been sent into your life as a representative of Christ. You're not just a teacher. You're Christ's teacher in the school he sent you. You're not just a business leader. You're Christ's business leader in the city where he has placed you. You're his homemaker on the scene of the family he gave you. You're his agent in a retirement community where you have opportunity to pray and to bless others. You're his artist glorifying Christ through the art he gives you. And so on, whatever you do, wherever you are, you matter.

That's why our gathering is so important. We need each other. We strengthen each other. We get put back together between rounds in the world, then sent back into the ring to work for another week as Christ's people sent to his world.

That's a view of our church hovering over this block on North Blvd. But raise the drone camera higher and look around in the bigger landscape. I am not alone; I'm part of a church. But our church is not alone. We're part of Christ's people in this town, in this country, in this world. We're down in New Orleans with Ben and Jenny Cunningham as they plant the Church of the Resurrection. We're over in Mobile as one of our former pastors, Alec Flynt, grows a vibrant

new church or with Derek McCollum as he launches a new church in New Braunfels, Texas. We're with EPC missionary Andrew Brunson in a Turkish prison, with MacGregor Magruder training leaders in Nairobi, with Brian Sleeth training people in our zip code how to get a job. We're in mission with Principal Brittan at Buchanan Elementary and we're creating a community of Christ in Gardere through the school. We're all connected in Christ and we belong to each other.

This is the context by which we can understand what Paul is writing to the Corinthians. Paul had a grand vision for how the young churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire all belonged to each other. And he had a very practical way he wanted to connect them. The church in Jerusalem had fallen on hard times. The first disciples of Jesus were all Jewish just like Jesus. But once they proclaimed Jesus as Lord, their fellow Jews thought they had gone off the deep end. They were considered to be blasphemous, fanatical, and dangerous. Their social standing plummeted and their economic opportunities shrank. Poverty came upon the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Paul wanted the churches in Greece, Macedonia, Rome, and Asia Minor to send gifts to their brothers in Israel. So he organized a collection. This was no easy process in days without rapid transit or mass communication. The collection would take years. Paul's guys would have to devote their lives to making the rounds and getting to Jerusalem. It would be dangerous to transport so much money over the open roads. But Paul knew the need was great. And he believed that this collection would knit the churches together. This would be a tangible sign of the unity of Christ's body, the church.

So in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul told them of the collection and urged them to set aside something weekly for the Jerusalem Church. That way, when Paul's people got to Corinth, their gift would be all prepared. But as he writes 2 Corinthians, Paul urges the Corinthians to finish what they started. He's concerned that their leaders may have downplayed the importance of this collection. He's worried that they may miss the chance to be part of this work. So Paul does what he does best: he connects something as practical as an offering to the deeper story. He shows how participating in the collection is a participation in Christ himself.

How does he do it? First, Paul keeps calling this collection "an act of grace." (vs. 4-6). Caring for the Jerusalem church is not a bill to pay. It's not mandatory. It's voluntary. It's an opportunity to participate in meeting the needs of fellow Christians they'd never met. Their gifts would be purely gracious. Sharing from

what they have in gratitude to God and love for the Jerusalem church. And that, Paul says, is a participation in Christ himself. That's the mystical, spiritual part. Your collection will launch you deeper into the story of Jesus who lived, died and rose to redeem us. You will get into the flow of grace that's at the heart of the universe.

So Paul writes,

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Though he was rich,
Yet for your sake he became poor.
So that by his poverty,
You might become rich.

That's an extraordinary statement! A great verse to memorize. Once again, Paul has put the whole gospel into one sentence. Think of what he's saying. You know what grace is. Grace is the story of Jesus. He is the eternal Son of God who lived in the riches of eternity. But because we were lost in sin and death, he came to find us. He stripped himself of glory and became poor. He was born in humility and lived in obscurity. He made his way as a working man in a backwater town. He gave away his love, his time, and his energy as he went about healing and forgiving. He gave us life in the ultimate humiliation of crucifixion. The Lord of glory died a disgraceful death. And he did it for you. For your sake he became poor. So that out of his suffering we might have forgiveness. Out of his disgrace, mankind might be restored. Out of his death, we might have life. He makes us rich with eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and every spiritual blessing that comes from being in intimate relationship to the Triune God.

There's a flow here. God who is complete fullness, emptied himself into our humanity so that our empty hearts might be filled. He poured himself into our lives so that we might be filled up with grace and love and mercy again. That's the heart of how God cares for the creatures he loves.

Now Paul makes the connection. We are meant to participate in this flow of grace. By *receiving* it as a gift, yes. But also by *giving* grace back out to others. We participate in the massive redemption project God has undertaken in the world. We are to empty ourselves in living for Christ by living for others in our daily life. We realize that we are participating in the flow of Christ for his world. I'm no longer just getting tired working for myself. I'm getting tired and realizing that expending myself is a participation in the life of Christ expended for the world.

That awareness lights up every day toil and every day chores with spiritual power. Mowing the lawn, doing the dishes, drafting a brief, diagnosing a patient, teaching a class, running a sprint or painting a canvas: it's all for him. It can, if I intentionally dedicate it to him, all be a participation in Christ. And that lights up our lives with wonder at how God will use what we are doing for his purposes.

Paul believed that intentional, voluntary, deliberate, and loving giving would put the Corinthians into the flow of grace. They would experience spiritually a participation in the work of Christ by participating tangibly in the collection for the Jerusalem church.

We know about that. We know what it was like to receive so many gifts from around the country to help our people with recovery from the floods last year. We know the joy of making contributions ourselves to flood relief here. We feel closer to the mission partners we helped. We're knit more closely to Abounding Love church and to Heritage Ranch and Caring to Love because we made their rebuilding possible. We know the sense of pride we have in watching the Gardere School grow or in seeing a congregation of 100 meeting in New Orleans at the Church of the Resurrection.

This is your stewardship sermon from me this year. My theology of giving at church has always included 3 foundational beliefs. 1) Christians need to give. The flow of grace was never meant to stop with us. Giving back to the God who has given us all things is a vital part of spiritual health. 2) I want all who give to our church to feel like they're in *all* that we do. So, unless there's a disaster, we only have one special offering a year. Otherwise, it's the weekly gifts that make everything run. Every single gift counts. And every single gift means you're connected to everything we do. 3) Talk about Jesus all the time, and mission, ministry, and giving will flow from there. And I've watched you respond to the news about Jesus with robust participation. You're vigorous in serving your church and your city. Your giving is outstanding and your care of one another stunning. More and more people discover what I've been discovering these 13 years. We live together, upholding each other in tears and joy, in sorrows and triumphs. We draw our strength for life from the truth of the gospel as we worship, study and serve. In the process, we find our hearts knit together. We realize this is the way we want to live life, going with the flow of grace.

Last month at our session meeting, I asked the elders to consider what we would do if we had a dramatic increase in giving. I asked the question several ways. What would you do if next year we got \$300,000 more in pledges? Or,

suppose a philanthropist sat down with you and said, “I’m looking for a place to invest my money that will build the kingdom of Christ. I’d like to give you a significant gift, but first tell me what you do if you could expand the reach of your church.” All kinds of ideas ignited within us. None of them official yet, but there is energy to consider the kinds of things we could do as a church. Perhaps we could take seriously our role as a teaching church for young pastors, and each year hire an intern whom we could train for congregational ministry. Perhaps we could plant a church in the Gardere area, hiring a pastor to work in the school and the neighborhood. Maybe we could put an additional job trainer to work in the Christian Outreach Center. Or send another missionary couple to Lebanon. We always want to keep our base strong. We know that our primary mission is to fuel our members for their daily life of serving Christ wherever they work or whatever they do. But we also want to push outward with the grace of Christ. We want to extend the reach of our church in ways consistent with who we are. The possibilities are unlimited. The challenge is for each one of us to go with the flow of God’s grace as he leads us.