

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

10/24/10

God's Abundance

2 Corinthians 9:8

I recently saw a rather obscure 1937 movie called *Wise Girl* starring Miriam Hopkins and Ray Milland. It is a comedy in the mold of the "poor little rich girl" genre that Hollywood was known for in the 1930s. But this film has a very unusual twist. It tells the story of a young woman who comes from a very wealthy family that knows how to use its money to get what family members want. But the family is suddenly confronted with a situation where money cannot produce the desired result. When the young woman's sister and her husband are killed in an accident their two little girls are orphaned. According to the provisions of the parents' will the children are assigned to their father's brother who is trying to become established as an artist. The wealthy family of their mother sues for custody but as long as this young man has a job the court will not grant their request.

So the Miriam Hopkins character resorts to stealth to achieve what the family's highly paid lawyers could not do. She moves to Greenwich Village where her nieces are living. There she poses as a poor struggling actress while she meets the little girls for the first time and gets acquainted with their uncle, played by Ray Milland. She quickly discovers that the Milland character has no regular job. He is in fact bouncing from one temporary part-time position to another. Her plan works beautifully. She turns him in and the girls are placed with their wealthy relations.

But then something happens that she did not expect. She has become part of a community of people who have learned how to get by when money is scarce. They survive on very little money because they are blessed with an abundance of caring. They make sure everyone has food, clothing, and a bed. They share resources and information about jobs. They do all of these things for the rich young woman who is posing as one of them. Believing she has no money her landlord tells her that she cannot move in until she signs an I.O.U. For the first time in her life strangers have provided for her not because they wanted to curry favor with the rich, but because they thought she was in need. When she experiences this abundance of caring her life is profoundly changed.

This abundance of caring is what Paul wanted for the Corinthian church. In the 8th and 9th chapters of his letter we find Paul writing about a special offering for the poor in Jerusalem. This was an important project for Paul as he visited the churches he had helped organize in the Aegean area. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD created many refugees and destroyed the economy of Palestine. The population of that region, which included many Christians, suffered greatly. Paul encouraged the churches in the relatively more affluent Greek areas to support their brothers and sisters in Palestine by sending money for food and clothing. It was a way to respond to desperate human need, but also a way for Paul to teach the Greek churches that they were intimately connected to people who were very different from them. Paul wanted them to learn to reach across ethnic, cultural, and racial lines.

But in the 9th chapter of the letter it becomes clear that the Corinthians are dragging their feet. They had earlier committed themselves to participating in this special project, but now some are arguing that it is more than they can do. We don't know the reasons for this growing reluctance. It may be the Corinthians were struggling with an economic downturn of their own. Paul urges them to follow

through on their commitment. He reminds them that their northern neighbors, the Macedonians, have already given generously even as they struggle with economic hardship. Paul states the case for the full participation of the Corinthians by emphasizing that as followers of Christ they should not be controlled by the scarcity of their resources. We live by the abundance of caring that God directs to us. Paul says it like this:

And God is able to provide you with everything in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

This is a passage that is sometimes misinterpreted to suggest that those who give generously will be blessed by God with financial wealth. This has been described as the “prosperity gospel.” One of the proponents of this theology is Bishop Eddie Long who has been in the news recently with multiple allegations of sexual abuse. His opulent lifestyle with fancy cars, expensive clothing, and luxurious homes funded by a multimillion-dollar salary testifies to the prosperity gospel that he preaches. One commentator has described this movement in these words:

The idea that God guarantees truly faithful believers physical health and financial wealth is not new. But cable and satellite television broadcasting have turned prosperity preachers into celebrities that have followings similar to musicians and movie stars...Of course, it is much easier for clergy to preach this gospel when they are living proof that the “system” works...When leaders of this movement assert that God wants everyone to be wealthy and that riches are the automatic outcome for all faithful believers, we should all be suspicious (DeForest B. Soaries, Jr, “Black Churches and the Prosperity Gospel, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 2010).

The apostle Paul never preached a prosperity gospel. For him the abundance of God was not about monetary wealth. It was about caring for others in the name of Christ. It is about sharing the abundant grace that has been poured out on us. Money is just one of the ways by which we make this happen.

Paul understood that giving money in the service of Christ demonstrates that we are not enslaved to our fear of not having enough. Paul did not want the Corinthians to fall into the trap that caught the Israelites in the generations that followed Joseph. They were a people who were shaped by their fear of scarcity.

It was scarcity that led them into Egypt. Scarcity was at the heart of Joseph’s advice to Pharaoh that he should hoard grain. When the drought came Pharaoh’s power expanded exponentially because he monopolized the scarce resources everyone needed. In the beginning the Israelites could benefit from the fact that Joseph was the overseer of Pharaoh’s largesse. But over time the Israelites came to place their faith in Pharaoh as the ultimate solution to the threat of scarcity. They no longer lived by the faith of their ancestors who believed in God’s promise to provide for their needs. They forgot how to trust in God’s abundance. In the end they sold themselves into slavery believing that Pharaoh was the only alternative to the scarcity they had grown to fear (Walter Brueggemann).

Paul called the Corinthians to affirm God’s abundance by leaving their fear of scarcity behind. Scripture tells us that they did just that, sending Paul to Jerusalem with their generous offering in hand. The same opportunity is there for us on this Stewardship Commitment Sunday. By sharing what we have we, too, can place our trust in God’s abundance.