Sermon 10-13-19

The Stewardship Paradox

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Last week we opened this new series of sermons talking about the Gratitude Gap, giving thanks to our God for all of our Creator’s blessings that have come to us. So as we continue with the stewardship theme, let’s look at stewardship as a paradox.

We’ve never had it better ... and we’ve never felt worse about it.

Or, to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens **GRAPHIC: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”[[1]](#endnote-1)**
That’s the surprising state of affairs in our society today, as we discover that cash cannot create contentment and possessions don’t always provide us with a sense of peace. Sure, we have may watched *The Fabulous Life of Celebrity Super Spenders,* which ran on cable for ten years or so beginning in the early 2000s, and gawk at the extravagant shopping sprees of Hollywood’s best-paid superstars, but we know that most celebrities are just a few steps away from having a meltdown and ending up in rehab.

What grandma always said is true: Money can’t buy happiness.

So, what is a paradox, anyway? The simplest definition of paradox is, “A contradictory statement that is nevertheless true.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Hence, it was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

Still, most of us expect that improvements in quality of life are going to make us feel better. But they don’t — at least not by themselves. Gregg Easterbrook makes this point in his 2003 book the *Progress Paradox*. He points out that life is getting better all the time: Our houses are bigger, our incomes are growing, our health is improving, and the environment is becoming cleaner. We are even enjoying a drop in crime rates, and decreases in certain problem areas such as divorce, teen pregnancy, drug use and abortion.

So why isn’t all this good news making us jump for joy? Easterbrook has some intriguing ideas about why we feel rotten in the middle of our nation’s great riches, and how we can be simultaneously healthy and unhappy. He makes the case that:

***GRAPHIC: Bad news sells*.** If it doesn’t bleed, it doesn’t lead. It’s always a disaster of some kind that draws us to television news reports, and bad news is what keeps us glued to the tube through many commercial breaks. I saw this personally when on the highway patrol. We would be at a fatal accident, the bodies would be covered with our yellow body-blankets (yes, look right here to see the gruesome aftermath) and people would drive by and ask if anyone was hurt. Say “no,” and they would keep on driving. Say yes and they would literally climb out the windows with this wild look in their eyes asking, “Where? Where? Where’s the blood?”[[3]](#endnote-3)

***GRAPHIC: We don’t sleep enough***. Americans sleep an hour less every night than they did a generation ago. And if that’s not bad enough, we sleep about two or three hours less per night than people did a century ago. With such sleep deprivation, no wonder we feel cranky! Have some young ones running around the house and that number drops even more.

***GRAPHIC: We are full of envy*.** Awards shows, feature films, celebrity Internet sites, *People* magazine and programs such as **GRAPHIC: *The Millionaire Matchmaker, Keeping Up with the Kardashians, Rich Kids of Beverly Hills, or even the antics of Miley Cyrus***that were on a few years ago are constantly bombarding us with information about how the more fortunate members of society live, and this is bound to make us feel envy — even if our lifestyle is really quite comfortable.

***GRPAHIC: The solution to one problem creates another***. Easterbrook describes this phenomenon as “the unsettled character of progress,” also known as a virtuous circle. This insight makes sense, when you think about it. We invent an anthrax vaccine, or any other vaccine for that matter, and then we fear that it has terrible side effects. We create a nationwide network of cell phones, and then we live in terror that some distracted driver is going to run us down in their SUV. We develop miraculous cures for diseases, and then worry that we will not be able to afford them, like the continuing saga over the Epi Pen or some of our current cancer medications. The unsettled character of progress often leaves us feeling very anxious about the future.
For these reasons, and others, we’re going through a progress paradox — we’re feeling bad while living well. But there’s also a spiritual component to this problem, one that’s addressed quite clearly by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians. Hear these words of Paul:

**GRAPHIC: The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9As it is written,
‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
   his righteousness****\*** **endures forever.’**

**10He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.****\*** **11You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, 14while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)**

Writing to Christians in the wealthy Greek city of Corinth, Paul reminds them of their promise to give him a “bountiful gift” for the poor Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:5). Although he describes this as a completely voluntary gift, it is clear that he expects the Corinthians to be generous in their support, and he promises many rewards for their giving.

For Paul, true happiness is found in what you give ... not in what you receive. “God loves a cheerful giver,” he tells them, ramping up the very first Christian stewardship campaign (v. 7).
Do you want to be enriched in every way? Then let’s see some “great generosity” (v. 11).
Are you interested in glorifying God? Then show your brothers and sisters “the generosity of your sharing” (v. 13). Are you looking for God to provide you “with every blessing in abundance”? Then don’t hold tight to a miserly attitude — instead, **GRAPHIC: “share abundantly in every good work” (v. 8).**The apostle is laying out for groundwork for stewardship as a paradox - what we might call “The Stewardship Paradox.” Remember, in any paradox, you are faced with a statement that seems to be inherently contradictory, but turns out to be true. In Paul’s words to the Corinthians, he is saying that personal enrichment comes from great generosity, and that blessings in abundance come from sharing abundantly with others. His point is that you receive the most by giving the most. The Stewardship Paradox.

So how does this work? “The point is this,” says Paul, using an agricultural image: “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (v. 6). Whether you are growing melons or mission projects, Paul is absolutely right — you cannot expect significant results without making a significant investment. There will be no great harvest of pumpkins in the fields, or people in the pews, unless forward-thinking men and women are willing to sow bountifully by making significant investments of time and talent and treasure. We must be outwardly focused and not inwardly. Where have we heard that before?

In *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (Touchstone, 2002), biographer Evan Thomas notes that Kennedy, a child of wealth and privilege, rarely carried cash, relying instead upon various members of his entourage to pick up his tabs. One day Kennedy, a devout Catholic, attended a church service with a friend, who dutifully placed a dollar on the collection plate on his behalf — only to hear the muttered protest: “Don’t you think I’d be more generous than that?”

Which raises the question: If your neighbor was going to put in for you, how much would that neighbor put in?!

As we move forward with our 2019 stewardship campaign, the words of Paul ring as true for us as they did for the people of Corinth. Where might be able to help us with our outward focus for next year. Or how about stepping up to help lead a class, a project, an activity, or some other community-oriented event? Want to help attract young people to our church, then let’s work together to develop an outreach that is attractive to them.

But there’s an unanswered question in the middle of this Stewardship Paradox**: GRAPHIC: How does generous giving actually lead to contentment?** The connection between sowing and reaping makes good logical sense, but the link between giving and happiness is a bit harder to establish. It is not immediately clear how good stewardship can make us happier in our rich but rotten-feeling world today.

Patrick Johnson found a link one day when he wrote a check for an air-conditioner. Johnson is a vice president at Bancorp South Investment Services, so he is doing pretty well for himself, financially, but he has discovered that his greatest joy is not to be found in managing fixed-income portfolios.

Instead, his joy comes from giving, and it’s a joy that borders on hilarity. As he was writing a check to help purchase a central air-conditioning unit for a local homeless shelter, he started praying and thinking about the immense joy that God was feeling as he gave to this worthy cause. He started thinking about the joy that would be felt by the homeless men as they slept in an air-conditioned room in the sweltering Mississippi heat. He then started thinking about the joy these men would feel when they gave their hearts to Jesus Christ and felt God’s love, maybe for the very first time.

And what welled up in Patrick Johnson, as he prayed, was laughter. He was actually so overwhelmed with joy that he laughed. It was spontaneous laughter, born out of the joy that was being experienced by God, by the homeless men, and by Johnson himself, due to one small gift.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Does this story surprise you? It shouldn’t. When Paul writes that “God loves a cheerful giver” (v. 7), what he says in the original Greek is that God loves a giver who is *hilaros* — the root of our English word “hilarious.” **GRAPHIC: What God loves is a *hilarious* giver, a person who gives with spontaneous joy and laughter.**
So, when was the last time that you actually laughed as you sat down to write your check to the church? Or to the Red Cross? Or to World Vision? Or to the local homeless shelter? Maybe you’re not giving at the level that will tip you over into hilarity. Or perhaps you’re not focusing enough on the joy that God is feeling, and that needy people are feeling, as a result of your generosity.

Hilarious giving**.** That’s the solution to the Stewardship Paradox that we are living with every day, the antidote to the unhappiness we are bound to feel as we spend our days in the middle of our self-obsessed secular society. In fact, author Gregg Easterbrook himself believes that we would all be better off if we were more grateful, more forgiving, and more spiritual, and he challenges us to move beyond our materialistic obsessions to reclaim “a mostly hopeful view of the human prospect.”

We can capture a more hopeful view, but only by learning to give with joy and laughter. As we commit ourselves to Christian stewardship, both inside and outside the church, we will discover that God is truly able to provide us with every blessing in abundance. As we make sacrifices for others, we will come to see that money cannot buy happiness, but generosity can.

Who knows? We may even break out in laughter. In a world that so often makes us feel rotten, **GRAPHIC: hilarious giving is the key to contentment.**
In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. March McCutcheon, *Roget’s Super Thesaurus, 3rd Edition*, 2003 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. From a lecture by Gordon Graham (CHP Ret), Attorney, CHP Academy [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Johnson, Patrick. “Hilarious giving.” *Generous Giving Web Site*, Generousgiving.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)