

When is Rich – Rich?

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

June 28, 2015 SOH

Theme: True riches = living faith

Last week Willie, Keith, and I were at the Desert Southwest Annual Conference. Each year all the United Methodist churches in Arizona, southern Nevada and California along the Colorado River gather to worship and do the work of the conference. Next year is the general conference. Every four years United Methodists gather from around the world and it is that body of people, clergy and lay that speak for the church. With the general conference on the horizon this is the year some conferences pass resolutions they hope to take on to general conference to present. Many times these resolutions are rather negatively worded because we feel some practice or investment of retirement funds is not socially responsible. It's all way too close to the processes of congress for my liking.

In the midst of some of the routine work, we stopped to authorize the sending of a letter to Emmanuel AME Church to show our support. It is a nice gesture and one I support. The AME Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was formed back in 1787 when Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were denied the right to preach and teach fellow blacks so

they set out to establish a church where they would be free to teach and preach. First established in Philadelphia, by free blacks, they faced attempts to take over the churches by whites who believed they were incapable of leading themselves. The AME church survived discrimination, the Civil War, and years of being treated as second class citizens and second class Christians. Despite the challenges they have faced, they have maintained their Methodist roots and Wesleyan heritage. Grace abounds in the AME church.

I have been blessed to have a number of friends from Fuller Seminary who are AME pastors. Camille Pensile, one of our pastors transferred into the UM church from the AME.

Why am I sharing this very brief history of the AME church? Why does it matter to you? Let me go back to our scripture today as I share my thoughts about Charleston.

First, let's agree this text is clearly about money. The Apostle Paul begins chapter 8 with a plea to give an offering for the church in Jerusalem which was suffering under severe persecution at that time. I think he was actually buttering them up with great praise in Chapter 7 before he makes his plea for the offering. In verses 1&2 he writes, "Hey, the folks up in Macedonia, despite their own troubles and poverty, have given a

tremendous offering, surely you will give at least as much!”

Paul was not one to mince words or afraid to cajole people into giving or following Christ. I know a seminary professor (not from Fuller) who authored a book about Jesus that claimed all of Jesus’ teaching was about money and giving rather than about faith and salvation in the kingdom. This text from Paul is a central theme in his book; verse 9, **“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”**

Jesus certainly talked great deal about money, but primarily from a standpoint of greed and idolatry. I think the professor missed the point and it’s easy to miss the second point in Paul’s writing here if you’re not careful. Paul is specific that our generous giving is to benefit others and within our abundance, there needs to be a balance so we ought to give out of our abundance, not out of obligation or duty or command. Even though, Paul is pretty demanding isn’t he?

But, I want to look at verses 9 -11 again. We know Jesus was never rich by human standards. Born into a carpenter’s family amid scandal from a tiny town in the region of Galilee; the hinterlands of Israel – a bit like coming from the hills of Tennessee, or maybe Flagstaff, Az. **“For your sake he became poor.”**

The ultimate measure of generosity, Paul writes, is the example of Jesus’ sacrificial love. Generosity: the showing of a readiness to give more of something than is strictly necessary or expected. Generous is from a Latin root meaning noble such as “from a noble birth.”

Would you agree with me that being generous is a way to demonstrate God’s grace, his love expressed in tangible ways? A generous person is usually someone we admire and respect sometimes to the point that we don’t understand the extent of their generosity.

I think our conference letter to Emmanuel AME is nice, but it’s a somewhat hollow act by itself. The text of the letter was out on Facebook pretty quick, but I didn’t post it to our Spirit of Hope Facebook. Rather, I penned the note to you in our newsletter. If you didn’t receive the newsletter, do we have your email? If you don’t have email you should have received it via snail mail. If not, let us know and there are some copies on the table in back.

Authentic grace is authentic generosity. Authentic Christianity is surprising – Lord Surprise Us! At the murder of a beloved pastor and eight friends and family a normal human reaction is anger and hatred toward the murderer. Don’t be misled there is great anger in the people; this heinous act of

cowardice and racial hatred calls for righteous anger and a demand for justice.

But the people of Emmanuel have refused to let anger be their motivator. They have refused to let their grief drive them to revenge or to demonstrate. They have chosen another path; one much more difficult and steep and rocky. They have chosen a path of great riches and wealth. In light of all the racially motivated violence and riots, wouldn't that be an easier path? The race baiters are noticeably absent in Charleston for a reason; God's grace is abundantly present and has pushed away hate.

I don't know if I could choose the path they have taken, I hope I could, I pray that I could, and I pray I never have too. Before grief was even fully realized and experienced, while the shock of an unthinkable act was still embedded with the adrenalin of the day, they acted with a generosity rarely experienced when family and supporters showed up at an initial appearance of the suspect and they offered words of grace and forgiveness.

Perhaps only a people who have experienced hundreds of years of hatred, rejection, and prejudice can take that kind of step. If that's what it takes, then Lord lead us to be objects of hatred, rejection, and prejudice for we will be better people and better disciples for it.

Christianity, authentic Christianity calls for us to take a more difficult route that leads us counter-culturally from hatred and actions that might seem normal toward actions that vividly express God's amazing grace. I believe the people of Emmanuel AME will be grateful to receive our conference letter along with countless others I'm sure but I believe they would be far more grateful to know that we recognize God's grace alive in their actions following the awful events in their church and we emulate them.

Only through Jesus Christ can you find peace and healing from the pain this world and the evil that seeks to rule you. The people of Emmanuel AME chose God's grace and peace what will you choose? What course are you on? Does hatred and prejudice motivate you to demean others and withhold God's incredible love?

I invite you to join me in taking a different course, a more difficult course and one that could be personally painful but eternally blessed. Choose to follow Jesus. Choose to live with generosity of heart and grace. Choose Jesus.