

PENTECOST 6B – July 1st 2018
It's A Matter of Perspective
(2 Corinthians 8:7-15)

Now that summertime is upon us – and the weather has finally caught up as well! – that typically means vacation time. In fact, this coming week Jeanette, Kaitlin, and I are going out to Michigan to visit her Dad, and her sister and her sister's family. And we're certainly looking forward to relaxing up at the lake, just chilling, with nothing more taxing to think about than what we're having for dinner and where we're going to watch the fireworks on the 4th of July.

But thinking about vacations reminded me of a family trip we once took a few years ago to visit Arizona and the Grand Canyon. It was a chance to see some extremely beautiful and exotic scenery.

I recall, however, that, after we returned, people often asked me what was the “highlight” of our trip, and I remember telling them that I couldn't really pick one out because *everything* was so memorable; all the mountains and canyons and deserts – the landscape is truly awesome, and so different from back East.

On the other hand, there were actually a couple of disappointments, however. Ironically, they both occurred on our second-to-last full day out in Arizona.

The first disappointment was the Petrified Forest – but not for the reason you may be thinking. If you've been there, then you know that the name “Petrified Forest” is a bit of a misnomer since *all* of the trees fell down a long, long time ago, which is how they became “petrified” in the first place. In fact, it should really be called the Petrified... *Logs*... National Park.

But that's not the reason why I was disappointed; that is, seeing fallen petrified logs instead of standing trees. No, the reason why I was so

disappointed was that we learned, from the short film in the visitor's center, that park visitors are currently stealing about a *ton* of petrified wood *a month* from the park! That's over two thousand pounds every thirty days! Or, if you do the math, almost 70 pounds a day! In fact, there were several scenic outlook points where you can tell that the petrified wood has been pretty well picked over.

Actually, the word "disappointed" is probably too tame for how I was feeling at that point. "Annoyed" is probably a better one. "Angry" even. That kind of insensitivity and selfishness and greed exhibited by people who would walk off with a piece of our national treasure really makes my blood boil...

And then the second disappointment, if you will, took place later that same day when we rolled into the resort town of Sedona. Now, you have to understand that we had just spent the previous *two days* traveling and sightseeing in the Navajo Nation, once called the Navajo Reservation.

It's actually a pretty large area, about the size of West Virginia, and it takes up much of the northeastern corner of Arizona and even spills over into Utah and New Mexico as well. For the most part, it's a barren and undeveloped expanse of land. And there's really not much you can do there, either, outside of subsistence farming, cattle and sheep grazing, and – of course – tourism. Consequently, the unemployment rate is nearly 50% (a staggering number), and well over 40% of the population lives below the poverty line – the median household income is a measly \$20,000 a year.

On top of that, and perhaps *because* of it, alcoholism is a real problem. In fact, alcohol cannot even be legally sold in the Navajo Nation – either to the residents or to any tourists, for that matter. At dinner one evening, in the town of Chinle, we noticed on the menu that only *non*-alcoholic beer and wine were available. Of course, it doesn't stop anyone from bringing it in from the outside, however.

So here's the thing. We're basically a middle class family. It took literally months of scrimping and saving (mostly on Jeanette's part – she deserved all the credit) for us to be able to pay for this wonderful vacation. But in our fully loaded minivan rental, and staying in comfortable, air-conditioned motels with satellite TV, and eating out each night... well, we felt pretty *rich and wealthy* compared to the everyday people we encountered who actually *lived* in the Navajo Nation.

But then, just about four or five hours later, we found ourselves pulling into the resort town of Sedona, set at the bottom of this gorgeous canyon and containing more top-of-the-line hotels and swanky spas than you can shake a stick at. It was dusk and the tourists were out eating at fancy and expensive restaurants. Or tooling around in their sports cars or great big SUV's. Or sitting outside a multitude of bars (no alcohol ban here!) with the music so pounding and so loud that we could both feel and hear it in our own vehicle – even with the windows up!

Needless to say, this huge *discrepancy* between the Navajo Nation, on the one hand, and Sedona and its wealthy residents and tourists, on the other, was pretty stark and jarring. And so, as I say, that was a little disappointing to me as well. We had gone, in other words, in a matter of hours from extreme poverty to extreme wealth. And it immediately made me feel a little uncomfortable; to be perfectly honest. This idea that some people would have such need, while, just a few short hours away, *other* people would enjoy such abundance.

More than that, suddenly, we ourselves went from feeling pretty *rich* in the Navajo Nation, to feeling like some “Okies” traveling out to California during the Great Depression when we arrived in Sedona later that same day. Or, better yet, the Beverly Hillbillies, if you remember that old TV show. In other words, I felt about as out of place in that environment in Sedona as Jed Clampett did! All we needed to have was our suitcases tied *on top* of our rental van to complete the picture!

Now, here's the thing; the point I'm trying to make, above and beyond any disappointment or uncomfotableness I was feeling. A question actually. Had *we* changed in any way, shape, or form during those four or five hours? Absolutely not. All that had changed was our location, our context. In other words, without changing a single thing about ourselves, we had gone from feeling *rich* to feeling *poor* simply by changing locales.

And, basically, what that reminded me is that *it's all a matter of perspective*. Rich and poor are *subjective* terms, in other words. They are open to constant interpretation and *reinterpretation* and revision. What's *rich* to one person may feel *poor* to another, and vice versa...

Well, remembering that "it's all a matter of perspective" is probably a good way to approach our second reading this morning. As we heard, Paul is reminding the church in Corinth about their previous pledge to take up an offering for the much poorer Christians who lived back in Jerusalem; in other words, to send some financial aid to those who were going through some tough times.

You have to understand that Corinth was sort of like the New York City of its day, a bustling cosmopolitan seaport. Not that everyone who *lived* in Corinth was well off, mind you. Just as not everyone who lives in New York City is rich either. But in comparison to many others – particularly those back in Palestine – the Corinthians *were*, by and large, pretty well off.

Now, in the first several verses of chapter eight (which were not a part of today's reading), Paul also reminds them that the churches of Macedonia – despite their own extreme *poverty* – have nevertheless *already* exhibited a wealth of generosity (apparently) in sending aid back to Jerusalem. Now, he says to the Corinthians, it's *your* turn. You excel in everything else, he reminds them, so we want you now to also excel in this generous undertaking as well.

But, again, it's a matter of perspective. No one ever *feels* rich, do they? Rather, typically the way it works is that the more you have, the more you want. Right?

For a gift, our daughter Kristyn once got me a subscription to *Money* magazine. Have you ever noticed how children typically rebel *against* their parents, and their parents' way of life and thinking? Well, what does it say about Jeanette and me that our daughter grew up to become a project manager for JP Morgan/Chase, not to mention also met her goal of becoming a Vice President by the age of 30... and then gives her father a subscription to *Money* magazine on his birthday? What exactly is she rebelling *against*? Or what is she trying to tell us?

Anyway, needless to say, when it ran out I never renewed that subscription, but in one of those issues of *Money* magazine (and I actually saved it), I noticed a small article written by a fellow named Edward Skidelsky, co-author of the book *How Much is Enough?* And among the points he was trying to make in this short article was the following observation: "Our generation tends to base desires on what *other* people have," he writes, "so our thirst for more is never fully quenched."

Exactly what I was saying just a moment ago. While we were in the Navajo Nation, and among people less well-off than we are – *by far* – I felt kind of rich, to be perfectly honest. But just a few hours later, in Sedona and among people who were financially *much* better off than I was, I suddenly felt poor. Interesting, isn't it? Nothing at all had changed, of course, except the people who I was *comparing myself to*... Again, it's all a matter of perspective.

Which is *exactly* the point that Paul tries to make next. "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ," he says, "that though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Again, it's a matter of perspective. Compare yourselves to others, especially those who are well-off, and it may not seem

possible that you can afford to be generous in your giving. But compare yourselves to *Christ* – who gave up literally *everything*, including his own life! – and it’s not such a big deal any more, says Paul. And then, he says to them, when you also compare yourselves to the people back in Jerusalem, to those who are *clearly* not as well-off as you are, it becomes much easier to see their need, and to also muster the willingness to help them out.

Paul then goes on to encourage the Corinthians to give out of their *abundance* – that is, according to what they *have*, he says, not according to what they *don’t* have. His desire, as Janice Scott points out, was for there to be “some equality between their relative *wealth* and the extreme *poverty* in Jerusalem.” There was a famine and the Christians there were suffering badly, she reminds us. But Paul points out that *everything* we have comes from God. “God has given to us abundantly,” she writes, and “we’re simply asked to give back to God with generosity of spirit.”

Someone once wrote, “Have you ever noticed how big a hundred dollars looks when you take it to church, yet how *small* it looks when you take it to the mall?” The people of Corinth in Paul’s day, just like the people in our own day, needed to be reminded that it’s all a matter of perspective. What looks like a lot in one context – like that hundred dollar bill when you’re at church or, again, our own financial situation while traveling through the relative poverty of the Navajo Nation – may look much smaller in another context – like that hundred dollar bill when you’re now at the mall instead, or when we drove into Sedona in our rental van and had to stop for all those Hummers and people crossing the street in front of us dressed in fancy, designer clothes...

Even determining and understanding abundance *itself* is a matter of perspective. Recognizing abundance while driving through Sedona was pretty easy, as you could imagine. But recognizing it out in the desert of the Navajo Nation was much more difficult. Yet there was also abundance out there, as well, we discovered.

One of the *other* things we learned during our trip was that what may look barren and forsaken to *us*, looked to the ancient Native Americans and even to their descendants today as a *wealth* of resources. They used, and still use today, all of the natural resources in those mountains and canyons. The plants and shrubs, such as they are, are used for food and medicine and a host of other applications. Again – I’m starting to sound like a broken record here – but it’s all a matter of perspective! What may look like a barren desert to *us* may look like a landscape *filled* with potential to those who’ve lived and worked that land for thousands of years.

Here’s another example. Joseph Ives was a colonel in the Confederate Army, who served as an aide to Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy. But he is perhaps *best* remembered, however, for his exploration of the Colorado River just before the outbreak of the Civil War. In the winter of 1857-58, as a 1st Lieutenant, Ives was commissioned to lead an expedition to the Colorado River to determine whether it was navigable as a supply route to the several outposts in that region.

He shipped a disassembled 54-foot iron-hulled steamboat up the Gulf of California to the mouth of the Colorado. Reassembling the steamboat, the expedition then steamed up the Colorado to the rapids at Black Canyon, near present-day Las Vegas. They then proceeded overland to explore the floor of the Grand Canyon and other parts of Northern Arizona and Southern Utah.

Ives then made this foolish assessment in his journal:

It (referring to the Grand Canyon) looks like the Gates of Hell. The region... is, of course, altogether valueless. Ours has been the first and will undoubtedly be the last, party of whites to visit the locality. It seems intended by nature that the Colorado River, along the greater portion of its lonely and majestic way, shall be forever unvisited and undisturbed.”

How wrong he proved, ultimately, to be... It's all a matter of perspective.

So here's the point. Since it's a matter of perspective, the perspective Paul wants the Corinthians to have, and ultimately us as well, is that our God is a God of abundance, and that this God showers us with enough blessings that each of us – despite whatever we might initially think – can afford to share that abundance with others. No one is too poor, therefore, to give. And *everyone* has experienced a degree of abundance from which generosity can then flow.

David Tiede, Professor Emeritus at Luther Seminary, has called this notion “Apostolic Economics.” Apostolic Economics, he writes, “are grounded in scriptural convictions about wealth: ‘the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it’ (Psalm 24:1). “Humans,” he says, “are empowered as managers of the abundance of God’s earth.”

And it was Frederick Buechner who once wrote, “The world says, the more you take, the more you have. *Christ* says, the more you *give*, the more you *are*.”

Years ago, there was a television show called “Candid Camera” in which a hidden camera caught ordinary, unsuspecting people – including, and especially, children – in interesting, sometimes humorous, situations. On one episode about generosity, children were placed in a room by themselves with a plate containing two cookies. One of the cookies, however, was much larger than the other one. An adult then came into the room and, before stepping back out, told the child that he or she could pick either one of the cookies to eat. Naturally, they all selected the *largest* cookie.

The adult then returned. One young boy was challenged as to why he took the biggest cookie. Alan Funt, the show’s host, said to the boy, “All you left me to eat was the little cookie. *I* would have eaten the little

cookie and given *you* the biggest one.” And, without a blink, the little boy responded, “Then you got the one you wanted, didn’t you?”

Our human tendency, of course, is usually to want and *to take* the largest portions for ourselves, often without regard for those less fortunate. But there’s another way of thinking and acting, says Paul. It’s called sharing; sharing what we have with those who have much less.

Interestingly enough, as Lynn Malone once pointed out, ironically even, “The poor are much greater givers than the rich... According to *U.S. News and World Report*,” she says, “the poorest households in America gave 5.5% of their income to charity (this was back in 2004). While “the wealthiest households gave only 2.9%.” (And I bet that those percentages haven’t changed very much over the past 14 years either.) Also “according to the magazine *Confident Living*, nearly half of all contributions to charity come from households with less than \$30,000 annual income.”

It’s as true in our own day, as it was in Paul’s day, as evidenced by the generosity of the Macedonians. As Paul wrote, “...for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”

In the same vein, the late Heiko Oberman, who once taught Reformation History at the University of Arizona, wrote about visiting with a group of Christian leaders in Nanjing, China. One Sunday they worshiped at a church where an older Chinese woman, now living in Los Angeles, was their special guest. This particular church, across the river from Nanjing, was a poor church composed of farmers. The 900 people in attendance that morning wanted to hear a word from their sister from the United States, so Mrs. Chang brought greetings from her congregation in Los Angeles.

She told them how the Lord had added many to their church, and how they were currently raising money to build a large new addition. Then, after a word of blessing for this Chinese church, she took her seat. But, at the close of the service, Mrs. Chang was once again called back to the front. The pastor said her words had thrilled their hearts. So they wanted her to have the *entire* offering that morning to help with the new building in Los Angeles – about \$140.00.

As Dr. Oberman observed, “When their overflowing joy welled up in generosity, they gave beyond their ability.” As he also commented, the American church almost certainly didn’t need their money.

But that was beside the point, wasn’t it? What mattered at that moment was the joy of giving, and the ability to see abundance and to be generous, even in the most modest of circumstances.

I am happy to say, proud even, that Hope is and continues to be a generous congregation. Our Mission Support for the work of the larger church is near the top of all congregations in the entire New Jersey Synod. In addition, we support many local ministries as well, and not just with money but also with our time and talent and energies.

But here’s the thing. Clearly not all of us are rich or wealthy. However, that’s not the point, that’s not really the issue, is it? What Paul is reminding us here this morning is that we can *all* be generous with the abundance that God has given individually to each of us.

It worked in Paul’s day. And it will work in ours as well.

It’s *all* a matter of perspective.

Amen.

