

Sandra Brown  
*Excellent*  
Proverbs 3:5-10 and 2 Cor. 8:7-15  
November 5, 2017

*Before scripture reading:*

Our second scripture reading this morning comes from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, verses 7-14. The Christians in Jerusalem are suffering from extreme poverty, and Paul has been working to collect a financial gift from the other churches to send to the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul describes how the churches in the region of Macedonia, the area north of Corinth, gave generously towards this collection, even though they themselves were experiencing poverty. He says, "They voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints." The church at Corinth has apparently expressed an interest in contributing to the gift, and Paul is sending his friend Titus to help Corinth make good on their pledge. Hear the word of the Lord as Paul continues:

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of YOUR love against the earnestness of others. 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. And in this matter, I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When I say the word, “Excellent,” what comes to your mind? Maybe you picture your favorite athlete making a magnificent play . . . or a world-class musician playing a challenging piece of music. Maybe a student who shines at their studies, a Van Gogh painting, a Mercedes-Benz.

Here’s another question: at what do you excel? I asked myself this question, and after much reflection I decided my areas of excellence include spelling, typing, deep-cleaning a bathroom, decorating Christmas trees, playing charades, and homemade macaroni and cheese. Back in the day, I had moments of excellence as a musician, when I’d spend hours and hours on a piece and it would finally come together in the polished way my teacher wanted it to. Today, I strive for excellence in ministry, particularly in the areas of writing, listening, leadership, and building others up.

Excellence blesses in all directions. Pat Yancey had the satisfaction of creating excellence when he baked bread for communion today, and we who eat it will also be blessed. Whether it’s in the kitchen or the classroom, the studio or the concert hall, the operating room, the beauty salon, the cafeteria, or the office, excellence blesses everyone it touches.

There’s this really powerful image of excellence that’s been in my mind all week, and I’d like to share it with you. Last Sunday, we commemorated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. I arrived at church early in the morning and there was Larry Wischropp, decked out in his kilt and full Scottish regalia, along with Kay Wischropp, in a splendid red plaid skirt.

(8:30) I came to here to the chapel, where Bill Baldry was already handing out bulletins without being asked, with his usual quiet grace. Even though we told you there wouldn’t be any heat in the building, you bundled up and came anyway, and sat there smiling, with your coats on. The little step out here was full of children, so full that I wonder if it isn’t time to remove this

wooden balustrade up here so that Ryan won't have to sit on Evan's lap. Without a choir to lead us, we sang with gusto, we didn't just tolerate but RELISHED the lively presence of children in our midst—I wish all you parents could see the delight in the faces of everybody else when your kids come in the room. We greeted one another with real affection—I particularly love the way the children are catching on to the passing of the peace—and the best part is, if we had had a visitor, there's no question that you would have warmly greeted and included that person just as warmly as you greet one another.

(10:30) When I came into the sanctuary for the 10:30 service, it was painfully cold, even for those of us lucky enough to wear robes, but there you all were, just smiling away with your coats on. We had a wealth of special music to open the service, with both a bagpiper and our bell choir giving us their very best. I stood up for the opening hymn and saw several women carrying in the big plastic tub full of prayer shawls—they'd all had the same idea at the same time--and they went up and down the aisles to offer them to those of you who were particularly chilly. When we greeted each other during the passing of the peace, several of you immediately made a beeline to the Fosters and to Don Patterson and gave them hugs because they had lost loved ones over the weekend, and somehow you knew, even though I forgot to announce it. Our musicians sent chills down our spines with their rendition of "A Mighty Fortress"—we have good music every Sunday, but there was something special about last Sunday. The grandeur of that piece was tangible, and it felt like it floated out into the air and lingered there for the rest of the morning. When I got up to preach, I looked out and there were people of all ages draped in prayer shawls—it was like the Holy Spirit in the form of a rainbow of yarn had settled over you--and there were adults pulling children closer to them to keep them warm, and faces radiant from all the good music. I left church on Sunday thinking, "My church was excellent today."

I love the way Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to be generous. He says, “You are excellent in so many things—be excellent in your giving as well.” Kind of like telling someone, you know, you are so good at dusting and vacuuming and laundry—be excellent in taking out the trash, too—because it is ridiculous to have a clean house if it’s going to smell bad. It only makes sense that a church with our beautiful music and kindhearted people and gorgeous windows should also have excellent givers, right?

But what does it mean, exactly, to excel at generosity? As I was working on this sermon yesterday, I received word that every single item that we registered for at Bed Bath and Beyond to stock our kitchen had been purchased. Every single thing! That is excellent! We are a church that has no debt—that is also excellent! But is that all?

Paul is very clear about what excelling in generosity does NOT mean. It does not mean giving of your resources until it hurts, whether it’s money, talent, or time, and he’s very clear about that. He says, “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you.” Nobody should feel that they have to give to the point where they don’t have enough money or time to take care of themselves, which is probably a good reminder for those of us who are parents and/or caregivers and/or church committee members who feel stuck with too much to do too many times and/or the family member who is always bailing out everybody else.

What DOES it mean to excel at generosity? Proverbs says “Honor the Lord with your substance, and with the first fruits of your harvest, and then your barns will be full and your vats will be overflowing.” We have to read verses like this with care, because they have sometimes been used in service of the prosperity gospel, which is what guys like Joel Osteen like to preach. That’s the belief that God always rewards faith and giving with prosperity, which is a dangerous, dark, and slippery slope. BUT—it seems there is something to be said for giving to God FIRST.

When that is the first check we write each month, or the first planned expenditure we make, it puts us in right relation to God, who already gave us everything we have anyway. Our giving is always and only a giving BACK. Putting our giving to God FIRST, rather than waiting to see what's left over at the end of the week or month or year, is a hallmark of excellence in giving.

Another hallmark of excellence is to do what we say we will do. Paul says to the Corinthians, "Finish what you said you wanted to do." If we say we're going to give to something, we should probably follow through and do so. To go a little deeper with this . . . does our giving match what we say is important to us? As Billy Graham said, "Give me five minutes with a person's checkbook, and I will tell you where their heart is," although we'd probably have to use something besides a checkbook in these days of online banking. If all of our spending and saving and giving were plastered on a billboard for all the world to see, would we take pride in what it said about our priorities?

A third hallmark of excellence has to do with what Paul says at the end of today's reading. He's talking about a fair balance between the abundance of some believers and the poverty of others, and he quotes Exodus 16:18: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." Paul is remembering manna, the food that God provided for the Israelites when they were wandering in the wilderness.

There is a special privilege and responsibility given to those of us who are blessed with much. That privilege and responsibility is to look out for those who have too little, and to share with them. What is much? Probably a lot less than what many if not most of us already have. To excel in generosity is to take the time to recognize our deep connection to our fellow human beings, to pay attention and watch closely for those who might be in need, especially our fellow Christians, be they here at First Presbyterian Church, where there is more economic diversity

than might first meet the eye, or recovering from Hurricane Harvey in Houston, or trying to get clean water for their village in Honduras, etc. And when we give, to remember that we are not giving to a poor unfortunate soul, but to a brother or a sister who is one of us. I'm grateful that last year, we as a congregation increased our mission and outreach giving over and above what we gave the previous year, and we look forward to doing the same in 2018, slowly growing towards excellence.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, excellent giving is giving not from a sense of obligation, guilt, or pride, but out of gratitude for what Christ has given to us—Christ did not just honor God with his substance, he gave the entire substance of who he was, for our sakes.

Sometime later this week, you should receive a pledge card in the mail—they'll also be available in the church office for anyone who wants one—and as each of us prayerfully considers our giving for 2018, what amount represents excellence in generosity for you this coming year? This church encourages the biblical standard of tithing, which is giving to God ten percent of whatever you take in through your earnings, investments, income, etc.

Meanwhile, for those of you who already tithe, “excellence” might be continuing to give ten percent, or even more, if you are someone who is exceptionally blessed. Excellence for someone else might be an increase of half a percent of your income over and above what you gave last year as you gradually work towards a full ten percent. Excellence for another person might be making a pledge for the very first time, pledging 2 or 3 or 6% of income and gradually working towards a tithe in years to come. As Paul stresses, it's not about dollar amount—it is always about giving according to what we have, and not what we don't have. Thanks be to God!