

June 27, 2021
“A Fair Balance”
Pastor Norman Fowler

Testing the genuineness of their love, I don't know about you, but if somebody said to me I want to test the genuineness of your love, I'd be a little taken aback. It's not something I would readily want to jump into. In fact, if somebody used that phrase to ask me to do something, I might be a little resistant, simply because they are using that sort of language. And yet, we see Paul in this passage use that very same kind of language.

Now we might take a step back and think about the context in which he is doing that. You see, he is trying to get the Corinthians to get back to the place where they were a year before, when they were so excited about sending some money, some resources, to Jerusalem to help the Jerusalem churches. And know, he's gone on and used them (the Corinthians) as an example, for the Macedonians. And, the Macedonians have given generously, but in the meantime the Corinthians have become reluctant, and so he's back, trying to encourage them once again to give of their resources to help the Jerusalem church. It is in that process, that he's saying it's a test of the genuineness of your love if you'll share in the needs of the people in Jerusalem.

I find the phrase, “testing the genuineness of your love” to be really strong language. I think if I used that language in a stewardship drive you might be a little taken aback. But here is Paul, inviting the Corinthians to think about how they act as a test of the genuineness of their love. He doesn't stop there, he suggests this is in the context of a greater story, of Christ himself who was willing to give all he had to become human, giving it all up, to come and be among us. He became poor so that we might become rich. Feels to me like Paul's not pulling any punches here, not pulling any stops. And as much as I struggle with somebody coming at me like that, there is, in what he is saying, a real challenge. If I get over my defensiveness, and think about the idea that as I live my life there are many times when the genuineness of my love is tested.

It's interesting to me that as he does this, he does take a step back and he wants to clarify how this grace toward one another works. He is not suggesting that this is one of those instances where we hear Jesus inviting us to the cross, to sacrifice all of who we are. He recognizes that most of the time in our lives what we are doing is giving what we can give, out of what we have already. At one point he says I am not expecting you to give what you don't have. So he is inviting them to give out of their abundance, out of what they have. He calls it a giving of fair balance. A sharing that I am thinking of as the grace of fair balance, a giving of grace.

When Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself it feels to me like what he's saying is, this is a grace and a love of fair balance. You don't have to degrade your own life, nor should anybody have to be degraded so that others have it all. He goes on, in fact, to suggest that what it really is, is that one does not have too much, and the other does not have too little. And he is inviting them to see this across community lines, across ethnic lines, because he's asking these gentiles who are in Corinth to help these Jewish Christians who are in Jerusalem. He's inviting them to see the fair balance, not only something that is local, but something that crosses those international boundaries.

Now he is arguing for a specific need at this point, but it seems that he is using a general theme of what he sees as Christian faith. One of the clues I have to see that they, the early Christians, saw it that way. You may have heard this before, but the emperor Julian observed how “the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of the dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyles, has done the most to advance their cause.”

He was not a fan of Christians, so the second statement is describing that what Christians were doing was positive but to his chagrin. “What is disgraceful, when no Jew is a beggar and those impious Galileans (the name given by Julian to the Christians) support the poor, our poor in addition to theirs.” So when Paul is making or using this standard of the grace of fair balance he’s not saying its just about one little group, it’s a way of life for Christians, whoever they are, engaging the world around them.

It is as we hear this passage in Corinthians, we recognize something that often comes out in Paul, it is an invitation to self-assessment. And, to see it as an important and regular spiritual exercise to see where we have abundance and how we might share it. How we have grace and how we might share it.

In some ways this double story that we hear in the Gospel, is another example of the grace of fair balance. For here, Jesus is teaching along the shore and this important man, the leader of the Synagogue, somebody that is important enough that he actually gets named in scripture, comes, and needs his help. He actually falls down on his knees and recognizes the value or the importance of who Jesus is. And as we might expect Jesus does get up and go with him. It’s what we would expect, that when somebody who is important comes needing help, one would go if they can give the help. And so, Jesus and his group of many people begin to follow. There is a lot of commotion because they need to hurry to take care of this young girl.

And then, in that commotion, we see a woman sidle up behind Jesus. A woman who probably shouldn’t have been there in the first place because she had no status, she was, in fact, considered impure. She shouldn’t have been with a group because touching another would have caused some of that impurity to have been imputed to the other, that was their understanding. She had that flow of blood, she was impure, she could impute that sin to someone else. Not only should she not have been in that group, she should not have touched Jesus. Impure people were not supposed to touch the pure people. I am not sure what the actual penalty was, but we see that it could have been serious. She hoped, in the commotion, to touch the fringe of his cloak and that everybody would move on, and she would be healed.

Well the healing part happened, she was indeed healed, healed of her biological ailment through that moment. But she was not able to do it anonymously. In fact, when Jesus asked, “Who touched me?”. The disciples, of course, were going why in the world are you asking that?, don’t you know we are in a hurry?, we are following an important man we have to get there. Why are you worried about somebody touching you right now?

But he turned, he stopped, he knew somebody had been healed. In part, he wanted to finish the healing,. The woman recognized that Jesus knew, and so she did the right thing. She made her honest confession of what she had done. In fear and trembling because she had crossed several barriers and boundaries she was not supposed have crossed. She was not someone who had value in society she was

somebody who was vulnerable and had been pressed aside. Jesus looks at her and says, "daughter", THAT WORD. Not, "you woman", not what she expected, "what have you done!?" Daughter. In saying that he has acknowledged that she is one of the family, part of the family of God.

See, that's the continuation of the healing that he's doing. Its not just the biological healing, it's the healing of her life. Where she fit, where she belonged, to let her know she was valued, she was a daughter. He also wanted to let her know that it was her faith that had healed her, through him. Not, touching his cloak alone, but her faith enabled the healing, and now she was restored.

I wonder, as the people who stood around saw this, if they caught what was going on. Or whether they were just frustrated that he wasn't hurrying to help the important person. Indeed their frustration and sadness would have increased when the people came and said the young girl has died. Why bother the teacher anymore? Of course Jesus finishes what he started out to do. And in doing so shows the fair balance of Gods grace, both for the woman who had no standing, she had spent all her money, she had no male in her life, in that society, to speak for her, she was a daughter that had no father to come speak for her. Jesus takes care of both daughters, because both, in the end, are God's daughters. Children of God.

He shows the fair balance of God's grace, in another way. Overcoming the barriers and showing God's Grace. How do we take what we see in Paul and what we see in what Jesus has done and integrate it into what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus? Well, we have to recognize, that in both cases we see that grace is meant for all people. And how easy it is for us to think grace is only for some, and not for all. The passages ask us to test the genuineness of our love, they become a way that leads us to ask how our social and cultural values engage us with what God's about, or what separates us from what God is about and the way of Jesus. Where we might have too much, and how we might share what we have, so that others don't have too little.

Now often times we can think about this in sharing a particular instance like Paul is sharing what the Corinthians did, to give an offering to help with Jerusalem. And that is a perfectly good way of doing that, it's a way of sharing what we have. In some ways, I see what Jesus does is even more challenging, because what Jesus is saying is, it's not only about sharing our wealth, but it may be about sharing our privilege.

Jesus is privileged, he is going to the leaders' house to do the healing there, to be with the privileged people, and he stops and deals with the underprivileged, the one that has too little. And he invites us to think about how we are privileged and who is not. Who has to go out and work in this heat? It's dangerous. I know I don't have to; I'm privileged in that way. How do we extend our privilege? How do we take what is said here and enable, or allow it, to be what invites us to assess our own lives, to see how Jesus has made us rich in so many ways, but particularly in the grace of God? And, how too often we make that grace God has given us equvalate to our own privilege, our own power, our own status; rather than allowing that grace to help us see everyone as the children of God. How do we think about our own lives in this way? How do we think about our life together as a church? How do we think about it as a nation?

Paul comes at this idea of a fair balance, through sharing and showing grace with this offering to the community in Jerusalem. Gentiles supporting Jews, across the boundaries, in a specific way. We have multiple specific ways we can do that; we can

share our abundance. Jesus shows us another way, that when the opportunity arises, we can share our privilege with those whose privileges are diminished or denied. Here we see it with a woman who is poor, sick, and rejected. Where are the poor, the sick, and the rejected in our lives? Jesus shows the fair balance of grace across the boundaries of status, power, and privilege defining this impure daughter and woman in this family, as a faithful one, worthy of receiving care.

We are asked to test the genuineness of our love. How do we share the grace we have received across boundaries and make that sharing a way of life, when confronted by specific needs, systemic struggles, specific opportunities, as they arise? Again, I struggle with that phrase that Paul has given us, testing the genuineness of our love, and thankful that it works out in a fair balance of grace, and that we are invited to be those who live out the fair balance of grace. Amen.