GENERATIONS OF GENEROSITY
October 30, 2016 – All Saint’s Sunday
2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

We are here today, worshipping and praising God in this beautiful sanctuary, in our church home, because back in 1884, thirteen people came together to form a Presbyterian congregation in Bon Air. We are here as the heirs to their faith and commitment and generosity. Although they had the means to come across the James River and take a break from the noise and grime of the city, they were living in a time of dramatic change. They were working to heal their wounds and rebuild their lives after a war that probably had taken some of their own and had destroyed the infrastructure of their society. The War Between the States had officially ended with the devastation of Richmond just nineteen years prior to the charter of this church. The Reconstruction Era had ended just seven years prior. To put that in perspective, consider what you were doing in 1997, or even 2009. It wasn’t that long ago.

In those challenging times, our forebears started this church as an act of hope for the future; an act of faith that God had brought them save thus far and would provide for them in the years to come. They were setting a foundation on which to stand in uncertain times for generations to come. My friends, these are the saints of our church family and they leave us quite a legacy. They worshipped together, had weekly prayer meetings, and taught their children. Our pastors and members were respected community leaders. They left us a legacy of community outreach and the seeds of justice ministry as they supported the Bethany Home for Friendless Children. From our very beginning, we have had a strong connection with Union Seminary and various denominational agencies based in Richmond as we provided financial support as well as leaders, students, and faculty.

As we consider our history and the generations who went before us, we can be inspired by their courage, determination, and generosity. For now the mantle has been passed on to us. We are part of their story. What we do matters. You see, there is an "intergenerational mystery" in the church. How we live our lives determines the significance of the faith of those who went before us. The impact of their commitment and generosity is determined by how we continue in their stead.

At some future All Saints celebration, our names will be read, a bell will be rung and a candle will be lit. One day, others will be remembering us. The question is, how will we remembered? Will we be remembered as those who made an impact on future generations, who contributed to the building of the kingdom of God? Will we be remembered as saints who used our talents to make a difference in people’s lives, passing on the legacy of community outreach and social justice? Will we be remembered as those who used our treasures to build on the foundation of this church to continue the spread the gospel? My friends, we have the opportunity and the charge to give of our time and talents and treasure to build up this church and its witness to future generations. It’s up to us. We are the authors of the current chapter in the continuing story of Bon Air Presbyterian Church. How will we express our gratitude for the blessings we have received and pass it on to those who will follow us?

As Paul writes to the Corinthians, he is involved in collecting money for the needy Christians in Jerusalem. In his letter, Paul establishes the Christians in Macedonia as a model for Christian living and giving. You see, Macedonia was an economically depressed area. The Christians there were very poor; as poor as the Christians in Jerusalem for whom the offering was being taken. Yet when Paul announces the need of the suffering Christians in Jerusalem, the Macedonians responded in a very dramatic way. They gave generously from generous hearts. Paul wrote in verse 3, “…they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means.” But the most surprising word comes in verse 4, “begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” Can you imagine a church made up of people like the Macedonians who begged for the favor of contributing to the mission of the church? As radical
as it sounds, that’s the kind of church God wants here, a congregation with extravagantly generous hearts. But that isn’t all.

The Macedonians not only gave generously, they gave sacrificially. As we look back to the second verse of today’s scripture reading, there are some strange words pairings, “…for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity. These Christians had suffered persecution for their faith and they were poverty-stricken. Yet, look at what happened: The severe affliction resulted in an abundance of joy; and their poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity. They gave sacrificially.

This is so counter-cultural to us that we may find it hard to accept as a serious model for Christian generosity. In the prophetic words of Wendell Berry, “(We) seem to be living now with the single expectation that there should and always will be more of everything…. This insatiable desire for more is the result of an overwhelming sense of incompleteness, which is the result of the insatiable desire for more.” Isn’t that a troubling image? Certainly, the direct opposite to the Macedonians. We are portrayed as seeking to fill our emptiness with more and more. But, with this mind-set, we are never satisfied. So, where does our faith fit into all of this? Where is God in the midst of our insecurities? My friends, we have a God of extravagant generosity who provides more than enough to fill our emptiness when people share what they have been given.

According to Paul, the Macedonians gave generously and sacrificially because they had first given themselves to the Lord. You see, holding back in our giving; refusing to take the leap of faith and do what the Lord commands us to do; to sacrificially give of ourselves, our time, talent, and treasure, is a symptom of trusting in our own provision rather than trusting God. And so, my friends, when we are less than generous with what God has provided, we might very well question our Christian commitment.

How can we dare to sacrificially give of ourselves? Because we know God made the ultimate sacrifice for us and invites us to follow. We give, not because the economy is good, but because God is good. We do not give because we can “afford it”; we give because we cannot afford not to give. Challenging times may be the best time to give generously, for it affirms God’s extravagant love and provision for us.

So, if you want your life to be more fulfilling, give your life away for a cause greater than yourself. Do something that does not benefit you, but benefits generations to come. Give your money away to support ministries which make a difference. Don’t wait until you feel like it. Don’t wait until you catch up with life and have extra time and energy to spare. Don’t wait until all your money problems are solved. Take the faith plunge and live out the legacy we have received from generous generations that set the cornerstone of life and faith and this church on Christ Jesus.

Today, we remember and give thanks for the saints who have gone before us. Let us honor them by honoring our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and continuing to build his church. Let us step out in faith, confident that our efforts will not be in vain because the next generation will continue to build on what we have done. Our faith and our humble actions make a difference in ways we may not see or fully understand. However, those who have gone before us have given us a church with great potential and we build on that potential to produce meaningful and faithful ministries. May that assurance and hope, inspire us and empower us in such a way that one day when our name is lifted up, people will remember us and give thanks for our generation of faith, courage, hope, and generosity.