

Sermon Title: Excelling in ...

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Theme: We are made in the image of The Divine One (*Ha Gadol*) - Excelling in Generosity, Love, Faith, Eagerness, Grace

“As you excel [*perisseuó* – go beyond expected measure] in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, in utmost [*pas* -all] eagerness (7) [*spoudé* – intense earnestness, speedy diligence] ... 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 (10) . . . If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have (12).”

In the Ontological proof for the existence of God, the great medieval theologian, Anselm, defines God as “that than which none greater can be conceived.” It is based on the ancient Hebrew description of God, *הגדל* – *ha gadol*,” or the Great One, or the One who excels. The One who excels in love, in understanding, in patience, in kindness, in compassion, in forgiveness, in grace, to name just a few of the categories. In the larger context, John defines God as Love (1 John 4:8), and Paul defines the “more excellent way as the way of love (1 Cor. 12:31).” In some scholarly circles, we are told that God has no need of us, no need of anything or anyone. These scholars tell us that it is the creature who has needs, not the creator. And yet, I find this a hard message to swallow. Consider a different biblical perspective on this matter: “No one can come to [Jesus] unless the Father draws (literally drags) her or him (Jn. 6:44),” or “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Lk. 19:10),” or “[The Good Shepherd] will search for the sheep and seek them out (Ez. 34:11-12),” or “God so loved the world [to] give his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish (Jn 3:16),” or “We love because God first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19).” Does this sound like a creator that has no need of us? Does this NOT sound like a creator who pursues us because of the love he has for us, even before we return that love? Yes, in my humble opinion, God excels in loving us and pursuing us. In the pursuing, God does not wait for us but precedes us. And so, in describing the more excellent way of love, Paul encourages us to “earnestly pursue love/eagerly desire the greater gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:31;14:1).

We can find a typical greeting from the ancient world in the first part of the Letter of Jude: “May mercy, peace and love be multiplied to you.” (v2). [cf. 2 Peter 1:2] In other words, “to the fullest measure, to maximum capacity.” May you reach your fullest potential for peace, mercy and love. Another ancient greeting is

“*Chairó*,” meaning “Thrive, Be Well!” or “Rejoice, God Speed Joy to you!” Literally, “may no one steal your joy from you!” It is a primitive Greek verb underlying the word for “Grace” (*Charis* - χάρις), but we are perhaps more familiar with the “Chi Rho” as the symbol in the Stone-Campbell tradition for our middle school youth program, a symbol that says “May you never lose you childhood joy!” or “May you grow into a fullness of joy and grace!”

One of Alexander Campbell’s favorite books of the Bible was the Letter to the Hebrews, from which he took much inspiration. We find in the greeting of this letter: “[The Son] reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power... The name of Jesus has become more surpassingly excellent (*diaphoros*) than the names of the angels.” (Heb. 1:3-4) Theologically, we know that God is not capricious, but reliable and dependable. God is not random with God’s affections; in its essence, God’s love is steadfast! We can depend on that love being excellent in all its characteristics. We can extrapolate what God will do in the future based on the past; we can interpolate what is in God’s heart from who God is and what God has done. Theologically speaking, surely, we can say, God does not excel in harm, hatred, punishment, pain, tribulation, affliction, oppression, inequity, etc. even though we have known some of these in our lifetimes, as also those who lived in biblical times. Many have carried a cross for Jesus; but he was not born to suffer, and neither are we; the purpose of his life, and ours, is to bring a fullness, an excellence, of joy, love, beauty and grace to humankind.

In Proverbs 31:29, in a veiled reference to Wisdom, the perfect woman is described as “excellent,” or “noble,” (*alah*: to go up, ascend, climb) “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Verses 10-31 are an acrostic poem, written with beauty and excellence, each successive verse starting with the next character of the Hebrew alphabet in order, written as a beautiful tribute to the ideal woman, to women and their wisdom. “She opens her arms to the poor and reaches out to the needy ... strength and honor are her clothing and she can laugh at the days to come.”

The Psalmist writes:

“O LORD, Sovereign, how excellent (*adder*) is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” (Ps. 8:1,9) The word translated as “excellent” is also translated as “majestic,” “wonderful,” “glorious,” and “honorable.”

In 2 Peter 1:17, the writer describes God as the “Majestic Glory,” translating the

Greek word *megaloprepés* , “befitting a great one,” “or “great by comparison,” attractive, beautiful, magnificent, splendid, sublime, awesome.” This term references the mountaintop experience of Peter, James and John with Jesus (Mt 17, Mk 9, Lk 9) sometimes referred to as the Transfiguration, where they encounter this overshadowing cloud, bright and dazzling, blinding. This translates into the term Majestic Glory. I prefer to call it the *shekinah* experience.

And then, also in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (4:8), we are encouraged to think of the things that are excellent: “whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, beautiful, whatever is of good repute, whatever is excellent (areté: - moral goodness and virtue) and worthy of praise.” As some of you may remember in Greek philosophy, areté describes one’s best self, an ideal self, to which each person should aspire to be, through speaking and doing good, thinking honestly,

Yes, God excels in every moral category we might name, in every measurement we might take, and in today’s scripture, God excels in eagerness to pursue us. This scripture **reverses** the reference ON TO us: If God excels in eagerness, among the many other categories for excellence, how much more should we do the same? Should we not also excel in eagerness? Should we not excel in eagerness of faith, speech, prayer, study, giving? In Today’s scripture, Paul exhorts us to excel in eagerness, and not just in eagerness alone, but in “all” eagerness. In the context of the Corinthian Church, he exhorts the members of the church to excel in being eager to give, to share their resources with others. In looking to others first, before we look to ourselves, we are in tune with God’s Spirit, the Spirit of Eagerness, to discern what is needed.

What does it mean to have excellence in eagerness, in utmost or all eagerness? Let’s examine this description for a moment. Let’s take stewardship as an example of excellence in eagerness so we can understand this Spirit of Eagerness better. In today’s scripture, Paul says that it is NOT about how much we have to give—its about how eager we are to give it. It’s about our speedy diligence, our earnest desire, to respond. It is about how quickly we jump to the task? It is about our measure of hesitancy, a measurement forward or backward, as the case may be. When the Lord asks: “who will go for me?” Our measure of hesitancy is based on how quickly we say:

“Here I am! Send me!”

I lift up two biblical stories for your consideration this morning: Mark’s story of the widow’s mite and a story in Acts concerning Ananias and Sapphira.

In the Mark's story of the widow's mite (Mk. 12:41-44), Jesus sat down one day, opposite to the Temple treasury, to silently observe how people were giving to the treasury. He was not sitting there to comment, but to observe without intervention. Later, he gives a report to his disciples. Here is what he noticed and told his disciples afterward: many were putting in large sums of money, but at one point, a poor widow came in and put down two small coins. Together, these two coins (*lepta*) were worth all of six minutes of an average daily wage. Jesus points this out to his disciples: "this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing ... these others have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty, has put in everything she had to live on today." In understanding the point of this story, we should realize that this woman is alone, without a husband, in a society that makes it difficult for her to provide for herself, in a society where others are called out, biblically speaking, to specifically help her rather than the other way around (Is. 1:17; James 1:17). She is an emblem of those who have been ravaged by the silent and hidden sin of her times, the unjust economic order which devalues her work and keeps her in poverty. In this regard, we should also note that she comes to the giving altar without hesitancy. This woman excels in eagerness with the daily means available to her. It is not that the other gifts are not wanted, but that her gift is special. Her gift is especially welcome precisely because it is eager, precisely because it is given without hesitancy from someone who we would expect to have every right to consider giving less, or nothing at all. She is totally dedicated to the cause. She totally believes in that cause which is beyond her own living! A cause that helps others like herself to survive. She gives back from what she actually has, not from what she imagines she might have. She matches the intensity of her eagerness with the reality of her means. She goes way beyond what is expected of her.

What the First Testament calls a "freewill offering" is one brought forward "by those whose hearts made them willing," by those with "a willing spirit and a stirred heart." (Ex. 35:21, 29). "Give generously without a grudging spirit," says Deuteronomy 15:10. Who knows? Perhaps this is the offering message that the widow responds to in this parable from Jesus.

Might we contrast this story of the widow's mite with the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). In the earliest days of the growing church, the members testified to the resurrection of the Lord, testified to the power of Easter in their living, by being of "one heart and soul," by sharing their resources together so that no one had needs that were not met. They held everything in common, without private ownership. If any owned houses or lands, they sold these and brought them

into the community and laid the proceeds at the apostle's feet so that these funds could be distributed as anyone had need. Barnabas was such a one, his name meaning "son of encouragement." Or, we might say "son of eagerness," or "son of earnestness," or "son of enthusiasm."

Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, were also a part of this community of early Christians in the church. They sold a field, a piece of land, that they owned and brought the proceeds of that sale to the community, in the same fashion as Barnabas did. However, Ananias and Sapphira decided to hold back part of the proceeds of the sale for themselves, thinking of what they might need in the future to survive. With Sapphira's consent, Ananias only laid a part of the proceeds at the apostle's feet. Think about his for a moment. They were hesitant to act quickly. They wanted a buffer between themselves and the others. They thought of themselves first, then the others. It is a perfectly natural way to think. From our perspective, it is important to take care of yourself first, to love yourself first, so that you may develop the ability to share with others. "Love your neighbor as yourself," (Mk 12:31) means loving yourself first, then your neighbor. In an airline flight emergency, it's like putting on your oxygen mask first, then your child's oxygen mask, second. And yet, IS it really as simple as this? Maybe not. For Moses, it was a matter of faith that the people not hoard the manna, the bread from heaven, saving some out for tomorrow's need. It's a matter of excelling in faith in the very moment of need. Let's continue the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

It would not have been such a large problem for Peter, as he watched what they were doing and why they were doing it, had they not been dishonest with the community. If each had silently returned to his or her seat, with head bowed in humility, Peter might have been more understanding. If each had not publicly declared that they had given all their proceeds from the sale, Peter might have let it go. Peter was disappointed, yes, but might not have read their hesitancy in such a negative way, had not they lied about their giving before the entire community.

"They put the Spirit of the Lord to the test," Peter announced, "by not being honest." Unlike the poor widow, they did less than what was expected of them. They did not excel in eagerness, as had the others in the community, like Barnabas. It was a grave moment, an unsettling moment, for the entire community. It was a matter of faith. More than this, it was a crisis of faith. Their legacy is one of deterrence in the story of this ancient congregation; just one small example of what we call biblical "texts of terror," where the reader is required to tiptoe around the dead bodies in the story to find the lesson and the meaning. It is an example of where we preachers try to temper or balance the hermeneutics of suspicion with

those of respect, while taking the scripture seriously, if not literally. And this story of Ananias and Saphira, in all its apparent terror, is a sure call find what is missing from the text, not to be prescriptive or proscriptive, and not to condemn, but to encourage excellence in readiness and eagerness, to achieve one's true potential in Christ Jesus, measured not in honors or certificates of achievement, but in the fullness of love.

John F. Kennedy once said: "success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan." [John F. Kennedy quoted Count Galeazzo Ciano (1903-44). 1942]. Almost no one wants to take credit for failure, but almost everyone wants to claim success. We want to err on the side of success. By nature, we lean toward persuasion, toward being agreeable rather than disagreeable. Dale Carnegie wrote a book in 1936 entitled "How to win friends and influence people." In it, he lists several principles for being successful:

"Arouse in the other an eager want. Give the other a reputation to live up to. Begin with praise and honest appreciation. Remember the other's name, the sweetest sound in any language. Encourage and ask questions. Be lavish in your praise. Appeal to the nobler motives."

"Where seldom is heard a discouraging word," as we say about our "home" on the Kansas range; which translates to "almost always an encouraging word." We fail our Lord when we crucify his life-giving spirit. We fail our Lord when we fail to will the good for ourselves and others. We fail our Lord when we are not grateful. We fail our Lord when we present to others an unwilling spirit, one with more doubt than faith. We succeed when our generosity reflects the generosity of others, when everyone wants to claim the faith they see at work in others. We succeed where together the synergy of our generosity ... is more than the sum of all those who are generous.

"If the eagerness is there, if faith is present, the gift is acceptable! It is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have." Excel in love, in the more excellent way, in the Spirit of Eagerness, for the spiritual gifts, for the greater gifts which God has in store for each of us. And, as the 23rd Psalm reminds us, God's "mercy and goodness shall pursue us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long." Alleluia! Amen.