**[1]** 4-week series on 2nd Corinthians
Week #4: Rich in Kindness
Scripture: 2 Cor. 8:1-15
Theme: Alone we can do little; together we can do much (Helen Keller).

**[2]** This is the fourth in a series of stewardship sermons from 2 Corinthians. The first week,
I spoke of the stewardship of consolation and comfort, based on the image of our Lord Jesus Christ as the Primary or First Paraclete (John 14:16; 1 John 2:1). The second week, I presented the stewardship of forgiveness, the binding and loosing of the spirit of forgiveness as the keys to the kin[g]dom given to us for stewardship. Embedded in the third sermon, the stewardship of faithful living, comporting ourselves as ambassadors of reconciliation, ones comfortable within the garment of faith to live within the constraints and possibilities of love. The last sermon in this stewardship series is the stewardship of kindness, exemplified by the biblical command: “Be ye gentle, one to the other, forgiving just as God in Christ, has forgiven you.” (Eph. 4:32).

Although we might rightfully take exception to it, knowing what we know about the Life of Moses overall, Numbers 12:3 describes Moses as “the most gentle (humble, meek) man on the face of the earth.” And, with the equivalent Aramaic word, Jesus teaches us that the “meek,” the gentle, are especially blessed, “inheriting,” NOT the wind, but “the earth.” The Hebrew word, *anav*, and the Greek word, *praus*, both indicated a strength and not a weakness; a strength which enables you and I to live in harmony with others and to be receptive to divine wisdom.

**[3**] In 1965, Curtis Mayfield published a song entitled: “People Get Ready!”

People get ready, there's a train a comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith, to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord

So people get ready, for the train to Jordan
Picking up passengers coast to coast
Faith is the key, open the doors and board 'em
There's hope for all, among those loved the most

There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner
Whom would hurt all humankind, just to save his own, believe me now
Have compassion for those whose chances grow thinner
For there is no hiding place, against God’s throne

So people get ready there's a train a comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith, to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord

The song sums up the stewardship of kindness. Compassion for those whose chances grow thinner, faith for those who hear the humming of the engines, hope for those who climb on board. Just leave your baggage behind. Today, we focus on what Paul sees in Corinth as a community of faith ‘rich in kindness.’ Paul sees an eagerness to give within the Corinthian church which he wants to encourage, saying ‘people get ready, there’s a train a coming,’ ‘open the doors, faith is the key, there’s hope for all.’

**[4]**  One of the earliest descriptions of the churches being formed by those baptized in Jesus’ name after the first Pentecost is that “they held everything in common.” (Acts 2:44, 4:32). These groups of believers were of “one heart and soul” guided by the testimony of the Apostles, a testimony of resurrection and the power and grace it provides. Acts records of these early groups, “there was not a needy person among them,” (Acts 4:34).  The Apostles taught them a social procedure which was meant to ensure equality within the group and give them a chance to survive where other groups in the Roman empire had failed. They hoped that the spirit of
generosity behind this simple procedure would become second nature to everyone, eliminating the necessity for the apostles to remain with them, and freeing them to leave and form another new congregation elsewhere. The procedure was described in this way: ‘those who had possessions, sold them, and brought the proceeds and laid them at the Apostles’ feet, and in turn, the accumulative proceeds were “distributed to each as any had need.” (Acts 4:35). A man named Joseph who was from Cyprus came to one of these groups through this procedure, selling a field that he owned and bringing the proceeds to the group for distribution. As he result
of joining the group, he received a new name: ‘Barnabas,’ meaning ‘Son of Encouragement.’ He would go on to become one of the traveling evangelists on Paul’s team. We also know that the **[5]** social practices of equality within each group were far from perfect. In our scripture today, Paul mentions this social practice by quoting from a story of God providing “manna” in the wilderness to the people of the Exodus. “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” (Ex. 16:18). It was a matter of “fair balance,” says Paul, it was a matter of equity.

There were also groups where widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6), or certain people within the group were not waiting upon one another while sharing food at the common table, allowing some to go hungry while others had too much (1 Cor. 11:21,33). But, these early communities of faith attempted to address these faults by selecting deacons (like Philip, Stephen, Timon, and others) to attend to the table manners and the spirit of unity within the fellowship (Acts 6:5). Justin Martyr, who observed some of these early practices of the church in the 2nd century CE, noted that some food and drink were even held back to be shared with those absent from the table. Luke mentions that they ‘ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God for the goodwill (*charis*) of all the people.’ (Acts 2:46). It was a time of great power and great grace within the life of the church, growing larger day by day. Luke’s tells us that the message shared by the early Christian community was that God leans toward each of us, being disposed to generously bless us with favor even before we respond to that blessing. God gives God’s Self Away to God’s people unconditionally through Christ Jesus, and this is reflected in the sharing of Bread for the World.

Some of the oldest sayings of the Church are in today’s scripture from Second Corinthians. “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.” (8:9). The ancient hymn of the church that Paul cites in Philippians is similar in spirit: ‘let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, ‘though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, found in human form, humble and obedient.’ True generosity is emptying oneself of all the baggage that blocks one’s relationship to God and to others.

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us … made us alive together with Christ. (Eph. 2:5), … so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:7). Let your gentle spirit be known to all! (Phil. 4:5); [let] those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion and kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Col. 3:12). The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. (James 3:17).

[**6]** So, this is the stewardship of kindness, according to Paul: ‘for if you are eager to give, it matters not what one has or does not have—you complete your giving according to what you have available to you (8:12). Paul is hoping that some of the spirit of generosity from the Macedonian churches, like the church at Philippi, will overflow into Corinth. You have heard the reports, have you not, O Church at Corinth, that grace was abundant in Macedonia despite a ‘severe ordeal of affliction,’ which might have significantly limited their giving, but did not. And then, Paul says something very amazing: “for their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have combined to overflow into a wealth of generosity.” Put another way, they willingly gave up to, and beyond, their means; they begged us eagerly for the ‘privilege of sharing,’ says Paul. Now, who in the world does that, says Paul? Indeed, who in the world does such a thing? But I see this possibility in you, this same eagerness in you, O Corinth! I urge you to finish what you started with Titus, and to complete your generosity. You have excelled in every category, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and now in our love for you, as measured by your eagerness to give. Excel O Church. Give yourselves first to the Lord, and then this excellent eagerness to give will overflow in you (8:5).

**[7]**  Frederick Buechner once wrote: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Paul wants to be a matchmaker for Corinth, to match up their best excellence with the greatest need. It’s not that you’re being singled out from among the rest of the churches to give more; it’s not as if you were being pressured in competition or in a race (8:13), as if we were being heavy with you and light with others. It is a matter of a ‘fair balance,’ says Paul. Today, your abundance meets their need; tomorrow their
abundance meets your need. Today, we might think of it as a type of insurance coverage, to pool our resources, and to even out the liability of each during times of greater stress. Helen Keller once wrote: ‘Alone, we can do so little, together we can do so much.’ Paul might have been a good insurance salesperson in today’s world, and then again, maybe not so much. The only true insurance is Christ Jesus, Our Lord.

And so, O Church, where do our abundant joy and persistent poverty meet? Have we compassion for those whose chances are growing thinner by the day? Where does our deep gladness meet the world’s deepest needs? Do we have a fair balance of resources? Are we rich in kindness? And, if the answer is yes, then what holds us back from achieving the possibility of excellence in our generosity? Are we ready to board the train? Can you hear the whistle calling, the diesel’s humming?

No ticket required; no baggage needed; all you need to do is thank the Lord!  Alleluia! Amen!