

The Cup is Half Full: A sermon on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF RED WING-MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2017

Several weeks ago, in one of our small group meetings, we were discussing the story of Jacob. The passage we read was about Jacob spending the night wrestling with a stranger and ending up with a new name, Israel. We wondered together why the Bible included the new name for Jacob- why did the wrestler give Jacob a new name?

A little background is helpful.

Jacob is one half of a pair of brothers, Jacob and Esau. Jacob's name always comes first, but that's really the beginning of the problem. These boys fought in the womb. Jacob was always trying to pull or push or force his brother out of the way. Literally, they are twins and we read in the Bible that Jacob tried to pull Esau back into the womb so Jacob could be born first. By birth order though, Jacob's fist grabbing Esau's heel notwithstanding, Esau is the older brother. When it was time to receive the family birthright, Jacob tricks Esau into letting Jacob have it. When their father prepares to give his eldest son (Esau) his blessing, Jacob and his mom scheme and trick his blind father into thinking Jacob is really Esau.

At times Jacob seems to have more in common with the Norse trickster God Loki than the God of Abraham. If there's a faster, easier or lazier way to get something done, Jacob takes it.

But now, years have passed and Jacob needs to make amends with Esau. And the night before he prepares to face his brother, who he has wronged repeatedly, Jacob camps by a river and "wrestles till the break of day."

The text is not clear if Jacob is wrestling with a man- maybe one of his brother's servants, or with God, or with an angel. The struggle lasts all night long and Jacob walks away with a limp, and a new name, Israel. We read this in Genesis 32:28 "The man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob. You have wrestled with God and with men, and you have won. That's why your name will be Israel."

With all that background, let me ask you. Why do you think Jacob gets a new name here? Go ahead and turn to a neighbor and chat about that for a minute. We'll wait.

I'm serious. Talk to your pew buddy.

Did you hear some good answers?

I think Jacob gets a new name in the early dawn hours on one of the biggest days of his life because his new name reminds him who he is. He needs to be told he can do this.

I call this external validation. Sometimes we need to be told what we already know is true.

Reinforce it. Verify it. You can do this Jacob. You're Israel.

You can do this.

That's the power of words. Words shape us.

For better or worse. They build us up and can smash us down. Did anybody see the movie Wonder this weekend? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRX...>

Words build us up just as much as words can break us.

Like Jacob's new name, Israel, in the book of Genesis. It tells him he can do this hard thing. In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul is using words to build up the church in Corinth, telling them what they already know to be true.

Here's what he told them: They are a generous people. God is with them as they choose how and where and when to plant their seeds. They have the capacity to give and build and grow the larger Christian church. They have experienced this before and they are being asked to do it again.

Paul's words are meant to inspire the people of Corinth to give to the large church ministry and, based on our knowledge of the early church, Corinth consistently did so.

Two thousand years later the church is still trying to help people act on what they already know- we are a generous people. We are blessed to have more than enough. When we dig deep, God provides.

This is a mindset we bring.

I think it's a "the glass is half full" mindset.

We are generous.

Do you want some external validation? The Faith Matters Surveys, conducted in 2006, were huge wide-ranging surveys that provided a deep look at a broad group of 3100 Americans to see how faith- or lack thereof- correlated with many different things. One of the surveys they looked at was charitable giving. The researchers found that people who go to church are more likely to give money to church than people who do not go to church. That's not surprising. But what the survey also found is people who go to church are more likely to give to secular causes- non church nonprofits than nonbelievers. People who donate money to church are much more likely to also donate money to other causes. The same was true for volunteering. People who went to church at least once a month volunteered more at church than those who don't go to church. They ask volunteered at non church things about 6 hours more a month than people who didn't go to church. Do you follow this?

Here's how David Briggs describes the data.

Religiously observant Americans are more generous with time and treasure than demographically similar secular Americans," "This is true for secular causes (especially help to the needy, the elderly and young people) as well as for purely religious causes. It is true even for most random acts of kindness."

Statistics nerds will love "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us."

Short version? We are generous people.

We (church-goers) give our money and we give our time. Our cups are more than half full, our cups run over.

My cup overflows, as David says in Psalm 23.

On Thanksgiving this is a good reminder. On a day in worship when we are receiving people's intentions of giving for 2018, this is a good reminder.

And really every day, this is a good reminder.

Our cups are more than half full, our cups run over.

Can we give like it?

Can we live like it?

God is good. Amen.