

The Message for September 25, 2011
2 Corinthians 9:8-15
What Do We Do with What We've Been Given?
The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Disciples of Jesus are blessed by God and sent to be a blessing to others. Today we ponder the question, *What do we do with what we've been given?* Disciples are to be the conduit of God's blessings not the reservoir of God's blessings. We exist to share God's blessings with others. Check out this short video about discipleship and sharing.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rk8ERxqCZqQ&feature=player_detailpage

We are to be the conduit of God's blessings not the reservoir. Truth is that is a counter-cultural and controversial idea. The world wants to convince us that we would be happier if we just have more stuff. The problem is – it's so easy to become possessed by our possessions and make a real mess in our lives.

Lisa was the youngest in a family of six children. One day her mom came home from the grocery store with a box of popsicles. Being the youngest, Lisa was convinced that her older brothers and sisters would eat all those popsicles before she ever got one. So Lisa snuck down to the kitchen, went to the freezer, took out a couple of popsicles, and squirreled them away so she could eat them later. She hid them in her dresser drawer. Lisa did not get to enjoy those popsicles; instead she had to clean up a sticky, gooey orange and white mess!

It's easy to laugh at a little girl who hoards popsicles. But if you think about it we are just like Lisa – both individually and nationally. And it's really no laughing matter. It's sad.

This economic mess we find ourselves in today, including our nation's \$14.5 trillion debt, can be addressed if we are willing to live into the freedom that Christ has won for all people on the cross. How might we live less as reservoirs, and more like conduit?

Last week I shared with you how we buy things we really don't need, with money we really don't have, to impress people we really don't like!

Question "*What do we do with what we've been given?*"



In the holy lands there are two seas - The Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Both are fed by the Jordan River which is fed by many small tributaries. These two seas are very different from each other.



The Sea of Galilee is full of life (1st picture). Its fresh waters are pumped to the towns and cities all around it. In warm weather it's a favorite vacation spot (2nd picture). People swim and ski and sun bath and fish here... There is life in and around the Sea of Galilee.

The Dead Sea, however, is an entirely different place. Just as it's name suggests. There is not much life around the Dead Sea (3rd picture). No fish living in it. No plants growing on its shoreline. Its salt and phosphate content is so high that it is impossible for a human being to sink in it (4th picture).



The high mineral content is good therapy for people with psoriasis and some other skin diseases. But, woe to the one who enters the Dead Sea with an open cut or who has recently shaved! The pain can be excruciating! Getting water from the Dead Sea in one's eyes is unbearable, and swallowing the water of the Dead Sea can be fatal.

Why is there a difference between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea? Both are fed by the Jordan River – so why is one so alive and the other so dead?

Here's the difference, the Jordan River flows both in and out of the Sea of Galilee, but only into the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is alive because it receives and gives. The freshness flows in and out, in and out. The Dead Sea is dead, because it only receives.

Which sea are you? Are you a reservoir of God's blessings or the conduit of God's blessings?

What do we do with what we've been given? It's a great question, and one I invite you to ponder here this morning as we conclude this worship series on "Blessed to Be a Blessing."

It's clear that U.S. Christians either aren't aware, or choose not to follow, what the Bible has to say about - what to do with what we've been given. The Bible teaches us to do two things: Enjoy and Deploy.

First enjoy. Enjoy everything that God has placed in our care. God has blessed us to enjoy the blessings that flow into our lives. God loves us beyond measure, so we need not feel guilty! Enjoy God's blessings in our lives.

Little Michael was sitting on the floor in the middle of his room, sulking. His father asked him what was wrong. Michael whined, "I have nothing to play with." Here's the irony – that little boy was sitting in the middle of room that was absolutely

crammed with toys. His room looked like an overstuffed Toys R Us store, and yet from his little perspective he had nothing to play with.

If we're honest, there is probably a little bit of Michael in all of us. I know there is in me. What about you?

When I think about it the abundance in my life is staggering. And yet, there are days -- as I shared last week -- when I look at my "stuff" and feel the desire for more, faster, shinier, upgraded... I'm guessing you've been there, too. This dis-ease comes from not enjoying what I already have.

I'm not just talking about just my/our possessions. I'm talking about the abundance of "freebies" all around me/us every day. I made a list:

- * the beauty of a sunrise or sunset,
- * the melody of birdsong or a chirping cricket,
- * a quiet walk around a neighborhood,
- * neighbors who watch out for my well being
- * the joy of teaching my son how to mow the grass,
- * or reading a book to my daughter as we wait for the school bus.

All of this, and so much more, are free (except for the children) and abundant blessings from God to enjoy. So enjoy your blessings.

That brings us to -- deploy. To "deploy" means to prioritize, to make available, to put to work for a purpose."

I was at a breakfast meeting this week. And the person I was meeting is truly the conduit of God's blessings. As we were waiting for our table a street person walked into the restaurant. His hair was mess, so too were his clothes, his B.O. suggested a shower would do him a world of good. He barely had enough money for a cup of coffee...

As we were being seated my friend pulled the waiter aside and gave him a \$20 bill and said "Buy that man whatever he wants for breakfast with this... and if you need more let me know." That's being the conduit of God's blessings. The look on that man's face was priceless.

God places good things into our care for us to enjoy, and then we are to deploy those blessings for God's purpose. That's what Paul is telling us on our reading for today to enjoy and then deploy. Listen to these words from St. Paul...

Read Text 2 Corinthians 9:8-15

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift of blessings.

Truth is -- most Christians in America can do better when it comes to deploying our blessings. Research shows that the average American Christians contribute around 2.5% of their income to charitable causes. That includes giving to the church. The same

research shows that American Christians consider themselves both charitable and generous... at 2.5%.

Oddly enough in the restaurant we give 15% tip and with a large group we give 18%. God is asking for only 10%... Yet we only give around 2.5%.

This isn't a new problem. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth to deploy what God has placed in their care. Paul reminds the people that God provides abundantly so that they might give abundantly.

I've come to realize that giving is a joyful response to God's love, not the other way around... it is not a way to earn God's love. St. Paul says that our giving level reveals faith level and that our generosity is an occasion for others to thank and praise God through us. Like the church in Corinth in Paul's day, we struggle to enjoy and deploy what God has placed in our care.

Consider this, about 15% of the people in this congregation provides about 90% of the financial resources to make our mission and ministry happen. This is typical in many Lutheran Churches. This isn't good or bad -- it just is. There is no need for blaming or finger pointing. That won't help.

Like Paul my concern is what this says about our faith – I say this not to guilt anyone but to point out the reality of who we are and how we live. By the way I can't make you feel guilty, no one can. Only you can make yourself feel guilty. And there is no need to feel guilty here. I'm just pointing out the fact that we have room to grow in this area of our lives.

The Bible says that our lack of generously points to a lack of trust in God who provides all that we need. It tells me that many of us are not free, but instead we are locked in a prison of discontent or even fear.

Fear - by the way is - False Evidence Appearing Real. Our fears are real but the evidence that promotes that fear is not real.

I'm aware that not everyone can give the same. But we can all give and we ought not be afraid to give. I also realize that these are difficult times for many people. So let me be clear – money doesn't run the church – faith does. I am concerned about your faith level not your financial giving level. Our faith level is revealed in our giving level.

So -- what are we to do with what we've been given?

First, enjoy - enjoy God's blessings flowing into your life. See everything you have and everything you are as blessings from God. God forbid we should be like Lisa and squirrel our blessing away somewhere or like Michael and be discontent with the blessings in our lives! Enjoy God's blessings.

Second, if you don't have what you really need – not want but need – let this congregation serve you. Ask... don't let pride stand in the way. We are called to provide for one another. Call the church office and we'll get you connected to the resources you need.

Third, deploy. Give generously and joyfully. I'm less concerned about how much you give and more interested in how you give. If you are a generous and joyful giver, thank you for your support to our mission and ministry. May God bless you even more. If you're not a generous and joyful giver, try it. Consider what percent you are currently giving and consider how you might increase your giving. Maybe start with a commitment of \$5 or \$10 a week or month.

One of the wonderful blessings of being a part of this faith community is that we get to see the results of our generosity. I made a list.

- We see children with smiles who are learning about God's love in Children's Church and VBS.
- We see the faces of senior adults who gather for Senior Fest to enjoy fellowship and learning.
- We see the gratitude in the faces of shut-ins who get to participate in worship through our radio ministry and through our home communion visitation ministry.
- We see lives transformed through our LIFE Group ministry.
- We see adults and youth gathering to study the Bible and fellowship and grow in the faith.
- We see lives being touched in powerful ways as we offer contemporary and traditional worship in a Lutheran Church in Lebanon Country.

There is an amazing amount of ministry that happens in and through this congregation. The list goes on and on...

What a joy there is in knowing that in some small way, we are touching the lives of others with God's blessings, pointing them to One from whom all blessings flow?

Question: what are you going to do with what you've been given? May I suggest we Enjoy and then Deploy. Amen.