

In today's reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul is asking the Corinthian church to make a donation to the Jerusalem church. His rationale is that gratitude to God results in the desire to be good to one another. The Jerusalem church is poor and the Corinthian church is less poor; therefore they have an opportunity to share which, for Paul, is the gospel enacted. He had also collected from the Macedonian church for Jerusalem and, in the letter to the Romans, pointed out that the Gentile Christians owe a great obligation to Jewish Christians who had for so long carried the covenant with God and were now spreading it to all the world. Interestingly, given what we know about Peter's reluctance to allow people to join the movement without first converting to Judaism, it's likely that the Jerusalem Christians would not have welcomed the Corinthians into their fellowship. However, this offering will bind the two communities in mutual obligation and, ultimately, in obligation to God who has given them to each other.

When I think about how to translate Paul's appeal to our own circumstances, therefore, I think about a public hearing I attended a couple of weeks ago, with a task force of the Polk County supervisors considering whether to raise the minimum wage, since the state legislature isn't doing it. The two supervisors on the TF came in telling us that they'd talked to the municipalities, and they would opt out of the wage if it was too high. The business people on the TF predictably pointed out how much it would add to their expenses if they had to pay more . . . though they all also said that they pay more than minimum wage now anyhow, just to get good help. The union rep and the member of the faith community suggested that there were ways to bring up the wage gradually so that businesses could adjust. Then there

was a very short time for public comment, and my friend Dave from the Urbandale church stood up and told a short story. He had done a stint as president of the chamber of commerce in whatever little Nebraska town he'd been serving in, and they had a food pantry and a clothes closet and so forth. Someone came to town and wanted to start a business in one of the rent-free buildings they had in their sad little downtown, but it would pay only minimum wage. The Chamber urged them to consider a higher wage, but they wouldn't. So the city said No thanks to the new business. Why would they want jobs that kept people dependent on charity? So, Dave said, my church works hard to offer free meals and shelter, and we're starting to feel like we're being had. We're subsidizing employers who won't pay a living wage.

The world is more complicated than it was in the first century. For one thing, the scope of our moral responsibility has expanded, because we now *know* about needs far away from us that we could help meet. People used to know only about what they could see or a traveler like Paul could tell them. But we also recognize that the needs in a complex world are different, and that giving money is sometimes counterproductive. For instance, if a community is suffering a famine, we *feel* like sending them food—but that then destroys the price that more local farmers can get for their crops.

Many of the situations for which Paul might have requested donations require long-term, intelligent, on-the-ground work, and often the tools are legislative or regulatory rather than monetary. That is why Jubilee USA exists, to get at the systemic sources of human poverty that are caused by the greed of the more

powerful. Let me tell you briefly about what has been going on in Puerto Rico, and Jubilee's work there.

The US used to give LOTS of tax breaks to businesses that would operate in Puerto Rico. In 2006 the US Congress passed a law withdrawing all those tax breaks. Businesses started to pull out, Puerto Rico's economy went into recession, people started leaving the island, reducing the tax base, and so PR cut back on public services and hiked taxes; more people left. Puerto Rico is a US commonwealth; it can't go bankrupt. So they issued tax-free debt to investors to stay afloat. Now they can't pay the interest any more, and the investors want their money back—in fact, they want to get paid in full *first*, before PR pays for public services. A major hospital closed because they couldn't pay the electric bill. People are going without critical medical care.

Last July Puerto Rico's Catholic Archbishop Roberto González Nieves called on Congress to grant Puerto Rico access to US municipal bankruptcy protection. Ten days later a group of economists released a report commissioned by a group of hedge funds urged the island's government to adopt austerity measures, including laying off teachers. In January PR defaulted on \$37M of its roughly \$1B debt.

If you look at the detailed timeline about Puerto Rico's debt crisis on the Jubilee website, you see all along various legislative attempts to intervene on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. Jubilee was involved in those, either recommending legislation or sending church leaders to the Hill or recruiting church people at home to call their legislators. Suffering on the island has deepened, and the outcome is still in doubt, but I am sure that without the intervention of Jubilee and other church

groups, the vulture investors would have already completely had their way and have enshrined in law their repayment in full before the relief of the population.

If we were to send money to Puerto Rico every year, a) it wouldn't be enough and b) it would do nothing to rearrange the power structure in which vulture investors win and teachers and doctors lose. This is the kind of need that Paul did not envision when he wrote to the church at Corinth; this requires us to educate ourselves about these issues and to be ready to call our legislators or take other actions when called on by Jubilee.

I knew when I looked at the scripture readings for today that I was not going to have to make a case for giving. That's just not a problem here. But there is a challenge for us, and that is how we might engage in this kind of structure-changing mission in a way that feeds our souls. When we serve the Table of Plenty, we can see the people we're feeding and enjoy some fellowship with them. About the fellowship at Pine Ridge I need say no more than has been said many times. Even when Patti and June get together to choose our Kiva partners they learn about the people's stories and contexts, and loan to projects that would be close to our collective heart. But calling legislators is like fighting Dementors; it sucks your soul right out of you—or at least, it's sort of unsatisfying and you do it by yourself from home, not with all your church family around a big table of Jane's chicken and noodles.

I'd like us to become more informed about the financial complexities that make poverty seem inevitable, and I'd like us to work on some of these justice issues. But we should figure out a way we can do it together, or a way in which we

experience being bound together with our sisters and brothers, as Paul wanted the Corinthians and the Jerusalem Christians to be bound together. Often Christians avoid this kind of work because it's complicated and contentious, but I don't think we're afraid of that. If we're creative, and if we want to do more justice-oriented mission work, and if we are prayerful, surely we can answer as Paul hoped that the Corinthians would answer his appeal for the sisters and brothers in Jerusalem.

“Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

Let us pray:

Most loving God, remembering Jesus' commandment that we love one another, we pray that you would show us how we may love prophetically and ingeniously, upholding the dignity of our kin and turning this world's values upside down.

Amen.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-red-cross-raised-half-a-billion-dollars-for-haiti-and-built-6-homes>

<https://www.thenation.com/article/how-humanitarian-aid-weakened-post-earthquake-haiti/>

<http://www.theskimm.com/skimm-guides/puerto-rico-debt-crisis>

[http://www.globalministries.org/syria\\_crisis](http://www.globalministries.org/syria_crisis)