

Paul's call for mutual aid (13B) (2 Corinthians 8:7-15)

We all have needs—and abundance.

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June 25, 2021

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A well-crafted donor appeal is a thing of beauty.

When I receive letters from one organization I support, I often start out thinking, “I gave last time.” Then, in the 40 feet from the mailbox to the recycling bin, I get teary reading the opening paragraphs, with their moving but not exploitative anecdote about a person helped by the ministry. I take the return envelope out of the trifold letter and go get my checkbook.

Paul's fundraising letter in 2 Corinthians 8 seeks to create a bridge between Jews and Gentiles by gathering relief for the Jerusalem Church. Verse seven overdoes it with the flattery, but I'm sure it works for some people.

The most fascinating part of this appeal is the way it subverts common models of patronage and philanthropy. Patrons generously bestow gifts as they choose upon those with fewer resources, winning appreciation and acclaim. Philanthropists attend galas and have building wings named after them, while those served by an institution or program humbly give thanks.

With the words *grace* and *fair balance*, the apostle signals that he's doing something different. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul uses the Greek word *charis* ten times. Usually I appreciate any and all efforts to eliminate redundancy. But here the repetition is striking when looking at these verses in Greek—or in a study Bible that notes all the times the word could be translated as *grace*.

The *Jewish Annotated New Testament* notes that early Judaism saw support for the needy as a religious obligation stemming from God's provision for all people. Paul underscores this point when he quotes from Exodus 16, about the gift of manna in the wilderness, given by grace. Moses instructs the Israelites to gather what they need. Some gather more, some less, but no one ends up with an excess or a lack. This miracle stands in stark contrast to our world today, with its places of hoarding and places of deprivation.

Often our response—especially in predominantly White, middle-class churches—is about helping others without recognizing our own needs. We turn *charis* into charity work. We think that some of us have more because we earned it. We forget that everything each of us has is by grace.

I'm a Mennonite pastor, and mutual aid is a beloved part of our tradition—beloved, at least, to those of us who like to talk about it a lot. My congregation recently formed a team of laypeople to make decisions about disbursements from our mutual aid fund and to educate members of the congregation about its theological underpinnings.

Mutual aid became something of a buzz phrase during the pandemic, with neighborhoods and networks cropping up to share groceries, clothes, and other resources. Generally speaking, these efforts are in the same spirit as Paul's grace and fair balance. The pandemic has taught us early and often that any of us could find ourselves in a precarious situation, dependent on others to meet our basic needs.

How do we make mutual aid truly mutual? How do we make it about grace and fair balance? We can start by taking stock in our congregations of where we have abundance and where we have need—and by looking at those with whom we share resources as people who have not only need but also abundance. Doing so could nurture an eagerness to give that wasn't there previously and a deeper gratitude for God's grace.