The Old Lady and an Onion

Text: 2 Corinthians 9:6–11 (10/3/26)

NAME

Good morning. Before I begin my sermon this morning, I want to tell you how surprised I was this past week when I looked at the Scripture readings that are prescribed for today's liturgy. The epistle we just read made me do a double-take, because the subject is about financial giving. The timing for our parish couldn't have been better. As I shared last week, the Lord has given us a matching gift of $50K to fix and beautify our church. I shared how every dollar we give that is separate from our regular giving between now and the end of the year can be doubled. $100 becomes $200, $1,000 becomes $2,000, $5000 becomes $10K and so on. Then -- in the Providence of God -- the very next week (today) the church assigned us a reading from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. And here's what it says: *"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound*

to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...”

Those are St Paul's words, not mine. Yet, as any priest knows, to stand before a parish and speak about money can be spiritually dangerous for both the priest and the people. The holy mystery of financial stewardship can be presented in such a way as to produce fear and guilt in people through a pressure campaign. Here, I'm reminded of a true story in church history. In the 16th century on the eve of the Protestant Reformation, the Pope of Rome needed money to build a great cathedral. So a Catholic priest by the name of Johann Tetzel travelled from place to place seeking donations throughout Germany. He would go from town to town raising money by preaching on the terrors of Purgatory and how to get people out of there. Catholics believed purgatory was the place in between heaven and hell where people would spend years in agony to purify themselves for heaven. People could be there for thousands and even millions of years before getting out of purgatory. It's like being in prison until you paid your dues. So to reduce the time in purgatory, and improve the coffers of Rome, Tetzel preached heart-wrenching sermons to get people to dig into their satchels

and give generously to Rome. He would plead with people saying, "How can you stand idly by and do nothing as your dear father burns in the fires of purgatory? Every dollar you give will shorten his time in the flames." And then he had a little ditty that went with it. He said: "For as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs!"

In fairness to the Catholic church, Tetzel was not a good model of a priest, as Catholics themselves have recognized. But Tetzel demonstrates how we should "not" speak about giving to the Lord's work. Yes, fear and guilt may be called for at times to remind people of their financial responsibilities as disciples of Christ, if they have been careless about it. But to understand the true meaning of Christian giving, we must begin not with a financial pep-talk, nor our personal bank accounts, nor with the financial balance sheet of the parish, but with God Himself. So let us listen closely to two points that St Paul on how we should, and should not, give to the Lord's work.

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abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...” So the first point is this: ***Christian giving must be an act of freedom and love rather than pressure or obligation***. God does not want our gifts because He needs them. Rather, **giving is part of our spiritual transformation into people who are free from possessiveness**. We give because everything we have ultimately comes from God. A generous spirit teaches us to receive God's gifts with gratitude and then become generous toward others. There is a connection between **freedom and love**. If a person gives because he or she is embarrassed, pressured, manipulated, or made to feel guilty, the external gift may be there, but the spiritual meaning of the gift is diminished. The phrase "*what he has decided in his heart*" points toward an interior freedom: the Christian prayerfully decides before God what they can give, and then gives it willingly. In Orthodox understanding, salvation is not only receiving something from God; it is being *transformed* by God's grace. The more we grow in grace, the more we participate in God's own life and love. God is, in His very nature, totally self-giving. He does not hoard; He pours out. He does not hold back; He bestows. So when we give

generously, it becomes a tangible expression of our transformation into God's image and likeness. We give because that's how God is. And so St Paul adds*:* *"God is able to make all grace abound to you."* In other words, God's blessing is ultimately given to us so we can become a blessing to others. *That is why Christian giving is ultimately an act of participating in the life of God.* We give because God is a giver. We love because God is love. His grace changes our hearts, and we become people who are eager to give ourselves for the good of others. That is what St. Paul means when he says that God loves a cheerful giver. He is not asking us to be excited about spending money. He is inviting us to discover the joy that comes when our possessions no longer possess us, when gratitude replaces anxiety, and when what God has placed in our hands becomes a means of blessing someone else.

The second point St Paul makes is the following: *"Remember this [he says]: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."* This leads us to ask ourselves, "What kind of giver am I? Do I give sparingly, or do I give generously?" You are

the only one who can answer that. How we give makes all the difference.

Here I am reminded of a Russian folk story that was retold by Dostoevsky in his book *The Brothers Karamazov*. Some consider this book to be the best "literary" expression of Orthodox theology there is. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, of blessed memory, was fond of telling this story from Dostoevsky' book. Here is how he tells it, but without the British accent:

Once there was an old woman who died and, much to her *surprise*—for she had always thought of herself as a respectable lady—found herself in a lake of fire. Calling out to her guardian angel, she insisted there had been some mistake, saying, *"I am a very respectable old lady. I should not be here in this lake of fire."* Bishop Kallistos adds: "Perhaps she was very regular in her church attendance and strict in her fasting." Her guardian angel looked through her life and asked if she had ever done a single good deed. She thought for a moment and remembered: *"Yes, once when I was gardening and a beggar came by, I gave him an onion." "Excellent,"* said the angel. Reaching into his robe he produced the very onion she had given the beggar. He

then held the onion out to her (it must have been a shalLOT onion with an elongated stem) and began pulling her out of the lake. But she was not the only person in the fire. Seeing what was happening, the other souls in the lake began crowding around her, clinging to her in hopes of being pulled out too. The old woman became alarmed and furious. She began kicking at them and pushing them away, crying out: *"Let go! Let go! It's not <u>you</u> who's being pulled out, it's <u>me</u>! It's not <u>your</u> onion, it's <u>mine</u>!"* The moment she uttered the words *"It's mine,"* the onion snapped in two and she fell back into the lake of fire where, I am told, she still remains.

Reflecting on this story, Bishop Kallistos adds "If only she had said, *'It is **our** onion,'* that gift of grace would have been strong enough to pull all those suffering souls out of the fire together with her. Giving to others is at the heart of what it means to be a transformed person. But the onion collapsed the moment she tried to hoard it for herself. By saying, *"That's **mine**,"* she denied her true personhood and turned her back on what it means to be made in the image of the Holy Trinity—a community of Persons in shared love. In the Divine Liturgy, we

do not pray as isolated individuals; the priest offers back to God *"Thine own of Thine own, on behalf of **all** and for **all**."* In the Kingdom of God, the bishop concludes, there are no private onions or hoarded blessings. The moment we turn "ours" into "mine," we cut ourselves off from the divine life, because in Christ, we are saved together, or we are not saved at all.

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