

Balance

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Texts: 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

Seven-point one percent (7.1). It's the lowest number in the world today, and probably just about the lowest number in the history of the world. 7.1%: that's the average amount of household income that we in the United States today spend on food. That doesn't include what we spend at restaurants, but in the big picture that doesn't really matter. We spend a smaller percentage of our income on meeting our basic dietary needs than anyone else in human history.

As our society has grown richer and richer, that number has been falling, of course. Our food production system is becoming more efficient all the time, and our incomes are rising all the time, at least a bit, even accounting for inflation, so the percentage of income we spend on food has been constantly falling. Fifty years ago, in the U.S., we spent about 12% on food. A hundred years ago it was about 25%. And before that it was even more.

7.1%. Elsewhere in the world today China, Bulgaria, and Estonia are at about 20%. Guatemala is at 35%. Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Cambodia are at about 40%. Angola is at 50%. Nigeria is at just under 60% - the highest in the world today. Compared to human history, however, even that 60% is probably the lower limit. Up until about 200 years ago, the vast majority of everyone's household income went to food. In fact, for most people, their household income was food, because most people were what we would call "subsistence farmers." Even in the ancient societies known for their wealth, Rome, Egypt, Persia, nearly all economic activity was about acquiring food. At the personal level, the dividing line between rich and poor was not whether you could afford a vacation home or to redo your kitchen: it was between those who could reliably secure their food supply and those who couldn't. Most people in the early church couldn't.

But there were variations. Depending on local rains, location, the competency of city administrators, and political power, some cities were up while others were down, and then down while others were up.

Just under 2000 years ago, when Paul was writing to the church in the Greek city of Corinth, Corinth was up, and Jerusalem and the surrounding area of Judea were down. There was a drought in much of the Roman Empire in the years 46 and 47. We don't know the precise numbers for Judea, but we know that in Egypt, during and just after that drought, about 50% of small farmers had to sell their land in order to buy food. They basically became slaves, working the very fields they previously owned. That's pretty comparable to any of us losing everything we have and then surviving by becoming housecleaners in the houses we used to own. That's what it was like in Judea when Paul was writing to the Corinthians.

Corinth, however, was doing better. Paul says that the Corinthians had an "abundance," which probably meant merely that few of them were struggling for food, and maybe some of

them had significant surpluses. Corinth at the time was actually an up-and-coming city – if not like Silicon Valley today, at least like Austin.

St. Paul had founded the church in Corinth. He spent 18 months there teaching about the way of Jesus, but when he wrote Second Corinthians he had already been gone for some time, maybe three or four years. Still, he stayed in contact with them, and some of his associates had visited them.

Long story short, Paul was collecting an offering for the struggling Christians in Jerusalem and Judea. We know that he had received contributions from other churches, including those in Macedonia, basically northern Greece, even though that region was not doing nearly as well as Corinth. Remember though, this is all relative: these people were all spending at least 50% of their resources on food.

So Paul writes Second Corinthians, at least this part of it, to motivate the Christians in Corinth to share with the Christians in Jerusalem. Now note that Corinth and Jerusalem are not exactly sister cities. The route by land, which Paul would use when carrying treasure, was almost 2000 miles, and would take months to travel. Corinth was an ancient Greek city. Jerusalem had almost entirely Jews. Jerusalem looked east, and had more in common with Babylon and Persia, while Corinth looked west, and had more in common with Athens and Rome. So, different histories, different cultures, different languages, different continents, different life.

But the same Lord. All of them, Judeans and Corinthians, brought into communion with God through Jesus, the redeemer of all. And that connection, that common identity, is all it took. That common faith connected the Judeans and Corinthians more powerfully than anything that could divide them: history, language, wealth, race, distance – all overcome through communion in Christ. So Paul invites the Corinthians to share, not so much with strangers in a far-off land, but with their brothers and sisters in Christ. Because sharing was what Christians did. Christianity was *koinonia*, a shared life. Salvation wasn't just about getting into heaven, it was about heaven breaking into this world. What do we pray? Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven. I'm talking holistic salvation, and if we can be part of God's work of relieving another's burden, then we are doing the work of God.

And it is all about sharing, about balance, as Paul puts it. Those with more than enough share with those without enough. Like in a family. If you only have a little bit more than enough, that's fine – give what you can. If you have a lot more than enough, great – your gift will make a huge difference to others. But either way, smaller or larger, the sharing will make a huge difference to you. Because that gift will show that you recognize the truth about our faith: that we are all part of the same people, our *koinonia*, our circle of care, extends beyond those we can see, to all God can see.

I mean, once you know all this background Paul's words preach themselves, right? *“For, if the eagerness is already there, your sharing is accepted according to what you have, not according to what you don't have. Because relief for others is not intended to be distress for you, but follows from equity: as things are now, your abundance is for their lack, so that their abundance may be for your lack, in order that there might be balance. As has been written,*

“those who gathered much had nothing in excess, and those who gathered little had no shortage.”

That last quote, of course, comes from the story we heard earlier, from the book of Exodus, when the Israelites were hungry in the wilderness, and God gave them manna from heaven. Some were able to gather more, some were able to gather less. But they had *koinonia*, and they shared, and everyone had enough.

At this point, I feel like the message is clear enough. It's all about sharing. Balance. Not keeping a lot but still having enough. To be honest, this may not be much of a stewardship sermon, and I am not so much trying to increase anybody's pledge (although, hey, feel free), as I am trying to influence our basic take on wealth, and sharing, and *koinonia*, fellowship in Christ. To put a finer point on it, I am trying to have your basic take on money be shaped more by your faith in Jesus than by your faith in the market. I am pointing to the fact that we receive a thousand messages a day that normalize the stunning imbalances that exist among us, and in all the world today. But according to the gospel, this is not normal. There is enough for there to be more balance among all. If our sense of money and wealth and economics more broadly was shaped by Paul, and Jesus, and our faith, we would be even more a crazy people on this earth, and a beautiful people as well.

So share. Share based on how much more than enough you have. And when we are spending only 7.1% of our income on the food we need to survive, then there is a pretty big surplus compared to what is enough. Don't share so much you can't buy enough food to survive, but share generously, share eagerly, because this is a chance to show that you recognize your gracious connection to others in this place, outside those doors, and indeed, across the world, no matter who they are. Here Paul puts this in terms of the Christian family, and elsewhere he puts it in terms of the whole human family. The gospel truth is that we are all God's children, and there should be balance, for such is the way of God among us.

In the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.