

As we continue our study through 2nd Corinthians we arrive today at chapter 8 and Paul's instructions to the church to give towards what has come to be known as the "Jerusalem Fund." This was a collection of money being raised in the Gentile Churches to help support the Judean believers who were struggling as a result of famine in the area in the 40's. This fundraising effort required an incredible amount of Paul's time and energy. But Paul viewed this financial support as an essential task for the followers of Jesus. He reminds readers that Jesus held nothing back from us in giving himself – emptying himself in the incarnation and the cross to bestow upon us all the riches of God's grace. Paul viewed this monetary offering as a symbol of the interdependence and interconnectedness of God's people worldwide and so asks the Corinthian church to give out of their abundance.

On this 4th of July weekend, as we prepare to celebrate our independence, we are invited to recognize how blessed we are as a nation and to see our abundance as a gift. I don't know about you, but I love the 4th of July and I adore fireworks– my dog, however, is not such a big fan. I think my dog can relate to the comic I saw recently featuring 2 dogs eating dinner. One says, "My plans for the Fourth aren't finalized yet, but I'm either cowering under the bed or digging holes through the tub. And you?" But the Fourth really is an important day to celebrate and count our blessings. America has a great deal more than most in the world – we are a land of incredible abundance. The way Paul describes the Church in Corinth could be used to describe America today as having "present abundance" in contrast to those in need. And notice that Paul has a balanced perspective on giving. He writes, "*the gift is acceptable according to what one has-- not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair **balance** between your **present abundance** and their **need**.*" Paul then quotes from Exodus 16:18: "*The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.*" This actually comes from the description of the manna God provided for the people of Israel in the desert– the model of a community in which no one had "too little" to sustain themselves and their families.

And that's a dream I have for the Church as well as for all Americans...and frankly, for our world. And I'm sure all of you join me in that sentiment: the vision of a world in which no one is left to go hungry or starve, a world where no one is oppressed or killed by violent regimes because of their class, race, or religion, a world where no one has to flee to their homeland out of fear, violence or poverty, a world where no one dies from an illness that we already know how to cure simply because they lacked access. But I have to admit, despite this dream, I can get bogged down and my focus is often on fear and scarcity. I worry that my family has enough, that my children's needs will be met and I'm often fearful about the limited resources I have. It's easy to go down the rabbit hole of worry or even set up camp there. And when my mind is there, I'm no longer standing in a place of faith and generosity, let alone thinking about the plight of others, because fear and scarcity have become my focus. And that focus is one that unfortunately dominates American culture today.

But Paul is inviting us to think differently- to have a mindset of faith and abundance. And if there was ever a people or nation that should do that – it's America. And while our news and media focus almost solely on what's going wrong – while they are always creating a narrative of scarcity and trouble with the negative bias that drives sales, the result is the driving of fear to new heights every day. And so we either forget or remain ignorant to the positive things happening in our world – a world where good news is usually a neglected reality and doesn't make any headlines.

1. Did you know that extreme poverty is on the decline in our world? It fell from 53 percent in 1981 to only 17 percent in 2011 and continues to drop every year (Source: Our World in Data).
2. Did you know that world hunger has radically dropped? Between 1990 and 2014 it dropped an astounding 39%. (Source: The International Food Policy Research)
3. Did you know that child mortality is down by nearly half worldwide since 1990? And that maternal deaths have dropped by over 45% in the world since 1990? (Source: Devpolicy) (*This positive data doesn't make the news because negative news sells and drives consumption.*)

There is much to celebrate and much to continue to build on for us as Americans. We can't stop now or become paralyzed by fear and scarcity. And we can't get stuck in prejudice and hate. I'm so proud of the many things we as

Americans have done to assist not only our own citizens but the citizens of other nations. America makes a positive difference in the wider world whenever we listen to our better angels. As we have offered democracy to the wider world we have seen governments institute better policies for their people. As leaders in science, medicine, and technology, our advances have saved the lives of millions on this planet. America has had a hand in every one of the positive changes happening in our world, and many of the people involved were motivated by their faith in God.

There are so many reasons to be hopeful and grateful. I think about my fellow Americans who give of their time and energy for those in need everyday. People like you, here at St. James, serving and donating towards the needs of refugees, the homeless, orphans, military families, and those with medical needs. With your help our Diocese will be sending refugee children to camp this summer and we'll be feeding and housing abandoned children in Tijuana at Vida Joven – reminding these young people that they too are beloved children of God. I think of Americans serving in agencies that meet the medical, housing, and hunger needs of people around the world - like the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, Habitat for Humanity, and World Vision. I think of the attorneys offering their services *right now* to help reunite the over 2,300 children who've been separated from their parents at our borders through organizations like The Florence Project and TCRP. I think of our nation's Peace Corps doing everything from building wells and helping farmers create sustainable agriculture to teaching computers skills. I think of our military families and our soldiers who risk their lives to serve our country and intervene in conflicts not our own.

Of course, the freedoms and abundance we have in America come at great cost and sacrifice. As the daughter of a veteran, my dad is a hero to me. I asked him why he joined the air force as a young man. He said: *"I decided I loved the idea of helping my country and having the military experience under my belt more than I cared what most people might think or the danger to my life, so I went ahead and volunteered as an aviator. I was stationed in Thailand in an F-4 squadron...and instead of dying or becoming a POW, I was blessed to come home safely and get to the valuable and important work of raising you and your siblings."*

The great sacrifices made by my American soldier in Germany during World War II has also been on my mind a lot as I've been reading our parish summer book "The Choice" by Dr. Edith Eger. Edie is a holocaust survivor and reading about her liberation from the death camp as a teen is indescribably moving. This is she described it: *"I lie out in the heavy air, my body entwined with stranger's bodies, all of us in a heap, some already dead,... some, like me barely alive. ... When I open my eyes, I don't know if I have slept or fainted, or for how long. ...Cries break me out of a sleep that resembles death. The cries must be death's herald...I open my eyes, and I can see jeeps rolling slowly in through the pine forest that obscures the camp from the road and sky, "The Americans have arrived! The Americans are here!" This is what the feeble are shouting. The jeeps look wavy and blurry...Someone is singing 'When the Saints Go marching In.' ...I see men in fatigues. I see flags with stars and stripes – American flags, I realize. 'Are there any living here?'" the Americans call in German. 'Raise your hand if you're alive.' I try to move my fingers to signal that I'm alive. Here I am I want to call out. I have no voice. He scours the bodies. His eyes pass over me with no recognition. ...The soldier shouts something in English. ... They're leaving. And then a patch of light explodes on the ground....It is the sun colliding with (my sister's) tin can...she has arrested the soldier's attention.... They are returning. We have one more chance. I close my eyes and concentrate, raising my hands above my head....I hear the soldiers again. One is very close to me... And now I can feel my hand. I know it is my hand because the soldier is touching it. I open my eyes. I see that his wide, dark hand circles my fingers. He presses something into my hands. ...'Food' he says. ... He lifts me now and deposits me on the ground. ...And (my sister) Magda is beside me on the grass. We have survived the final selection. We are alive. We are together. We are free."*

On this 4th of July weekend, recall all that we have been blessed with – our freedoms, our gifts, our abundance, and the honor we have of serving people around the world. May this holiday create in us, not only pride in who we are and what we have done as a nation, but a renewed will to strive for that same freedom, justice, and mercy for all God's children throughout the world. Amen.