

6th Easter - 5/9/10 – 2 Corinthians 9:1-15 – Choices

As we mentioned in the Children's message, we all face choices. Choices like how we'll honor our mothers, not just today but everyday, what we'll wear and how that reflects how we see ourselves, and how we respond to the situations we experience in life. In an article I read this week, the writer stated that our choices grow out of our values and that we have "two kinds of values. Our stated, conscious values are those we name out loud when we're talking about the things that are really important to us. Our operative, and often unconscious, values are the ones that actually guide our behavior." This helps us understand why we sometimes say one thing and then do another.

In 2 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul points to the early Christian community's core operative values. Paul encourages the fledgling congregations he founded in Asia Minor to support Christians in Jerusalem who were experiencing hardship. Logically, this made no sense as these congregations were struggling to make ends meet. In addition, the Church in Jerusalem had not been welcoming and supportive of these Gentiles who joined the faith community. Paul invites these mission congregations to look beyond logic to their hearts and the values upon which Christ operated. This passage is about more than drumming up money for "Mission Support" or guilting people to give more. It's about the interconnectedness of the body of Christ and our operative values. How do we bring together what we say and what we do? We face this each year as we build our Mission Profile and budget. We serve Christ together and God's generous, self-giving nature is reflected in how we respond. We depend and count on each other for support – emotional, physical, spiritual, and financial. This is our operative value. It defines who we are and is evidenced in our behavior. Where would we be if people didn't invest in caring for infants in the nursery so infants would feel secure and loved, passing on the faith with our children and youth so they might catch what is important to us, sharing our gifts as we live out God's purpose, serving or delivering meals to the hungry and building Habitat houses so that others might experience God's love in a tangible form? Giving is a mark of discipleship.

Passion follows the heart. By passion I mean those causes to which we freely give ourselves. Certainly we're passionate about our children. As a result, we give ourselves freely without thought of the cost. Look at how we arrange our schedules or stay home from work in order to care for them, or deny ourselves as we save for their education. Some are passionate about mentoring children and serve as tutors, coaches, or scout leaders. Some are passionate about older adults and deliver meals to their doors, visit monthly and share communion, or adopt them as grandparents. We find value in these ministries; they give our lives purpose and we derive joy as we serve others. The Great Commandment - to love God above all else and our neighbor as much or more than ourselves, is our operative value. This single command shapes the way we live - not just our isolated choices, but every moment of every day. It is a command that determines how we treat each friend and family member, each enemy and stranger...even how we treat ourselves. It is a command that is made possible not because of any strength we have, but because our lives are rooted in the love of a God who loves us relentlessly. It is a command we cannot ignore, because how we live this command is how others will know that we are Christ-followers - not because of the things we don't do, but because of the entire way that we live.

We have and are doing great things in and through our mission. Quilts are being made for an orphanage in Uganda, VBS is being planned for, youth mission trips are in the making, shoes are being collected, faith is being formed and lives transformed as we live out our mission together. Our stated and operative values, however, may be on a collision course. Due to at least 3 contributing factors – the recession, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly vote regarding pastors in a same-sex committed relationship, and the building vote – our income has declined 9% over the past 2 years. Now we will have to make difficult choices about which ministries to fund, including staff. In the church many of our decisions are based on the heart and not on logic or facts. As Pascal said, "The heart has reasons that reason knows not of." We walk by faith, not by sight. We catch a vision and give ourselves to it. We believe we can end homelessness and hunger in 10 years. It's a compelling vision that has elicited generous giving of time, talent and financial resources. If everyone in the world shared this operative value, then, yes, we could. With God all things are possible.

Over the next 4 weeks, as we grapple with decisions about our ministry in general, our worship services, our move into the new building, and our passion to eliminate hunger and homelessness in our city, let's bring together our stated and operational values; let's bring together our heads and hearts so that we can affirm the decisions we make and walk together into God's future. If we say something is important, and we derive value from it, then let's find a way to do it. Above all, let's build on the foundation which is Christ and the Great Commandment to love God and others, even as God has loved us in Christ. As Paul writes in our lesson, "God gives us something we can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that we can be generous in every way, producing great praise to God." Thanks be to God who gave us mothers and fathers who have embodied this operative value of self-giving love. Thanks be to God for those who have passed on the faith to us. Thanks be to God for those early leaders of FLC who had a vision and made sure we had a place to worship. Thanks be to God that we, too, have a vision of passing on this faith and these values to those who come after us.