

“Overflowing with poverty”

II Corinthians 8:1-9

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I was in a seminary class in 2007 with a small group of fellow students. Our professor told about a time he was working as a campus minister at a large school in Texas. One day Alistair Cooke came to the campus to give a lecture. Alistair Cooke was a popular television and radio personality back in the day. Our professor, in his role as campus minister was asked to serve as a host and guide for Alistair Cooke. During the visit Alistair Cooke shook hands with our professor, the campus minister. And then Cooke said something to our seminary professor that is really pretty amazing. Cooke said, “You just shook my hand. Now you are four handshakes from Napoleon.” In case that needs clarification, that would be Bonaparte. Napoleon Bonaparte, the famous emperor of France. Apparently Alistair Cooke had shaken the hand of someone who had shaken the hand of someone who had shaken the hand of Napoleon. And now our professor was included in that chain. Being thoughtful and dignified pastors and seminary students, we all immediately rushed our professor and shook his hand, so we could be in that esteemed company of only being a few handshakes from Napoleon.

It seems to me the Apostle Paul wants to tell the church in Corinth about a handshake he has had with some folks who made a lasting impact on his life. In a real sense, Paul wants the church in Corinth to shake hands with these folks, to be linked with them, to be joined in a common cause. The folks whose handshake made such a profound impression on Paul’s life are the churches of Macedonia. The New Testament lists three churches in Macedonia, or at least three places where Paul would have encountered and been impacted by the Macedonians.

First is Philippi, a Roman city he visited. Second would be Thessalonica. Third is Berea. In Acts 16 and 17 we read of these three

Macedonian cities. The Berean church is only mentioned in Acts, but what we learn about the Bereans is priceless, because the Bereans were devoted to the scriptures. Philippi and Thessalonica are part of the captured correspondence from Paul, and what he writes about those churches is powerful. To the Philippians he expresses the deepest affection and claims them as partners in the gospel. The Thessalonians are lauded for their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope in Jesus Christ. Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul expresses his desire that the Corinthians would shake hands with the churches in Macedonia. The Corinthians have something to learn from the Macedonians. Paul desires that the things that mark the Macedonians would be things that mark the Corinthians. Paul wants the Corinthians to join hands with the Macedonians. What is it about the Macedonians that touched Paul so deeply? By the grace of God...

- In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.
- They gave as much as they were able...and even beyond their ability.
- They urgently pleaded for the privilege of sharing in the service of the Lord's people.
- They exceeded all expectations.
- They gave themselves first of all to the Lord.
- Then they gave themselves to Paul and his companions

Corinthians, you just have to shake hands with the Macedonians. They are such an amazing example of generous, faithful, earnest, and sacrificial giving. For the Corinthians to shake hands with the Macedonians, in the context we are exploring, was not an impossible task. Paul is the intermediary. Paul knew the Macedonians. Paul knew the Corinthians. Paul links them together and calls for their hands to be joined. By having the Corinthians shake hands with the Macedonians, Paul is calling for the church in Corinth to test the sincerity of their love. There is no question of the depth of love demonstrated by the

Macedonians. With hands clasped together, the Corinthians have the opportunity to test the sincerity of their love.

I wish we knew how things turned out when the Corinthians shook hands with Macedonians. The handshake is initiated in the letter we know as II Corinthians, but we do not have a III Corinthians to turn to. Nevertheless, we can imagine what might have resulted from that handshake. Paul certainly imagines such a thing. Anticipating the outcome of that handshake Paul envisioned the Corinthians performing a service that would supply for ones in need, and in supplying those needs many expressions of thanks to God would overflow. Their service would bring praise to God as others observed their obedience and their generosity. Ultimately, prayers by others would arise as from hearts touched by the giving of the Corinthians as God's surpassing grace was so evident in their eyes. (II Corinthians 9:12-15)

All this talk about shaking hands might leave you shaking your head. What does this have to do with us, this hypothetical handshake that supposedly took place nearly 2,000 years ago? Whether we know it or not, whether we would put it in the terms I am putting it, I believe we all have the opportunity to shake hands with the Macedonians. In fact, one of the great blessings in our lives is to shake hands with the Macedonians. One of the most beautiful and inspiring gifts God gives is for us to shake hands with the Macedonians.

To literally shake hands with the Macedonians we would have to travel nearly 5,000 miles and travel across time by close to two millenia. But there is another way to shake hands with the Macedonians. You could have joined us on our recent mission trip to Guatemala. You would have been with us when we shook hands with a Macedonian named Armando. As a young father Armando was diagnosed with cancer. His village surrounded him with prayer. Through the work of Faith in Practice Armando was able to have a surgery for his cancer. The cancer was on his face. A large portion of his face was removed. Then following chemotherapy, a gaping hole was left in his face. Despite the

painful process he endured of having his face reconstructed, Armando made a vow. He wanted to serve others.

Armando was there to welcome our team when we arrived at our village. It was one of the most humbling moments I have ever experienced. This particular village was the site of the last medical team that was sent out in 2020. On the next to last day of the mission, the team was pulled out of Guatemala because of COVID and barely made it home before the borders closed. Armando pleaded with the staff to know if anyone would ever return. A promise was made. Our team was the fulfillment of the promise, some 18 months later. The look of relief and gratitude on all the faces of the villagers was overwhelming. Armando has lived a life that overflows with poverty. But this man has the deepest joy and the richest generosity. He gives of himself completely. When you meet Armando, you are one handshake away from the Macedonians.

Julie worked at the mobility clinic alongside a team of Macedonians. She worked closest with a man from Macedonia named Byron. Byron is a Guatemalan who serves on the staff with Faith in Practice. Byron, who is a master at building wheelchairs happens to be confined to a wheelchair. Talk about heartbreaking, Byron told us that seven years ago he was attacked for no reason and hit repeatedly in his back with a baseball bat. Those repeated strikes left him paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. I cannot imagine the impact those wounds had on his spirit as well as his body. And yet here he is, day after day, building countless wheelchairs to help others, and doing it with a level of kindness and compassion that defies expectations. Although Byron knows the poverty of physical attack, injury, and paralysis of his legs, his life overflows with the deepest joy and the richest generosity. When you meet Byron, you are one handshake away from the Macedonians.

Bernie is a doctor who served on our team and who has been with us on previous trips. Bernie and his wife Pam have led many teams, and he also signs up to come when he is not leading the team. Like everyone

else on these trips, Bernie pays his own way so that he can have the privilege of serving. Each trip costs over \$1,000, in addition to airfare and any other expenses. He has gone on close to 40 trips, usually going to serve two times a year. Over the years his personal financial cost is more than \$50,000, and yet that doesn't even seem to enter his mind. With a great sense of humor and an appreciation of the blessings he has in his own life, Bernie patiently treats his patients with the best practices that represent years of experience. One of Bernie's children is facing a difficult health challenge. Instead of pulling into himself and pulling out of the trip, Bernie chose to serve yet again. Bernie's life overflows with the deepest joy and the richest generosity. When you meet Bernie, you are one handshake away from the Macedonians.

Joanie and Marty Martin joined our team. Marty is a pediatrician from Fresno, California. When we lived in Fresno Marty was the pediatrician for our four children, and he is an excellent doctor. During a fun little get to know you activity early in our trip to Guatemala, people wrote something about themselves others might not know. One of the notes said, "I married a mail order bride." Oh! Really? Well, it turns out not really. Before they knew each other, Joanie and Marty corresponded. At the time Marty was going for several months each year to Cambodia and doing volunteer medical work. He really was a missionary. Joanie was captivated by his story and the two of them began writing notes, which led to their meeting one another, and getting married. Not long after they were married, Joanie and Marty made a decision to move into a very poor area of Fresno, an area where 95% of the people lived in poverty, and many refugees from Southeast Asia had settled. It was an area known for gangs, drugs, and violence. The Martins made their home a safe haven for children and youth, even turning a large yard area into a little park. They sold that home a few years ago to a former gang member who has turned his life around as a result of a Christian ministry. Marty is very quiet and soft spoken and rarely calls attention to himself. He told me something extraordinary but in such a way that it might have been as common as the weather report for the day. He said the former gang member and his family who have moved into their

home in this neighborhood full of challenges have made a formal move to name the park that is part of their home. Marty said, “They named it Martin Park.” Marty and Joanie chose to live a life surrounded by poverty, and yet their lives overflow with the deepest joy and the richest generosity. When you meet Marty and Joanie Martin you are one handshake away from the Macedonians.

And now we are no longer in Guatemala, we are in Fresno, California, and yet despite the geographical change we are still in Macedonia. That is important. All the people who traveled with our team to Guatemala all returned to their normal home. That means in the places each of these people live there are Macedonians, people who have experienced poverty in numerous ways and whose lives nevertheless overflow with the deepest joy and the richest generosity. Char is a nurse who returned from Guatemala to her home in South Bend, Indiana. A few years ago, Char, who is a retired nurse, brought her 90-year-old mother from Florida to live with her in Indiana. She cared for her mother until her mother died. Char’s grandchildren live in South Bend. She watches her grandchildren when their parents are at work. How many Macedonians care for an aging parent, a spouse facing challenges, how many Macedonians give love and support to their children and grandchildren, giving sacrificially because their love overflows in an outpouring of generosity that is manifested in caregiving and kindness? Guatemala, Fresno, California, South Bend, Indiana...and Westerly, Rhode Island. How many Macedonians live right here in our little corner of Rhode Island? I see a room filled with Macedonians, people who have encountered extreme poverty in the many ways our life face poverty, and with the deepest joy your lives well up in rich generosity.

Paul wanted the church in Corinth to shake hands with the churches in Macedonia. Paul wanted the Corinthians not only to meet the Macedonians, he wanted them to be inspired by them and to imitate them, to discover the amazing truth that when Christ Jesus is present overflowing joy and extreme poverty can well up in rich generosity. Paul wanted to tell others about those churches in Macedonia. But Paul

wanted more for the Corinthians. As much as Paul wanted the Corinthians to shake hands with those Macedonian churches whose extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity, and as much as I have gained by shaking hands with Macedonians named Armando, Byron, Bernie, Joanie, Marty, Char, and so many others, Paul wants more for us than just shaking hands with the Macedonian churches, those precious saints whose extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. Paul wants us to shake hands with Jesus.

After lifting up the Macedonian churches as a compelling example of ones whose giving is exemplary, and after Paul writes to the Corinthians, “I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others (the Macedonian churches)”, the Apostle makes a subtle and yet extremely significant move as he lets us know whose hand he really wants us to shake. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (II Corinthians 8:9) Without taking one single thing away from all those faithful, generous, committed, and dedicated Macedonians who fill our lives as they serve and make sacrifices in the name of their Lord, without taking one single thing away from the Macedonians, Paul makes it clear that the handshake that transforms our lives is the handshake we have with Jesus Christ.

Paul makes this kind of move in other places. Writing to one of the Macedonian churches, the church at Philippi, he told those Macedonians, “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...”. Writing to those Macedonians who lived in Philippi Paul rejoiced, saying that they “shine like stars in the sky as they hold firmly to the word of life.” What a tremendous and soaring affirmation of the faith of those Macedonians. They shine like stars. That is in Philippians 2. And yet while he holds those dear friends up as stars that shine, he begins that same chapter in Philippians by lifting up Jesus Christ, “Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something

to be used to his own advantage: rather, he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...humbling himself and becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8) When followers of Jesus Christ follow Jesus Christ, they shine like stars in the sky. When we follow Jesus Christ we shine like stars in the sky.

But we only shine like stars in the sky when we follow Jesus Christ, whose bright star that shined over Bethlehem signaled his entry into this world, a world where he came to serve and sacrifice and lay down his life. So it is no surprise when Paul boldly proclaims to that Macedonian church known as Philippi “I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...” (Philippians 3:10) Paul has experienced the transformation of shaking hands with Jesus, and he wants nothing more for others, nothing more for the Macedonians and the Corinthians, he wants nothing more for us than for us to shake hands with Jesus, for that is the handshake that will change our life forever.

A seminary professor said he was four handshakes from Napoleon and we rushed forward so that we could be five handshakes from Napoleon. It was a silly gesture that is symbolic of this silly world in which we live, where we rush forward to shake hands with American Idols and The Voices and to dance with the stars and to touch celebrities and sports stars and billionaires and world leaders. Today, on our dedication Sunday, we have a chance to do something that is not silly. Today God’s very own Son, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, is extending his hand to you and to me. We can shake his hand.

- We can touch the hand that touched the leper and made him clean
- We can touch the hand that touched the blind eyes and brought sight
- We can touch the hand that touched the tax-collectors and sinners and removed their sin
- We can touch the hand that touched the tears of a weeping woman and filled her life with love

- We can touch the hand that touched the loaves that fed 5,000
- We can touch the hand that touched the loaves and said, “This is Body given for you.”
- We can touch the hand that touched the heavy and hopeless hearts, saying, “Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”
- We can touch the hand that bears the scars that prove his love...greater love has no one than this than that he would lay down his life for his friends.
- We can touch the hand that touched all the prodigals in this world, all those who had wandered, all those who were lonely, all those who were lost, all those the world treated as the least, we can touch the hand of Jesus as he wraps us up in his arms of love and says to us, “Welcome home, my dear and precious child.”

The hand of Jesus is extended this morning. On this Dedication Sunday, there is no more important dedication we can make than to dedicate our lives to Jesus Christ. His hand is reaching out to us. Let today be the day you shake his hand, for there is no greater gift than to be held in the hand of our Lord. Let the hand of Jesus grab hold of you today, let his overflowing joy and the extreme poverty he willingly embraced, let his joy and his extreme poverty well up within you...let it well up within us.

Let his love well up within us in the rich generosity that says, **“Take my love; my Lord I pour at thy feet its treasure store; Take myself and I will be ever, only, all for thee, ever only all for thee.”**