

Material Grace

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

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There are times on the weekends with thousands of movies out there for the choosing, when my family and I simply cannot find something that we all want to watch. Our satellite television system must have 750 channels on it, and yet we are still dissatisfied with everything on it on a Friday night. So, in the days when there still were video stores, we would head off to the video store and walk around the aisles of movie after movie after movie like sheep without a shepherd, and after 30 minutes or so of this mindlessness, we would very often head back to the car *empty* handed. Every once in a while, though, we found a gift.

Several years ago, our daughter found it. She came over to my wife and me with a DVD that had a man sitting with an empty expression on his face, staring forward into nothingness. Just sitting. Just staring. The title was *Lars and the Real Girl*.

To understand what happened next, you have to understand a little something about me. Growing up, I had the gift of being able to tell whether food was going to taste good or bad simply by looking at the food. My mother mocked my gift, but time and time again, I could look at a vegetable dish, and, having pronounced it funny looking, I would know right away that it was also inedible. I also have this gift with the covers of DVDs. Without knowing anything about the movie, I can look at a DVD cover and immediately, instantly arrive at a reasonable, rational, even righteous conclusion. I told my daughter, "We don't want to see that."

All of a sudden I was faced with a family mutiny. My wife and daughter refused to recognize my executive prerogative. My daughter protested until I did the unthinkable. I conceded. Right there in public, in the middle of the store, I, who have the power to determine whether I like vegetables and movies by the look of their packaging, took out my glasses and read what the thing was about. It sounded so odd that I couldn't help but be intrigued.

Well, it started out weird and slow. Lars mostly just sat around staring at stuff. He had no friends, refused to be in any relationships, and avoided his brother and sister-in-law who loved him by living out in the garage rather than in the house.

One day, out of the blue, Lars tells his brother and sister-in-law that he has met someone and that they are engaged, and she needs to stay in the house with them because she and Lars, of course, are not yet married. Her name is Bianca. We see Lars' brother and sister-in-law get so excited because Lars has made such a wonderful romantic contact. Of course Bianca can stay with them. Bianca, Lars explains, is from Brazil.

Bianca, it turns out, is actually from a box. Bianca is a life-sized doll that Lars has ordered from the internet. It is at this point that the tag line for the movie makes sense. It says, "The search for true love begins outside the box." Of course, in Lars' case, they mean this literally.

Well, you can imagine the shocked looks on the faces of Lars' brother and sister-in-law as Lars sits there beside this doll and introduces her to them. In the oddest of

conversations, he talks to her and interacts with her as though she is real. Of course, they take Lars for medical assistance the very next day. The doctor explains that, quote, “Bianca is in town for a reason.” Lars is trying to cope with something broken in his life through this delusion. And the doctor suggests that since they won’t be able to convince him that Bianca is not real anyway, they should live out the delusion with him in hopes that they can find out why he needs her.

Now you are wondering, I am sure, what in the world has this guy with a delusion about a life sized doll he ordered from the internet got to do with Paul’s belief that the Corinthians can create a stronger community *if* they share their resources with the poor believers who live in Jerusalem. You’ll remember from the scripture that Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to give to a collection he is raising to help the poor. He is trying to get a community that has been gifted by God with material things, money, to share some of that money with the poor. By doing this, Paul believes that he can help bring unity to the church. He wants to build community by having the wealthy Gentile Christians give some of their money to the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

I thought of *Lars and the Real Girl* as I read and re-read this Pauline text precisely because the doctor was asking Lars’ brother and sister-in-law to *give* Lars their love and their patience even though on the surface, it looked like Lars was too mentally and spiritually poor to give them back anything in return. As it turned out, the entire town entered into the giving act. It was one of those small towns where everybody knows and looks out for everybody else. At first, people just laughed at Lars. But then, because he was one of them, because they were community, they did as Lars’ brother and sister-in-law did. They tried to help Lars by pretending that Bianca was real. And then something miraculous happened. Bianca became real. Not in a literal sense, but real enough to them. They started treating Bianca with respect because of Lars. They accepted her at church worship. At the Beauty Parlor they did her hair. At the hospital, they let Bianca sit with the sick children. At the local department store, they let Bianca have a part time job modeling clothes in the store window.

Out of Lars’s illness and the town’s giving love, an image of love, grace-filled, a-caring-for-somebody-else-more-than-I-care-for-myself kind of love materialized. Their giving grace bore the fruit of true community. Though they begrudgingly gave themselves to playing along at first, they cheerfully did so by the movie’s end. It was that cheerful giving that helped Lars find his way back into community and health. They gave Lars their love, and Lars gave them a view of themselves that they, and those of us who watched their movie, could deeply appreciate. By loving Lars, they strengthened their community. The love they gave out came back to them a hundred-fold.

That, quite simply, is all Paul is saying about the cheerful giving that God loves. Cheerful giving of oneself and one’s resources is the kind of giving that creates community. That, I believe, is what we come together to celebrate this morning. A community that has been gifted by the inexpressible gift that is the Son of God in our midst. We allow that gift to materialize not only in worship, but in the way we share our gift with others.

Compared to the Jewish Christians in Palestine, the Corinthians are rich. Paul wants the Corinthians to stop thinking about how much they must keep of what they have and start thinking of how much they must give of what they have. He wants them

to share. He believes that by sharing, they will show the world that they are unified in faith with the poor Jerusalem Christians. They can demonstrate their gratitude for all that God has given them by giving to God's less materially fortunate, and therefore show that they believe that even though they are Gentiles and those others are Jewish, even though they are separated by vast distances, they are still one community of faith, one body of Christ.

But something has gone wrong. Paul is concerned about Macedonians coming with him on a visit to Corinth, so instead of coming with the Macedonians himself, he sends an advance team of co-workers ahead to prepare the way.

Here's the situation. Paul was trying to get Gentile Christians in every town he visited to give to his collection to help the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. In an effort to get the Gentile Christians in Macedonia to support the collection for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem, Paul had bragged about how the believers in Corinth had pledged to raise a generous gift. And the good news is, the Macedonians, though they were nowhere near as wealthy as the Corinthians, had responded. As one of my former Ph.D. students wrote about this text, the Macedonian generosity caught Paul by surprise precisely because their generosity was *disproportionate*. They gave beyond their capability. Unlike the Corinthians, the Macedonians were not wealthy. The Macedonians did not have a lot themselves. They were themselves in material need. Most people give what they can afford to give. The Macedonians apparently gave what they could not afford to give. They were so overwhelmed by the grace of the gift of God's son in their lives and what that gift meant, that crazy with celebratory fever, they gave with the same joy and generosity that they believed God had given to them. As my student went on to say, "Paul is impressed that these materially impoverished Christians, in the midst of grave distress, begged to be permitted to give from their already meager resources (8:4)." Who in the world would beg to give to others when they have major needs themselves? The Macedonians would!

My student had a beautiful image to describe what was happening with the Macedonians. He likened them to a tree of grace that had been planted and nurtured by God. God had graced them with life, and they had taken on that grace so completely that they became rooted like a tree in that grace, and now, they were bearing grace fruit.

The singer Madonna used to call herself "the Material Girl." That was the title of a song she sang. We live, she sang, in a material world. Why not therefore be a material girl? Why not be someone who craved, stockpiled, and worshipped material treasures? Who would have thought that the preacher Paul and the pop singer Madonna would ever have anything in common! Madonna is a material girl. Amazingly, Paul wants the Corinthians, following the example of the Macedonians, to become Material Christians. That's the song he is also singing. We live, he was singing, in a material world? But it is a world of material *grace*. God's grace *materialized* in the form of God's son. God's grace *materialized* in the gift of blessed relationship with God. God's grace *materialized* in *our* salvation. If this is truly a material grace world, why not crave, stockpile, and share material grace? Why not let the grace we feel materialize into a kind of concrete grace that we can share with others? Why not plant, nurture, grow, and share grace fruit with those who are starving from both spiritual *and* material hunger? Why not become grace fruit ourselves by how we live our lives, by how we use the resources with which our lives have been gifted? That

is the question Paul is asking the Corinthians.

Paul is also asking *us*! Cannot we, too, be grace fruit on God's tree of communal life? Those who are grace fruit must not only celebrate what we have been given, but we must also cheerfully give that fruit in both spiritual and material ways to those who are in need. We are here this morning so that we can feed the hunger of God's people in need. That is what cheerful giving is all about. It is willing, sacrificial, loving giving, like God giving to God's people. No wonder Paul declares that God loves the cheerful giver.

Do I have an image of the kind of giving Paul is talking about? I think I do. Let me share a story that went out as my president's letter a few years ago in an issue of our seminary magazine *FOCUS*. It was just after the financial meltdown of Fall 2008. I wrote:

This past June (2009), we were ending what would reasonably be called a very challenging academic year. The seminary, like all seminaries, colleges, and universities, was shaken by the economic quake that disrupted financial landscapes across the globe. Like many other institutional leaders, I prayed throughout the year for God's strength and guidance. I will admit that as the year drew to its close, I offered up a few not so theologically appropriate prayers. I prayed for vacation! And, in my weaker moments, I prayed for a sign—just a little hint that as a community we were walking the path that God had set for us. After a few days without a celestial fireworks display, some theophany of voice speaking from a whirlwind, or any dream-like epiphany of astonishing proportions, I slung my backpack over my shoulder and walked over to my office like the right-thinking, reasonably-reformed New Testament scholar turned president who knows better than to go around seeking signs that I am—at least most of the time.

After entering my office, I went through my daily routine. Turned on the computer. Hung up my jacket. Pulled out the work I had accomplished the night before. Sat down in my chair. Turned to face the work on my desk. And saw this note.

My assistant had placed the note on my desk the day before. While I was out, I had had a visitor. Vismitha Taneti is her name. Vismitha is 5 years old. She had not visited by herself. She had come with her dad. And together they had left this note.

Vismitha's father is a student at the seminary, as is her mother. On the previous day, she had come with them to one of the conversations I had held with the community. I had alerted the community about some actions we were taking to respond to the financial circumstances we faced. Little children who accompany their parents to such gatherings very often occupy themselves with thoughts or activities that distance them from the adult conversations taking place around them. Vismitha, though, had been listening. Upon arrival back at their seminary apartment, she informed her parents that she wanted to help the seminary. So, she asked them if she could break open her piggy bank. After getting their permission, she did so. She counted out enough change to make a gift of \$52.00. Vismitha's dad did not want to leave \$52.00 in pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters

on my desk, so he wrote the seminary a check. The check accompanied the note on my desk. That check was—in my mind at least—a sign of God at work.

After sitting for almost ten minutes and staring into the space in front of my desk, I composed myself and then I composed a thank you letter to Vismitha. And then I thanked God for forgiving me for asking for a sign, and for giving me a sign anyway.

A sign of God's material grace in the cheerful gift of a little girl.

That is Paul's point to the Corinthians. And to us. *You* can be a sign of God's material grace because *you* are the indescribable gift. You can be! Recognize what you have been given, the gift of Christ, the gift of this wonderful community of faith that is your spiritual family, the gift of each other. Celebrate what you have been given by giving some of what you have to God's church and God's people in need. Give to someone else the fruit that has been given to you, the spiritual fruit and the material fruit. Be material!!

No one in here has to ask a Christian to be spiritual. Paul knows this about the Corinthians. Not only are they spiritual, but they are too spiritual. They are so spiritual that they are like ghosts, spirits, floating all over the church, all through Corinth, and, they hope, all over heaven, not touching, not doing, not changing anything. The Corinthians are so spiritual you can hardly see them, certainly can't feel them. The Corinthians don't like bodily stuff. Bodily stuff is messy, has an odor of decay to it, is limiting, is locked into the world of the flesh. They want to fly around in the clouds of converted, carefree Christianity. Body is ethical and moral and having to help others and do for others and do for God. The Corinthians want to be free of the body so they don't have to worry about right doing and right living and certainly not right sharing. Because, for the Corinthians, spiritual means, "I don't care how many resources I do have and I certainly don't care how many resources you don't have." Being spiritual means I am content with what I have, and I am also content with what you do not have.

Can you see why Paul is annoyed, why he wants these Corinthians to Get Material? He wants them to get messed up in the messiness of other folk's lives. He wants them to give some of what they have to people who have nothing. He wants them to stop floating around talking about heaven and get down in the hellish dirt with people who are being drowned by desperation and despair. He wants them to put some material flesh on those spiritual beliefs and get weighed down into the troubles of the world so they'll want to give of themselves to make some changes in that world. He wants them to Get Material.

I think we Christians today are too much like the Corinthians. We have and we love a spiritual faith. Don't get political; we're spiritual. Don't get material; we're spiritual. Don't get dirty; we're spiritual. We have a spiritual fixation. Like the Corinthians we want to be free of the weight of the world, come into church and leave the world behind and worship God and think about salvation and not be weighed down with all the struggles of life out there. We want to be like . . . beer. Every beer has a commercial these days about being great tasting and less filling. You can't watch a football game without seeing one of those commercials. Coors light. Miller light. Bud light. There's also Christian light. You can't go into a church without seeing

a whole gaggle of Light Christians. Frothy, sudsy, got good heads on them, always go down smooth. They worship well, they pray well, but there's no weight, no substance to them. Nothing weighing them down. That's because they are not material enough.

Paul's challenge: It's time for all the spiritual people to get material!

It's good to be spiritual, but a truly spiritual people is also a material people, a people who not only get salvation, but, having gotten that gift, give that gift of salvation back to somebody else. And you give salvation back the way God did, by giving up the high, spiritual life and dropping down into the material world of the incarnation. God got material. So can--so must--we. That's Paul's point!

The most spiritual reality of all--God--became material in Jesus and became for us material grace. That's all Paul is asking of the Corinthians. And of us. It's good to be spiritual. But we are also called to Get Material.

Spiritual Christians think about the poor and the starving in the world. Material Christians find a way to give food and resources to change their lives. Spiritual Christians lament when they read in the papers about people who have lost everything in floods or hurricanes or tornadoes. Material Christians get down on their hands and knees in the mud to rebuild with them. Spiritual Christians give of themselves to mission endeavors in the hot zones of life like urban ministries of food pantries or tutoring services by dropping volunteers off when they go in and picking volunteers up when they come out. Material Christians get out of the car and go into the shelters and closets and classrooms and give their time and talent. Spiritual Christians fret about the church budget and hope the pastor finds a way to get folk to make stronger pledges. Material Christians pull out their checkbooks and give to the church before they give to themselves because they have pledged themselves to the causes to which the church has committed itself.

You know what Paul is concerned about. Spiritual Christians are believing, trusting, loving, go-to-church-every-Sunday Christians, but they are light Christians, floating all over God's creation not touching much except the pew they park on. Material Christians are weighed down with the issues of God's world and God's people, and they give their time, their talents, their love, and, yes, their money to position the church to power the changes that can transform both soul and body.

Be material. Do material Grace. That is what stewardship is all about. Stewardship is about moving from saying grace to doing grace. It's about celebrating the spiritual by getting material. That is how you not only celebrate having the indescribable gift of Christ; it is how you become an indescribable gift for others.

The indescribable gift? It's you. It's us. This community is a tree of life for God's world, and each of you is material grace fruit on that tree, and you ripen in here in community, and you drop off in here with your tithes, your offerings, your time, and your talents. You drop off out there into the world with your gifts of time and talent and, yes, your money to share the indescribable gift of God's life and your own lives to those who need what you have, all that you have to give.

We are material grace fruit. Feed God's people.