

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 24-25, 2011
Philippians 2:1-13

“Rivers, Not Lakes”

Who among us has not at some point in life sat down beside a river to think, imagine, reflect, or dream? Whether the river is a small stream that one could jump across, or a mighty waterway that ships navigate, a river gives life to all that is around it. Just watching the flowing water pass by, hearing the gurgling sound of it, is refreshing in itself. But there is so much more! A river waters the landscape around it, causing plant and animal life to flourish. A river becomes a source of life because of that life-giving, flowing water. That image of a river is before us as we begin this series on Christian stewardship, using the 40-day devotional book, *Why Give?*, as our basis. Each Sunday, we will examine the previous week’s theme in both preaching and Sunday morning Bible study. I pray that you are already being blessed through these daily devotions. The central theme of the entire devotional book, as well as that of the first week, is how God calls us to be rivers, not lakes. And that is the theme for today’s message. May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

In contrast with a river, a lake takes in all of the water that flows *into* it – all of the rivulets, streams, and rivers - but very little, if anything, flows *out* of it. A lake is all about *getting*, but a river is all about *giving*. The Lord God is that ultimate river of giving because it is God’s very nature to give. Today’s Epistle lesson from Paul’s letter to the Philippians speaks clearly and beautifully about this. In fact, it is widely believed by many scholars that contained in these verses is one of the Christian faith’s earliest hymns. It is a hymn of praise that speaks of Christ’s sacrificial giving, **“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”** (Philippians 2:6-9). God’s river of giving which began at creation culminated in the giving of his only begotten Son, who freely and willingly gave his life as the atoning sacrifice for us all. This is where our stewardship of giving begins: with God’s giving.

Now, what is our response to all that God in Christ has given for us? Will we become a lake, with everything that God graciously provides flowing into our lives, but very little if anything flowing out from us to give life to the world around us? That is the clear and present danger for us who have received this great good news; that we become like the Dead Sea – that well known body of water in the Middle East. It gets its name because it is essentially dead – void of life. You can go there and literally float in the water because of its hypersaline quality. The mud of the Dead Sea is widely used in cosmetics and bath products, but aside from this there is no life in it. God calls us to something different – not to be dead seas, but rivers of life with the life of Jesus flowing through us to others. Paul tells us what this will look like in the lives of Christ’s people: **“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only**

to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:1-5). This is our calling in Christ: to be rivers of giving.

In the devotion for Day3 in *Why Give?* from this past week, the author states: “A bishop of the Church of North India told me that he believed the primary sign of a person’s faith in Christ was giving! He went on to say that he did not believe a person could be saved and be stingy at the same time. Salvation means that God’s resources flow through us” (p. 35). That’s a pretty bold statement, but I don’t disagree with it. With all that God in Christ has given for us and for our salvation, how can we be anything but generous? And let me say clearly: it’s not just about the money. God’s resources that flow through us certainly do include this, but are in no way limited only to money and finances. God’s resources include our time, our body – its health and well-being, our gifts and talents, our relationships, our work, our leisure, our mind and personality, our faith. All of these are God’s resources placed into our empty hands so that God might bless others through us as we, by his grace, become Christ-like rivers of giving.

If we’re going to understand this whole stewardship thing and what it means to be stewards and managers of God’s gifts, to be rivers of giving, then we must first understand who God is as the ultimate Giver of every good and perfect gift that comes down from above (James 1:17). God as the ultimate river of giving now calls us to become those rivers of giving through Christ in each of our lives. God help us to do this, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.