



God Loves a Cheerful Giver
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The following reflection on the theme for this year's ABA campaign is intended to assist pastors and parish ABA representatives in their efforts to support the appeal this year.

When I first learned of the theme for this year's ABA campaign, *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Corinthians 9.7), it rubbed me the wrong way. Does the passage mean that God does not love a grumpy giver? What about the non-giver? I was tempted to prepare a reflection exploring the potential value of giving even grumpily because it did not seem right to say that if you could not do it cheerfully, you should not do it at all. In the end, I think I will save that question for a Lenten reflection. The question is, after all, similar to what we hear in the readings for Ash Wednesday about how to fast: not moaning and groaning about how hungry we are and moping about but rather washing our faces, putting oil on our heads, and going about our business as usual.

Still, this question about the grumpy giver did lead me to think about the three populations present in every parish: the cheerful giver, the grumpy giver, and the non-giver.

Sometimes a cheerful giver is eager to share her resources but is concerned that they be stewarded responsibly and put to good use. The ABA campaign can make giving easier for the cheerful giver. By publicising the way ABA funds are distributed and put to use and by inviting recipient agencies to speak about how they serve the pastoral needs of the church in Southern Alberta, parishes can give people peace of mind about their giving. It might sound trite but it's true: ABA gives the cheerful giver an opportunity to give!

What about the other two populations? How do we encourage non-givers to give and grumpy givers to be cheerful? Bishop Robert Morneau of Green Bay Wisconsin first presented a syllogism, a three-line argument, to illustrate what determines behaviour. The argument says, "we live on images: images lead to attitude and attitude leads to behaviour." We do not change behaviour by harping on people or even by focusing on attitudes. The root of behaviour is self-image. Images are hard to change and besides, it is not entirely up to us. If someone is not open to God's Word or the movement of the Holy Spirit, it may not matter what you say. However, we continue to pray for God to work in people's lives, as we pray that He work in our lives. We can also do our best to identify the images that may keep people from giving or giving cheerfully and work towards cultivating different images.

In order to make more sense of the theme, *God loves a cheerful giver*, let us look at the Scriptural context of this phrase by examining the whole of 2 Corinthians 9.6-13.

The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

This passage is about image—the image of abundance. It is not unlike the parable of the talents where we are told, *for all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away* (Matthew 25:29). It sounds counter-intuitive or like saying that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer but really, it has to do with the first principle of stewardship, with receiving God's gifts with gratitude. People who acknowledge God as the giver of all they have and are and who recognise that they are then dependent on God for what they do with these gifts, live with a sense of gratitude and abundance. Their self-image is of a people who have been blessed and gifted. These are the people who sow bountifully, who are not hoarding what they see as meagre resources. The cheerful giver, with an image of abundance, has an attitude of gratitude and manifests generous behaviour.

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

This line from the passage takes us to the second stewardship principle about discernment, or cultivating God's gifts responsibly. Individuals decide for themselves what they must give. Their image and attitude determine their behaviour. As this passage suggests, some people give for the wrong reasons: reluctantly or under compulsion. They might have an attitude of guilt, concern for their own salvation, or fear of God's wrath rather than an attitude of love for neighbour. This kind of giver, the grumpy giver, has a different image in mind than the cheerful giver. Instead of seeing herself as the recipient of a beneficent God's gifts, she sees herself as slavishly trying to appease a harsh and judgemental God. Grumpy giving is behaviour that reflects an attitude of obligation and an image of fear.

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

This final phrase from the passage illustrates the third and fourth principles of stewardship. The third is to share lovingly and in justice with others and the fourth is actually to go beyond love and justice and to return God's gifts with increase. Here the scripture talks about sharing abundantly—not in a calculating way but liberally, free from fear. If the grumpy giver is afraid of what will happen to her if she does not give, the non-giver is afraid of what will become of her if she does! This scripture passage insists that God provides you with every blessing in abundance and that you will always have enough of everything. The non-giver does not usually have a money problem, rather, the non-giver usually has a faith problem. Just remember the story of the widow's mite. The widow put into the treasury all that she had to live on. Did she not know she was poor? Did she not need this money to survive? Clearly the widow was poor but she was not afraid. She believed that God would provide, whether miraculously or through the support of her friends, family, and community. She did not fear becoming destitute.

Generous, free, cheerful giving comes from an attitude of gratitude for a life of abundance. When we hold an image of God as the giver of all and an image of self as the recipient of God's gifts, we see the abundance in our lives that make us long to give out of gratitude.

Questions for reflection:

- What kind of giver are you? What image determines your behaviour?
- What kind of givers are in your parish? What images determine their behaviour?
- What image do you need to cultivate for all to become cheerful givers?
- How can cheerful givers help to change the image of others?