

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 2, 2006

"Balancing Act"
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Modern life is often described as balancing act.

Go to Borders Books or go online
and you'll find a thousand recent books or websites
dedicated to helping you manage the many demands
of work and personal life,
so that you keep things in balance.

Almost every day, we have to balance
work with leisure,
career advancement with family nurture,
good nutrition with convenience and affordability,
exercise with rest,
self-care with taking care of others.

Achieving the right balance is the key to a healthy life.

It's also the key to a healthy portfolio, say all the investment experts.
One of most important things investors are advised to do,
is to "Rebalance" their portfolios on a regular basis,
keeping their assets wisely allocated between
stocks, bonds, cash and so on.

As Christians, to be sure,
we are called to seek the right balance
among the many important aspects of our lives.
We are called to be good stewards of what we've been given,
and not neglect any of the important things:
family, work, health, recreation, service, spiritual life, and so on.

But Christians are called to a broader vision of balance.
As those who see the world
through the lens of God's love in Jesus Christ,
we are called to see that our personal or family balance,
that is, our personal or family well-being,
is *directly related* to the balance and well-being of others.

The Balancing Act that God seeks
involves more than our little individual or family spheres of balance,

but calls us to be concerned with
the balanced well-being of all creation,
the balance of the world and all those who live in it.

That's quite a Balancing Act.

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This is the kind of balance Paul is calling for
when he writes to the Corinthian church
and invites them to share in this generous act of giving
for the sake of the church in Jerusalem.

Part of Paul's missionary endeavor
was to seek contributions for the impoverished Christians
in the Jerusalem church.

As he approaches the Corinthians with his request
he does so delicately, for several reasons:

For one, they have already given in the past
and perhaps he's not sure how many times he can go to that well.

Secondly, as the letter makes clear,
his relationship with the Corinthians has been rather strained of late,
conflicted on a number of different matters.

Thirdly, he knows he's dealing with some ego issues,
so perhaps he's got to convince the Corinthians
that this generous act is their own idea.

You see, the Corinthians are into "excellence" –
they want to *excel* at everything.

In fact, one of the spiritual issues Paul addresses with them
is their competitive desire always to "one-up" each other.
Still, Paul figures, if they've got this vice of excessive competition,
we might as well harness it for the good of the church.

So, he reminds the Corinthians
that the Macedonians have already given generously
to this collection for the Jerusalem church,
even though the Macedonians
are themselves pretty hard up for cash.

He refers to the Macedonian generosity as a "test" of love,
because they gave abundantly during tough times.

So Paul says to the well-off Corinthians

*I am testing the genuineness of your love
against the earnestness of others.*

A little friendly competition for the sake of the poor, it seems.

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The Corinthians, like most middle to upper-middle class folks,
are very good at achieving personal balance:
they use their personal resources to excel at things
that make them stronger and better:
profit in the marketplace, learning in the academy,
achievement in athletics, status in social life,
security for the family, strength of faith.

Paul wants to broaden their sphere of concern,
to see that in God's economy,
the Balancing Act is much bigger
and involves us in expanding our care
beyond personal and family gain.

God's concern for Cosmic Balance is revealed in Jesus,
*For you know the generous ACT of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor,
so that by his poverty you might become rich.*

Now Paul knows all the rationalizations used by the well-to-do
to justify their accumulation of wealth, their endless consumption,
so he hastens to qualify his request:

*I do not mean that there should be relief for others
and pressure on you,
but it is a question of a fair balance
between your present abundance and their need,
so that their abundance may be for your need,
in order that their may be a fair balance.*

And he concludes his vision of balance by drawing on
the story of the Exodus, when the people gathered manna in the desert;
they gathered just enough so that

*The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.*

Several years ago I knew a certain financial adviser.

One day he said to me in bewilderment,

I work one day with a man
who is irritated that he has to come up with
several hundred thousand dollars to pay his taxes,
because he had the unfortunate taxable event of
making a lot of extra money that year

which couldn't be sheltered from taxation.

I work the very next day with an elderly woman
whose medical bills and prescriptions,
utilities and debt re-payments
are driving her relentlessly toward bankruptcy.

The world is just so out of balance.

Paul's point is: when this kind of imbalance occurs in the world,
and it always is,
God calls upon us, in the name of Christ, to join in
The Balancing Act.

For the Christian, it's about more than *personal life balance*,
it is about *balance within the household of God*;
church-wide, community-wide, world-wide.
Jesus Christ brings about Cosmic Balance, and call us to share in his work.

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In our church today,
many of us are like the Corinthians, having more than we need;
others of us are more like the hard-pressed Macedonians,
struggling to make ends meet, but still able with difficulty
to share some of our resources with others;
still others of us are like the Christians in Jerusalem,
in desperate need of help to meet our most basic needs.

For those of us with more resources,
following Jesus is a constant call to engage in Balancing Acts:
that is, to take action that puts our money where our mouths are,
that puts our time and talents where our testimony is,
so that God's abundance can be shared;
so that *the one who has much does not have too much*
and the one who has little does not have too little.

That's why middle and upper-middle class Christians
leave the comforts of suburbia and go on mission trips all the time:
these are Balancing Acts.

It's one reason why our youth go to inner city Chicago
to serve the elderly poor, the homeless, the children of the city.
It's why Karen and Mary Ellen are leaving tomorrow to go to Naples,
carrying duffle bags full of clothes from the children of GPC

to the children of the Casa Mia in Naples.

These are our Balancing Acts,
or rather,
these are our way of participating in God's Cosmic Balancing Act
in Jesus Christ.

It should also be said, and said loudly,
that receiving a generous gift
given in the name of Christ,
is no less sacred, no less holy, no less honorable
that giving the gift.

There is no shame, but only honor,
in receiving a gift given in the name of Christ
for the sake of balance.

It is only the male-dominant, patriarchal, testosterone driven
culture of excessive competition
that would shame a person for receiving
a compassionate, balancing gift –
there is no shame before God.

God's sacred economy requires givers and receivers
to achieve balance,
and both the givers and the receivers,
in the act of receiving the gift as well as giving it,
are honoring God's desire that abundance be shared by all.

No one is superior to anyone else,
since all the abundance belongs to God, and not to us,
in the first place.

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So, how is God calling you to participate in the great Balancing Act?
We have focused primarily on economic balancing,
since that is what this passage, and *so much* of scripture is about:
economics

Is it time for you to engage in some form of economic generosity?

Or do you need some other form of balance:
Perhaps you have been living your life in a posture of judgment;
you are angry at someone, or a group of others,
in your family, say, or in the church,
and you've been blaming that person or that group
for being such bad people, such bad Christians.

Could it be that your Balancing Act is to step back from blame

and take the oak trunk out of your own eye
before you seek to remove the speck from your neighbor's eye?
To give up your need of being right all the time,
and admit that you might still have a few things to learn about life.
Again, this kind of humble posture, *so central* to Jesus' teaching
is quite contrary to the male-dominant,
patriarchal, testosterone-driven culture of excessive competition
which drives us these days.
That is to say, on this 4th of July weekend,
humility is quite un-American,
but it is the only path to true freedom in Christ .

Or perhaps you have fallen into the downward spiral of work-a-holism,
or sports-a-holism.

Then your Balancing Act might be one of Sabbath.
Learning to take Sabbath is not a self-indulgent act of balancing.
But, the scriptures teach that our inability to rest from striving,
whether striving to make money, or striving to excel at sports,
has an impact on others;
an economic, spiritual, physical, emotional impact on others.
The practice of Sabbath rest and worship,
is one of the most radical, most public, most relational,
Balancing Acts available to the church.

Paul puts the challenge before us:
You say you love Christ. Let's test that claim.
Put your money where your mouth is.
Put your time where your testimony is.
Back up your words with witness.
Be generous.
Give, not more than you have,
but according to what you have.

And in your generous act
you will learn to rejoice in the only abundance that really matters,
the abundant love of God, given freely in Jesus Christ.

Amen.