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Philippians 4:9-23
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Mutuality in Christ

Today we say goodbye to Paul's letter, but Paul has one last thing to say to his church in Philippi. He says, thank you. But not exactly. He says 13 verses saying everything, but thank you. Let's explore why Paul may have done this and what this can teach us about the ancient Christian ritual of communion, remembering the last supper between Jesus and his disciples.

Prayer: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What is Christian gift giving?

Growing up, some of my favorite days of the year were Christmas and my birthday because these were days that my parents would get me gifts. When I think back to these days, I remember just how much I depended on them, not just for gifts, but for food, clothing, shelter, and many other things. And while these gifts were all hallmarks of my pretty nice childhood, it also shows the power dynamic between my parents and I while I was growing up. They were in charge and I was dependent upon them.

This metaphor of parenthood, may be a good bridge into understanding how gift giving worked in the ancient world that Paul lived in. In that time, the fabric of society was held together by patron, client relationships. The patron would be a wealthy individual, probably a land owner. Every morning, their clients would come to them, to either receive gifts of some bread or coins. And in exchange they would vote for their patrons in elections and make their patron look good by joining them when their patron conducted their business. These patron-client relationships were the glue that held ancient Roman society together.

So, okay. I've told you about how a parent gave gifts to me as a child and how Roman patrons give gifts to their clients. What does this have to do with Paul?

Well, when I hear this passage I usually think of inspirational posters with the words, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." But really this passage is about the Philippians giving Paul a gift. Paul starts by saying how he does not need the gift. I can imagine this is like in some southern cultures you are supposed to refuse a gift, before they can accept it. It is important to Paul that he let them know that he is not asking for anything. But why?

Because asking for a gift would be a sign that he is their client and they are the patron.

The other thing to note is that Paul never says thank you. This may strike us as weird, isn't it polite to say thank you to a gift. After all, Paul is in prison, a prison where his Roman jailers would not be giving him anything to eat, Paul depends upon the kindness of traveling companions and gifts from his churches. So why not thank them?

Because thanking someone for a gift is a sign that Paul is their client and they are the patron.

Paul is letting his Philippian church know that while he is grateful for this gift, it is indeed a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. What he wants with them is giving and receiving. Paul desires not the relationship of a parent and child or patron and client, but a relationship of equals. He is modeling mutuality in Christ.

Paul's refusal to enter into an unequal partnership with anyone does have economic consequences. In Romans, Paul goes on to explain what this mutuality would look like within a church. Paul tells the church to "love the stranger" "associate with the lowly," and "Regarding each other according to the same social rank." When we consider others to be of the same social rank, do we rub shoulders with the lowly, and give new people the benefit of the doubt? What kind of church does this produce?

I know that we as the church have tried to follow in Paul's way that he set before us. The church has tried to give money and comfort to the poor, starting schools and hospitals, raising money to pay for rent and the basic necessities of life. But when the church has all the money and the poor are always the grateful receivers, I fear that the church has replicated the old patron-client system. Where in exchange for money, the church has bought the loyalty of believers. What we are really doing is establishing an unbalanced donor / needy relationship. And I know that is harsh, but charity kinda rubs me the wrong way.

Shifting from the church universal to our local congregation. The church must be faithful stewards of the money our congregants have given us. So, in an attempt to be faithful to our people, the church only gives to people who it considers worthy. And I imagine that if it ever came up that means no money for prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. No money for the people that Jesus kept associating with and calling his family. And I know that I am guilty of this too. I want to make sure our donations are responsibly given. But here is annoying Paul, whispering in my ear how I am not really rubbing shoulders with the lowly if all I do is cut a check. Here is Paul telling me that it is in giving AND receiving that we have mutuality in Christ. If I am just a giver, then I am not really inviting people into this church. I am only giving to people I already know and trust.

So where does this leave us today? I think that Paul is calling us to partnership.

A partnership is one where we are standing in solidarity with the needy. Where their desires become our desires. Where we move from the model of helping people beat the odds, into changing the odds. Where we join with Oscar Romaro and ask the difficult questions about why the poor are poor. Where we recognize that the Holy Spirit has given gifts to the lowly as well. Ultimately, partnership is actually quite simple. It is about making friends with people. Making friends with people we once considered enemies. Making friends with people who consider each other enemies. Making friends with the stranger in our midst.

This does not mean that we have to have hundreds of friends, but I can imagine a world where the church is a bridge building place. Where one of us is connected to farmers others are connected to queer folks, and others to the latino community. We show how we can be friends with all sorts of people, that our network of mutual-love is stronger than any patron-client network.

Which brings me to communion. A symbolic act of this world of mutual-love and aid. There is no cheap bread and expensive bread. There is no first and no last. By taking these simple elements of bread and cup, we acknowledge that we are all human and all have a place at the table. I do not go up to one of you and say, you have not donated to the church this month, I shall withhold communion from you. And neither do I approach our big donors on bended knee thanking them for their money as I give them communion. In communion we are all equal, equals before God and equal among each other.