

THE MACEDONIANS

II Corinthians 8:1-8

The best thing about Bible School at the First Church
was the chocolate chip cookies.

This is not to say

Bible School at the First Church
was trivial or unfaithful.

Oh, no!

Bible study at the First Church was excellent and age appropriate.

Music and crafts were related to the Bible study.

Recreation was fun and nurturing.

In fact,

in every way,

Bible School at the First Church was *first rate*.

It's just that the *best* thing about Bible School at the First Church
was the chocolate chip cookies.

They were served up as a snack

the last day of Bible School every year.

For the other days,

refreshments were health conscious;

but on Friday

caution was thrown to the wind.

Lenny Penny made the chocolate chip cookies
for Bible School at the First Church.

Lenny Penny was her real name.

You and I know,

all things else being equal,

a woman named Lenny

probably should not marry a man named Penny

but she did.

By all accounts it was a good marriage.

Add to that

the children at Bible school

rather liked her cartoon-like name

and it made for a good match.

The children also liked the way she dressed...

seldom fashionably...

always bright and ever so colorfully.

Lenny was a Macedonian.

You could tell she was a Macedonian
because grace
was the most tasty ingredient
in her chocolate chip cookies.

Actually,

Lenny wasn't a Macedonian at all.

Lenny was a Texan...

transported to the small north Florida town
where her chocolate chip cookies became famous,
at least among the among the Bible School crowd.

In fact,

she probably knew little or nothing
about Macedonia,
that stub nose of a peninsula
which juts out just so
there between the Adriatic and Aegean Seas;

but in her heart of hearts Lenny was a true Macedonian.

Let me tell you about the Macedonians.

There was a time,
according to Paul,
when the Macedonians
knew more about the grace of giving
than almost anyone else in church.

**"I want you to know, brothers and sisters,"
Paul once wrote
to the sometimes troubled church at Corinth...,
"I want you to know, brothers and sisters,
of the grace of God
that has been given to the churches of Macedonia."**

Like the Macedonians

Lenny knew
that the way to taste the grace of God
is to give.

It was the taste of such grace
that made her chocolate chip cookies legendary.
Children are better than most
at recognizing the taste of such grace.

All week long
they waited for Friday's tasty treat
and for the colorful Macedonian
full of grace,
who would be there serving up her cookies.

Let me tell you
about grace:

Grace is something that comes first as a gift from God.
Grace is something that you understand best when you give.
The invitation to give is an act of God's purest grace.

I'm not sure I understand that.
It runs against what comes naturally to me;
but I know it is true.
Let me say it again:

Grace is something that comes first as a gift from God.
Grace is something that you understand best when you give.
The invitation to give is an act of God's purest grace.

In the New Testament
it worked once like this:

The whole church was taking up an offering
for the church in Jerusalem.
One supposes every congregation in the early church
was passing the hat for the saints in the mother church.

I find it extremely interesting
that the particular need in Jerusalem has
long since
been forgotten.
Nobody remembers why they needed so much money.
The need must have been tremendous.
The need must have been real.
It's just that nobody remembers what the need was;

but everybody remembers taking the offering.

The act of taking the offering
made such a positive impact on the church that
everybody...
everybody who much reads the New Testament
remembers that the church needed very much

to *give* the offering:

When they gave
is when they came to understand
the true flavor
of the grace of God.

When they gave
is when they came to understand
the true feel
of what it means to believe in Jesus.

The Macedonians are a perfect example.

Proportionately,
the Macedonians gave more generously than most.

Proportionately,
the Macedonians knew more than most
of grace.

Proportionately,
the Macedonians knew more than most
of what it means to believe in Jesus.

It's not that the generosity
brought on the grace,
nor even that the generosity
brought on the believing.
It is, however, the generosity
that brought on the deep, deep understanding.

Wounds were healing
in the once troubled Corinthian Church.
A new day was about to dawn
for the Corinthian Christians.
Like at Oakland Avenue Church,
they were on the cusp of new things.
Paul wanted the Corinthians to taste the grace of God...
Paul wanted the Corinthians to feel what it means
to believe in Jesus.
Those are things I want for you.
Paul didn't coerce or pressure the Corinthians.
There was no arm twisting.
No guilt was laid;
but the apostle did tell them
they had something to learn from the Macedonians.

As I said, Lenny Penny was a Macedonian.
We have something to learn from her.
Lenny lived alone
and she lived on her Social Security check.
First Sunday after the check came in the mail,
ten percent of it went in the offering plate at First Church.
If you knew to listen,
when Lenny put in her offering
you could hear the angels singing.

On real cold days, though,
the Board of Deacons would send someone by to visit Lenny...
you know...just to visit...
to visit and to be sure the house was warm.
Sometimes when Lenny was at Circle meeting
the deacons would have the oil company go by on the Q. T.
and add a few gallons of fuel oil to her tank...
never fill it up...
she's be onto that...
just add a few gallons.
Of course,
it didn't make sense...
no sense at all
for Lenny to be putting ten percent of her Social Security check
into the offering plate
and for the deacons to take money out of the offering plate
to buy fuel oil for Lenny...
no sense at all;

except, of course,
in the economy of the Kingdom of God,
it made perfect sense:

It was in giving
that she savored the true taste of grace.
It's not that the giving
brought on the grace.
That's what some of the TV evangelists preach
but they are wrong...
dead wrong.

It's not our giving that makes God gracious.
It is, however,
in freely giving
that we best understand the God who freely gives.
It's the way of the Macedonians.

Paul thought we might do well
to learn something from the Macedonians.

Lenny was a Macedonian.

Late one Spring

the Bible School Committee
asked me to go by Lenny's house
and tell her we were counting on her chocolate chip cookies
again that year.

They also wanted me to tell her

they had some money in their budget for such things
and they would be glad to buy the ingredients
if Lenny would make the cookies.

That made sense to me.

The Bible School was growing.

They were expecting 150 to 200 children plus teachers.

It takes a lot of groceries

to make chocolate chip cookies
for 150 to 200 children
especially since there was nothing dainty
about Lenny's chocolate chip cookies.

Lenny's chocolate chip cookies were...
well, they were *extravagant*.

One of Lenny's *extravagant* chocolate chip cookies
could spoil a six year old appetite
for two or three well balanced meals to come;
but then,
bountiful grace has a nutrition value
of its own sacramental sort.

"Lenny," I said as I settled in her goose neck rocker
with the upholstery worn shiny,

"Bible School is coming up in a few weeks, and...."

Before I could say another word

Lenny blurted out,

"I know, and I know what you're going to ask...

I'm way ahead of you, preacher.

You want me to bake cookies again this year for the last day of Bible School.

I hear they're expecting 150 to 200 children this year,
so I've been buying a little extra flour and sugar along each month
and I've been saving for the butter, eggs
and chocolate chips.

"When exactly did you say Bible School is?"

I heard the angels beginning to vocalize
so I kept my peace.
I didn't deliver my message...
not my whole message.
I left out the part
about the church paying for the ingredients.
To have robbed her of giving
would have robbed her of the taste of grace
and would likely have rendered the cookies tasteless.

"I declare, Lenny, you *are* way ahead of me.
Bible School is in three weeks
and I believe to my soul
your chocolate chip cookies
are the best part of Bible School."

I spoke truth.
Lenny was a Macedonian;
and beside that,
we really did need the chocolate chip cookies.

Like here at Oakland Avenue Church.
These beautiful buildings are real.
Their maintenance and their utilities are real and growing.
Your faithful staff,
as good and capable as any with whom I have been privileged to work,
is real and they need to be paid generously.
These children and young people are real.
Your ministry to and with them is real.
The mission to which God is calling you is real.
God is calling this church
to do some very real things:
God is calling you to nurture
your own in faith and worship.

Like a mother gathering her children
God wants you to gather
and care for our own.

God is also calling you to do and say
those things
that cannot be said or done
by any government or civic organization.

You are called to speak and live
the gospel of Jesus Christ in this place
and then to reach out to join hands with brothers and sisters in Christ
around this broken world
to demonstrate the peace of Christ.

That call is real.

If you've been reading the newsletter
you know the Stewardship Committee,
rather than only bombarding you once a year in the fall,
is trying to keep matters of stewardship education before you all year long.
In keeping with that effort,
as an out of town guest
brought in while William is away,
I asked if they would like me to sprinkle in a stewardship sermon out of season.
You can believe they jumped on that.

So, like Paul to the Corinthians,
I do not wish to coerce or pressure anyone.

There will be no arm twisting here...
no guilt laid...
no bribes offered;

but I do want you to learn something
from the Macedonians.

By their giving,
the Macedonians came to understand the grace
of the God who gives
and,
as if by a miracle,
in the process of tasting the grace of God
the need in Jerusalem,
what ever it was,
was met.

It's the way of the Macedonians
ancient and modern.

My father was a Macedonian.
Early in the year after he died
I came over from Memphis where we were living at the time
to help Mom with something or other...

can't remember what.
My older brother who, who lived much closer, was handling her business matters
and was going to prepare her income tax return,
but he asked, if while I was there,
I would go through Pappy's checkbook
and make a list of deposits
and a list of charitable contributions.
That didn't sound too complicated.
I figured even a preacher could do that much
so I went out to the office he carved out of the back porch
and closed in when he retired.

It still smelled of King Edward cigar smoke
like it smelled when I sat in his lap
when I was a child to read my geography lesson
or to have him go over my arithmetic homework.
On the wall was an autographed picture of Sam Snead.
Taped to the file cabinet,
along with a picture postcard of St. Andrew's Golf Course,
was a snapshot of Pappy
with all of his over-six-foot frame
folded up and sitting in a child's chair at a child's table.
He was being served tea
by our daughter, Jayne,
and her cousin, Margaret.
They looked like they were about three years old at the time.
It was a picture of grace.
Pappy knew what was important.

I got Pappy's checkbook out of the safe,
sat at his desk
and felt like a little boy looking where I had no business;
but I began to add.
I was adding on his old, old calculator...
a mechanical predecessor to the modern versions...
state of the art when he bought it...
the kind you go drink a twelve ounce Pepsi
while it rattled and bounced doing long division.

I wasn't dividing.
I was adding so it didn't take long.
I added his income for the year.
It wasn't a fabulous sum
but comfortable...quite comfortable.
I remember thinking
I hope I plan as well for my retirement.

Then I added the charitable contributions...
to the Great Falls Presbyterian Church mostly
but also to such organizations as Heifer Project International and
Habitat for Humanity.

The amount of his contributions
was exactly one half of his income...
almost to the penny.
So close it could not possibly have been a coincidence.

I had always known my father had a deep understanding of grace.
From childhood I had experienced his grace.
That day I came deeply to understand why he had such a deep understanding.
It is because his own giving was filled with grace.

It was not Pappy's giving that forced God's hand...
no that's the way of shysters.
It was in giving
that Pappy tasted best the grace of the God who gives;
and it is in giving
that he knew best the Christ who gave.

Pappy was a Macedonian.
So was Lenny.
I hope I have learned something from them.
I hope I have.

James S. Lowry
Oakland Avenue Church
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