



**“Where There’s a Will . . .”**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Sunday, June 28, 2009  
2 Corinthians 8:7–15 (NRSV)***

**SCRIPTURE READING**

2 Corinthians 8:7–15

Michael Stuber

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 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. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 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 there may be a fair balance. As it is written,

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

**SERMON**

“Where There’s a Will . . .”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Times were tough in the early first-century Christian churches. The congregations were few and far between. There were tremendous cultural and theological differences among those that did exist. Everybody was strapped for cash—most especially the church at Jerusalem—the mother ship.

Like some children, the Christians at Corinth seemed to have forgotten where they came from. They thought that they were self-made men and women who had arrived in Corinth, and built their churches by themselves. Compared to other congregations in the first century, the Corinthians were the “country club Christians.”

Now here comes the Apostle Paul (or more likely someone who came in his name) in order to garner more influence with the rich and famous. Here comes the Apostle passing the hat—asking for an offering for the church at Jerusalem.

The Corinthians weren't interested. For one thing, they didn't think that they shared much in common with the church at Jerusalem. And they didn't. At least not on the surface. The Corinthians were Gentiles. The Jerusalemites were ethnically Jewish. The Corinthians were wealthy. The Jerusalemites were poor. The Corinthians were merchants. They were well schooled, well traveled, and well known in their city and region. The Jerusalemites, by contrast, were peasants. They lived a subsistence lifestyle. They were home-schooled. They didn't journey much beyond the city gates. If they were known at all in their home town, they were known as Temple outcasts.

The Christians at Corinth and Jerusalem had nothing in common, and they had everything in common. Demographically and economically, they had nothing in common. But spiritually, they had everything in common. They were brothers and sisters in Christ. They shared a common faith heritage, and a common challenge: how to serve and survive in an increasingly multicultural, fast-paced world where the economy was changing rapidly and the old ways would not help them prosper in the brave new world in which they were living. Even though the Corinthians had so much more materially than the Christians in their spiritual hometown, the challenges that the Corinthians faced seemed to foster their spiritual stinginess.

Then comes the Apostle, the author of II Corinthians, calling them on their spiritual disposition, inviting them to participate in a kind of first-century version of Our Church's Wider Mission (that's what we call it in the UCC). Along comes the Apostle, calling the Corinthians out of their navel-gazing self-interest to engage in an international mission—and reminding them that they have the material capacity to help their sister church—the only thing that's missing is the spiritual will to do so.

## II

Before anybody gets too nervous about where this sermon is going today, let me just say that one of the things that I have always loved about Eden Church is that this congregation has *willpower*. I'm not talking about the kind of willpower that keeps us away from the sweets. I'm not even talking about a significant bequest. I'm talking about the kind of willpower required to do great things for God.

Frequently I have opportunities to tell people about what a great congregation you are. Sometimes that happens around interviews for new employees, sometimes it happens around family crises—a death, a serious illness; or something happier—a wedding or baptism that brings people into closer relation with Eden Church. On such occasions, it's not unusual for people to tell me how special it feels to them to be here at Eden, how warmly they feel received by our staff and congregation, and how important the activities are that happen on our campus. They are right.

I enjoy telling newcomers to our campus the good news about Eden Church. I am often asked about the membership, so I tell them that we are about 220 members—120 of whom have joined in the past 6 and one-half years, and 30 of whom have been members for 50 years or more.

Newcomers often comment on the attractiveness of the campus, so I give them a thumbnail history of our renovation project. Most are awed by the magnitude and length of the project. I affirm their suspicions that it takes way more than money to renew a campus like this. It takes people with the capacity to dream God's dream, and implement that dream. It takes people with patience and fortitude and an indefatigable commitment to a job well done. It takes the kind of people who served on our New Millennium Committee and our Board of Trustees.

Eden Church has long been known in our community for our music program and for the talented musicians who have served on our staff, sung in our choirs, and played our instruments. In the modern era, we've had such greats as Lee Kjelson, who recruited the Coburns and Blakes to Eden Church. In more recent years our music program has been led by Bill Coburn, Mark Unbehagen, and Marty Stoddard, and I'm pleased to report this morning that we have just signed a new music director, Lee Steward, of Ithaca, New York.

We have also been blessed to have two very talented and very dedicated organists. Two in particular have provided organ music for this congregation for most of the history of the church. Mrs. Sarah Hoyt played the organ in Pioneer Chapel for 50 years, and Loris Coburn has played our Swain & Kates organ for the entire life of the instrument—over 38 years.

The dedication of our choir and ensemble participants has been phenomenal, combining the gifts and dedication of beginners to professionals of all ages.

Eden's willpower has shown through our membership, our campus renovation, and our music programs. It also shines through our stewardship efforts. Starting in the Great Depression, the women of Eden Church warded off deficit budgets with their famous duck dinners. When Pioneer Chapel needed a new roof and some spiffing up, the Trustees put their heads together and hatched the successful idea of selling annuities.

Pastors have been known to kiss pigs in order to raise money for Heifer Project International. Our Sunday School bake sale once raised enough money to buy an accessible van. Our Fellowship & Stewardship committees and the generous giving of our members and friends reduced a projected \$50K projected deficit to under \$10K this year.

Most recently, the Easter Bunny, our Cheerful Giver Superheroes, and our Caribbean Staycation helped raise more pledge dollars for the mission of Eden Church than ever before—and you all did that with a \$50 stewardship budget. Just imagine what we can

accomplish next year, given that the Cabinet has proposed a doubling of that stewardship committee budget!

### III

Each and every one of these illustrations of Eden's incredible willpower serve as a reminder of the old adage and the Apostle's message—"Where there's a will, there's a way." The apostle wasn't talking about money, per se. He/she was talking about willpower—the power to let the spirit work in and through you, through us. On this Annual Meeting Sunday, I want to take this opportunity to say thank you to all of you for the countless ways that you have and continue to exhibit willpower. Thank you and bless you for exhibiting the will to do God's work and through the mission and ministry of Eden Church. Amen.