

Sunday, February 8, 2008 Gifts Message from Series Romans 6:12-23

So far in this series we have talked about supporting the local church with our Prayers and our Presence. Today, we move on to a message that might be a little nearer to our hearts and that is supporting the church (the bride of Christ) with our gifts.

Ideally, everything that we do as church should be designed to be done in love. That is what God wants and expects of us as we live out our faith in the world. The Scripture that we shared a moment ago was read so that we might be reminded that our salvation, eternal life in heaven with Christ, is a **gift** from God. That gift is valuable beyond measure. Our salvation through the blood of Christ is the ultimate gift of love and compassion. Do you remember that old hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”? The second half of verse 2 reads,

“Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God; he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.” The third verse goes, “O to grace (God’s unmerited love) how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be! Let thy goodness, like a fetter (Shackle), bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.” (Robert Robinson, 1758)

There are a ton of reasons that people “give” to the church and I am not only referring to financial gifts. We will address finances more in a minute but I would like to speak a moment to our motives for giving. Ideally, God’s gift of life

and salvation, freely given, should be our sole motivation – our response to Amazing Grace. We can't repay God for what he has given us. We do not have the resources to give, after all, what do you give God who created all there is to give, right? The gifts we give aren't for God's personal benefit, but rather as an offering, a way of giving that enables ministry to give others the opportunity to see Jesus and receive him as Lord and Savior. God doesn't need anything. He desires tough, cheerful, grateful hearts.

In 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 we read, "Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a 'cheerful' giver."

God desires for us to give generously from the resources he has given us to manage; to be stewards over. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. I have seen people give their gifts out of a sense of duty, which if left unaddressed brews resentment. I have seen gifts given out of guilt and that too brews resentment. I have seen gifts given with hope of gain; an attitude of "God and the community will just fall all over themselves to honor or prosper me because I am so valuable and give so much to the church". I have seen many, many, give out of habit. Many have given the same \$5 or \$20 for years with no thought of addressing the fact that that money isn't worth what it once was. It is like an employee never

getting a raise over a span of years, not out of malice but because the boss just saw you doing your thing every day and thought you were happy and never gave it another moment's thought. I have even seen people give their gifts "because they want to 'help' the church." All of these are based in the idea of "works righteousness" and not acts of grace or love.

Unfortunately, these are not what God is looking for. God has given us the whole world for which we are to have dominion over and all he asks is that we give a portion back from a loving, grateful and generous heart. And, generosity does not depend on the size of our bank accounts, but rather upon our readiness to open our hearts to the needs of others and to share what we have with them.

The gifts we possess for the Lord's work are many. John Wesley wrote that our hands and feet are gifts given by the Lord for his use. Our "talents, our strength, our health, our beauty, our eloquence, our address (ability to speak), our faculties of pleasing or persuading, or convincing others..." are just a few of the gifts we have. How are we doing with them? Are we using these to God's glory? Are we using these gifts to bring people to the place where they can see Jesus?

How are we using the things, the skills, the innate part of our being to help build up the local church so that this part of the body might be strengthened and enlarged for the Kingdom of God? What are we doing with what God has given us to share the Good News of Salvation in Christ alone? How are we reaching the lost in our families, in our church, in our neighborhoods? What talent could we be using more effectively to introduce that lost and hurting soul to the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ?

Now, OK, you've been waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop; the money thing. "Oh here we go, the big money talk. All the church talks about is money." Have you ever heard or said that?

Anyway, money is the precious and tangible manner of exchange in our world. It is a part of civilizations in every generation. Whatever form it has taken it has been a way to judge wealth, to exchange for clothes, food and home. Money, whether scarce or abundant, is useful for the kingdom of God. It is a way by which we can assist in the work of Kingdom Building. It is also one of the subjects that no one wants to talk about for fear of discovering how one actually used it. Seldom is the outcry about how much someone has but in reality, how

little someone actually has. We guard it like it belongs to us instead of being on loan from God who enables you to have it in the first place.

When we have our annual Consecration Sunday, our Finance Campaign, we are asked to see our giving through the eyes of faith and not our checkbook. We are asked to tithe (Biblical standard of 10%) or in some other way give in a systematic way striving towards that amount. Mike Slaughter, pastor of the Ginghamburg United Methodist Church writes in his book "Money Matters: Financial Freedom for all God's Children", "I emphasize that God's economics are not like ours. *God blesses our willingness to trust him with our finances, and calls us to be responsible in our spending so that we can love recklessly with our giving to him.*" Finance Guru, a strong Christian leader, Dave Ramsey who you can hear on the radio twice a day is in agreement with that model.

Our giving of financial gifts is not meant just to be about the local church's expenses, including the pastor and if you wonder, I tithe my income. Our giving is meant to reach the world for Christ, to enable ministry to people in the church and those who have never even darkened any church door. Giving of our money, in particular, tithing, giving from the first fruit of our gain, isn't just a good idea. It is what God has asked of his people since ancient of days. Giving of our tangible

assets isn't always going to be easy but it is a discipline, a measure of our faith.

Each of us have a lot of places where we could spend our money and then what?

What are our priorities? What we earn, save and give away testifies to our

priorities. For most of us, our checkbooks testify against us. What other kind of

invest can we make that has eternal consequences? Those of us who have seen

our pensions plummet in value or our real estate value shrink beyond belief are

well aware that investment in our own retirement can't be trusted to do anymore

than provide for this life if at all.

I saw on the news Thursday evening a man from our area that lost hundreds of thousands of dollars in the Bernard Madoff scheme. He said he could have lived comfortably for several years off of what was lost. What is he to do?

He will press on. Live on.

I remember in UMYF saying "Only one life; will soon be past. Only what's done for Christ Jesus will last." If handled properly, given with prayerful, grateful and generous hearts, our giving – financial and otherwise – can change lives, alter the world around us. Our money, our talents, our skills, used to the glory of God will help draw the world to Christ. *God can be trusted with what we reinvest into the Kingdom.*

Will you support this congregation of the United Methodist Church with your gifts?