

“WHAT I SAID I WOULD DO: V - GIVE”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
November 9, 2008

Stewardship Sunday

(Fifth and final sermon in the series “What I Said I Would Do”)

Mark 12:41-44

Once upon a time, in a church far, far away, a pastor wrote a letter to one of his parishioners, a man who happened to be extremely wealthy. He wrote requesting the man make a donation to the church. Not too many days later came a terse reply from the parishioner, which ended with these words: “As far as I can see, this Christian business is just one continuous give, give, give!”

Do you know what the pastor’s response to that was? Do you know what he wrote back to the parishioner? He wrote this: “I wish to thank you for the best definition of the Christian life that I have yet heard!”

What that man meant as an insult, the pastor took as a compliment, and today, on this Stewardship Sunday, so do I. Unashamedly, I stand before you and say that “give, give, give” **is** a great definition of the Christian life - and, in keeping with the theme of this sermon series, it is what we said we would do, in five different ways, when we joined the church.

For when we joined the church, we promised to give by praying, we promised to give through our presence here, we promised to give through our service, we promised to give through our witness, and today, in this fifth and final sermon in the series, we remember that we promised to give, well, by giving, by giving financially to the ministries of Christ through this church.

I’ve told you before, and I’ll tell you again today. Though some pastors feel squeamish about preaching on this particular Sunday - they’re uncomfortable talking about money - this is one of my favorite days to preach - because I believe when I remind you of your commitment to give, it’s an invitation to joy.

We give because God has given so abundantly to each one of us. We give out of gratitude for all that God has given to us.

We don’t give just to pay the church’s bills or fund the church’s ministries.

We don't give because we're paying taxes, if you will. No, we give rather as a reflection of our faith. As Rick Warren once put it, "Where I put my money shows my values and my priorities. I may say that God is number one in my life, but the way I spend my time and money show what truly is my first priority."
(Rick Warren, "Purpose Driven Generosity," on-line)

If we truly believe that all we have comes from God, and if our giving to His church reflects that then, friends, this should be one of the most joyous Sundays of the year for us - ranking right up there with Christmas and Easter. Actually, it's a counterpart to Christmas and Easter - for on those days, we remember just how much God loved us, to send His Son to live with us and for us, and to die that we might have life eternal; and on this day, we show in a most concrete way our gratefulness for all that God has done. It should be one of the most joyous days we have together.

Is it for you? When you think about the commitment you wrote down, or will yet write down on your pledge card, are you filled with joy that you are offering that amount to God? Are you excited about what you're going to give? Do you have a sense of deep down joy about the commitment you're about to make?

There was a woman who knew the kind of joy I'm talking about. We don't know her name, but we do know her story. We heard it in this morning's Gospel lesson. She was a widow, which in that day and age, made her an extremely vulnerable person. She was on her own, alone in the world.

She came to the temple that day along with everyone else, and surely watched as others began to make their offering. No doubt, some who came were dressed in the finest fabrics available, so it was known they were persons of means, and many watched to see what they would give. And no doubt, some others tried to impress by making a grand gesture as they put their offering in.

I suspect this woman would just as soon have not been seen making her offering. She was humble, and made her way forward without much fanfare, to lay her offering before the God who had been her refuge and strength, her rock and fortress. Perhaps she was hoping that no one would pay much attention to her, but somebody noticed what she offered - and that somebody was Jesus.

And what he noticed was that she gave everything she had - everything - which was two copper coins. It was all she had to live on, and yet, she gave it all, to the One who had given all to her. And though it doesn't say it, I know she had joy deep down in her heart.

It takes a lot to give as that woman gave. It takes belief and faith and trust

that the God who has been faithful in the past will be faithful in the future. She had that trust, and she took that risk, even though any financial advisor would tell her not to be so generous.

Compare her to a man who, one day, was walking down the street right before Christmas, and came upon a woman ringing the bell near a Salvation Army kettle. Moved with the spirit of Christmas, he reached into his pocket, pulled out all the change he had, and deposited it in the kettle with a smile. He turned to leave, but then he stopped. He reached into his pocket, took out his wallet, and emptied every last bill into the kettle as well.

Grinning like an idiot, he walked away with a bounce in his step. But about two blocks later, the bounce wore out. Suddenly it hit him! “What have I done?” he asked himself, and high-tailed it back to the woman at the kettle. When he got there, he asked for his money back. He got it, and left again, this time walking very quickly, with his head down, looking neither right nor left.

The man who told his story, Donel McClellan, reflected on what happened, and he said, “For two blocks, that man walked in the Kingdom of God. For two blocks he was free of the burden of his possessions. For two blocks he put other people above himself. For two blocks he was self-giving and generous. For two blocks he was blessed, but like most of us, he could not stand the uncertainty that goes with that much blessing. He wanted to continue to think that he is in control. He walked back, out of the realm of God and back into the well-worn grooves of his weary world.” (Carol Wilton, “Hilarious Giving,” in *Speaking of Stewardship*, Wm. Carter, editor, p. 72).

Friends, it’s your choice when it comes to giving financially to the Lord. You can walk in the Kingdom of God with joy in your heart, or you can, as Mr. McClellan put it, stay in the “well-worn grooves of your weary world.”

My prayer is that you choose joy in your giving - that you give out of your gratefulness for all that God has given you, and that you give trusting that God will do wonderful things with what you offer.

And we know that God will do that with what everyone offers here today and in the days to come - for we have seen it over and over and over again already. I read this week about something that happened one day in a thrift store, and it stirred up all sorts of thoughts for me in terms of what God has done through our giving here in this place.

First, the story. A woman named Ellie was preparing to take a trip to Mexico one fall, and needed to find appropriate clothing for the trip. But she was having a

hard time finding warm weather clothing in her hometown in Canada. So she and her sister decided to check out the local Goodwill store in their town.

They got to the store, and luckily found a couple of shirts that were just right, and went to stand in the checkout line. There were two people in line ahead of them. The first was a young man who, frankly, looked like he needed to shop at Goodwill, rather than wanted to, like the sisters. He had a collection of clothing items on the counter and was starting to pay for it.

Ellie noticed that he was paying mostly with coins - lots of them, but no bills. It looked like he had robbed his piggy bank to buy what he needed.

The cashier looked up at him after she had counted all the money and told him he was short. \$3.00 short. "Well," he said, as he pulled out a shirt from the pile. "Can you hold this for me for later, and after I get the money together, I'll come back for it?"

Well, by this time, the people in the line behind him were looking down, for they were embarrassed for him. Then, all of a sudden, the woman in front of Ellie said to the cashier, "How much did you say he needed?"

"Three dollars."

"Oh," the woman said back. "Can't you just give him the shirt?"

Well, no, the clerk wouldn't be budged. No money, no shirt.

Then, suddenly, the woman in front of Ellie said, "You know what, I have some change." She looked and she had about a dollar in change. Which prompted Ellie to reach into her pocket and pull out change she had there. Which prompted others in line with them to reach into their pockets, and before long, just using the loose change they all had, the customers in line behind the young man came up with a pile of change and handed it to the cashier. She counted it, and discovered now, there was too much money, and just as she said that, another customer said, "Wait, I didn't even get a chance to give anything!"

Well, happy as a lark, and a bit astonished, the young man thanked them and left with the shirt he so desperately needed. Ellie and all the others were very moved by what had just happened. She said, "There was this moment or two of wonder. What was it? I think it felt like a time of discovery when for a moment you see the beauty of another soul, except this was a group happening. I felt like I was among friends, good friends. I didn't want the unnamed feeling to end. Then I realized I was looking for someone else to help. I hoped that someone else would

show up needing help so I could get more of that great feeling.”

She continued, “I had only had the opportunity of giving seventy cents. It was the best bargain I had ever found. I was left with an overwhelming good feeling. I had seen the love and goodness of others all around me. That good feeling was almost tangible that autumn day in the thrift store. I am surprised that people didn’t begin hugging. Isn’t it just a wonder that you can receive so much for so little?”

She finished with this. “As we stood in the line up waiting for the cashier, the man beside me grinned and said, ‘It feels good to give, doesn’t it?’”

Oh boy! Doesn’t it!!

Now, what that story made me think about, was all the ways in this past year that we, in this church, did what those customers in that thrift store did. In much the same way, you and I reached into our pockets and put together whatever we had to enable the ministries of Christ through this church to take place. We did it together, and we did it with joy!

And because we did, amazing things happened. Because we gave, homeless persons had a place to lay down on a cold night, and had a warm meal on a Friday noon. Because we gave, young people came to our youth ministry programs and learned how to survive and thrive in the midst of a world of pressure and strife. Because we gave, countless persons could take part in Bible studies and Beginnings classes, and grow closer to God and each other.

Because we gave, elementary children who needed something extra were mentored, college students were delighted when they found a care package in their mailbox, nursing home residents celebrated their birthdays with their circle friends, and choir members held new music in their hands and made a joyful noise with their voices.

Because we gave, hundreds and hundreds of people gathered here for worship, lives in Kentucky were touched as homes were repaired and hope was reborn, and flood ravaged homes received supplies and relief. Because we gave, one person was nurtured in such a way here in this place that he’s in seminary right now studying for the ministry.

Because we gave, friends, because we reached down together, and gave with joy in our hearts, God took our offerings and did amazing things! And God promises to do the same in 2009 with what we offer.

My prayer is that today is a day of great joy for you as you make your financial commitment for the coming year. As you come forward in a few moments to lay your pledge card before God, do it with joy! For isn't it wonderful what we can do together with all that God has given us, and can't you just wait to see what God will do with these our gifts in the year ahead?

Oh, what a joy it is to give to the God who has given so much to us!

Come now, with joy, and lay your commitment before Almighty God.

Amen.