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Easy for Me to Say

Stewardship Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

Commitment Sunday, November 18, 2018

Two weeks ago, we read the story of Jesus telling his disciples to feed five thousand men with the food they had on hand, which was five loaves and two fish. Jesus blessed it, they handed it out, and somehow five loaves and two fish became so much food that people were stuffed and they had 12 basketfuls of leftovers. A great illustration of the way that when God asks us to do something, God provides the resources to do it. We give God what we have, and God does wonders with it. So when God asks us to tithe, to give ten percent of our treasure, which is the basic standard of giving all through scripture, we can be confident that God will help us do it.

Last week, we looked at the apostle Paul's fundraising efforts with the church at Corinth. He was collecting money from all the churches to help the Christians in need in Jerusalem, who were suffering from extreme poverty. He challenged the Corinthians, saying that just as they were excellent in so many things, so they should be excellent in giving. That means everybody giving their best, according to what they have, not what they don't have. I told a story about excellent giving at a church in Kenya that has 100% participation each week in the offering, because everybody comes forward and gives what they have, and how several women who did not have money gave beans, peas, and a couple of eggs. I shared about my daughter Madeleine, who works at a Great Clips and makes half her income from tips, and while big tips are enormously appreciated, she also appreciates the \$2 tips from the struggling single moms who aren't getting child support, and can barely afford the actual haircut, much less a tip. We stressed that every gift matters, and I asked each of us to pray this week about our financial giving for 2019, and to evaluate the excellence of our giving in light of the other ways we spend

money. And I said this week we would talk about why our best giving goes to the church. After all, there are many worthy organizations out there, with hundreds of nonprofits in Topeka alone.

These past several weeks I kept re-reading the chapter on money in Donald Miller's bestselling book from 2003, Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality. He describes how hard it was to be a writer, to have no money, to always wonder how he was going to pay his rent. One afternoon, when he was hanging out with his pastor, he confesses, "I am not giving any money to the church, Rick. Not a dime." His pastor says, "Ok. Why aren't you giving any money to the church?" Don says, "I don't have any money. Everything goes to rent and groceries." Rick says, "That sounds tough." Don asks, "So am I exempt?"

And here's where this pastor is a little braver than I am. He says, "No." The discussion continues, with the pastor explaining that since Don was making roughly \$1,000 a month from his writing, he should give \$100 of that to the church, and this is about trusting God. So Don says, "I know. I just think it would be easier to trust God if I had extra money to trust Him with."

Rick-the-pastor explains that it's not about meeting the church's needs, but about everything Don is missing out on by not giving. He says:

When we do what God wants us to do, we are blessed, we are spiritually healthy. God wants us to give a portion of our money to His work on earth. By setting aside money from every check, you are trusting God to provide. He wants you to get over that fear—that fear of trusting Him. It is a scary place, but that is where you have to go as a follower of Christ.

The pastor goes on to share some of his own experiences with learning to tithe, and then Don describes how the next week, he went to the bank and emptied his checking account, which had 8 dollars in it, he says, and gave it to the church. A few days later, another check came in the mail, and he gave ten percent of that to the church. Then he got a writing gig with a magazine, and deposited that check and wrote another one to the church. He started getting more

and more calls to speak at retreats and conferences, and each time he got paid for those, he'd write a check to the church. He writes, "Since that conversation with Rick, I have given at least ten percent of every dollar I make . . . And I have never not had rent. For more than a year my checking account had hovered or slipped just over or just under zero, and suddenly I had money to spare."

But then Donald Miller explains that the financial abundance that accompanied his tithing was not the best part. The best part was what it did for his relationship with God. He says, "Before, I felt like I was always going to God with my fingers crossed, the way a child feels around his father when he knows he has told terrible lies. God knew where I was, He didn't love me any different when I was holding out on Him, it's just that I didn't feel clean around Him, and you know how that can affect things" (198). He also learned he needed to give to the poor directly, in addition to what he gave to the church.

I guess this would be the time to say something about giving to the church because of all the great things the church does. That even though other non-profits are more efficient at feeding and clothing people in need, educating children, and putting roofs over people's heads, no other organization can do or has done what churches have done for the past two thousand years. But truthfully, when I write checks to the church in fulfillment of the financial commitment I have made, I'm not thinking about the church at all. I'm thinking about my relationship with God and my giving as an act of trust in God. I'm enjoying the lightness I feel in being obedient. And I'm celebrating the progress Rod and I are making as we work towards a full tithe.

I love the Church, but for me, the church is like one of those cylinder cannisters that they have when you're doing drive through banking. You place your money or check in the cylinder

with your deposit slip, and you place it in the tube and press a button, and it goes whoosh! I think they call this a pneumatic tube transport. Then the teller takes it out and makes that deposit.

When I give, the church is the carrier tube that directs my money to God. And the reason that it's the church, and not some other group, is that only the church is the body of Christ. The Topeka Symphony is fabulous, and so is Habitat for Humanity, and the Topeka Rescue Mission, and the American Heart Association, and the alma mater that is dear to your heart. It is good to give generously to organizations like those. But they are not the body of Christ. When Rod and I calculate the percentage of our income that we give to the church, we do not include money we give to other organizations, even though those organizations do good work that glorifies God and makes life on this earth better.

Now, this is easy for me to say. I work here. I receive a salary here. I attend Finance meetings, and session meetings, and I see firsthand the care with which our leaders handle the church's money. [Just as you and I are stewards of all that God gives to us, the church is a steward of all that we give to God, and I see the way the leaders of this church treat this as the holy task it is.]

That being said, if someone gave 20 or 30 million dollars to the church tomorrow--which would be great—Rod and I would still keep working towards a tithe, because of what it is doing for us, and our relationship with God, with each other, and with money and possessions. And we would keep directing it to the church, because the church is the body of Christ. Now, do not hold back on your 20 million dollar gift, if you can make one, because that would make so much wonderful ministry possible. But it would not change the need for every member of the church to be tithing, or working towards a tithe. And by the way, if all of us did work up to a tithe, our church would have no money problems. We would be overflowing, and the session and finance

committee would have to go on a retreat just to pray and discern God's will about what to do with it all.

Back to this image of the church as the body of Christ. There is no better metaphor for who we are. We need each other, and each person's time, talent, and treasure make a difference. What happens in one part of the body affects the others. For example, we have a ministry of recording the worship service at the 10:30 service, and this allows us to make DVD's of our service, as well as put it on our website. We know from testimonials that there are people who can no longer get to church who look forward to viewing this from their homes once it gets online. So somebody sitting near the back at 10:30 in the sanctuary is doing something that blesses the homebound parent of another member who worships at the 8:30 service in our chapel. It's the same with our financial gifts. The vibe of our giving resonates throughout the whole body.

Some of us may be thinking, oh, my goodness, I'm retired, I have a very fixed, small income. My modest financial gift does not make a difference to the well-being of this church. Please think again. The freedom and joy that giving to the body of Christ will give to YOU, will make a huge difference for the better in the spiritual health of this congregation, and may well inspire others to be more generous.

Some of us may be thinking, oh, my goodness, I already give thousands of dollars to this church. In fact, when I look at that table of giving on the back of the stewardship brochure, I can see that I'm giving more than most of my fellow members. Since I'm already giving so much, why does it matter if I'm not tithing or working towards a tithe? The church should just be grateful.

If that is you, the church IS grateful. But someone who gives as much as you do also deserves to taste the fruit of obedience. Please do not deprive yourself of the blessing of tithing.

Were you able to spend some time in prayer this week about your financial commitment to this church's mission and ministry for 2019? I hope that it feels to you, as it does to me, not like giving to a budget, but giving to God. I hope that, whatever you decided, that it's an amount that both challenges and excites you. If it does not, if you feel dread or anger or guilt, or nothing, please take your pledge card back home, and pray some more. Ask the Lord what excellent, faithful, obedient giving looks like for you this year. THEN return your pledge card. Remember that God never asks us to do something without providing the resources to do it, it's just that we nearly always have to step out in faith first. And remember that in the body of Christ, every gift matters, especially ours, more than we know. Let us pray:

God Whose Giving Knows No Ending, you have given us so much, including the ability to give. Thank you for the way our giving transforms the world the way a cupful of bubble bath transforms ordinary bathwater into a magical wonderland. Thank you for every gift that is given out of love for you and your creation. Help us to be more like you in every way, including the way we give. Amen.