10-21/22-17 Rev. Amy Haines

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 Abundant Blessing Stewardship Series

..One Sunday a pastor told his congregation that the church needed some extra money and asked the people to consider giving a little extra in the offering plate. He said that whoever gave the most would be able to pick out three hymns.

After the offering plates were passed, the pastor glanced down and noticed that someone had placed a $1,000 bill in the offering. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he’d like to personally thank the person who placed the money in the plate. A very quiet, elderly, saintly lady all the way in the back shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front.

Slowly she made her way to the pastor. He told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much and in thanks, asked her to pick out three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation, pointed to the three handsomest men in the building and said, “I’ll take him and him and him.” --Homileticsonline.com 6-28-09 “The Apostle Paul Asks for Money”

When considering the concept of stewardship, especially the stewardship of our financial resources, I often wonder how much we are like that saintly woman—do we truly not understand or do we choose not to understand? Do we accept God’s invitation to be stewards of our resources through which we can bless others or do we insist that our resources are for our own pleasure?

In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is encouraging the church in Corinth to tell their story of faith through their giving, to be generous as a Gentile church fulfilling their commitment to support the poor believers in Jerusalem. Last week we heard Paul lifting up the churches in Macedonia who gave generously out of a mindset of abundance as an opportunity to say thanks to God for Christ, even in the midst of their poverty and persecution. Then we were invited to follow in the footsteps of the Macedonian Christians, to give out of our abundance, to see our giving as an opportunity rather than an obligation, and to give in response to God’s generous blessing in our lives.

Today, Paul continues to remind the church then and now how to give in response to God’s abundant blessing. Today we are called to give voluntarily, cheerfully, intentionally, and thankfully.

**Voluntarily**

Thankfully we do not live in a country where our giving is required as part of a state tax.

Thankfully we do not live in a country where our giving is an act of radical disobedience.

Thankfully you do not have a pastor who locks the door until we receive a certain amount of tithes and offerings, as was once my experience in another congregation.

I won’t give you an invoice for 10% of your income. There is no joy in paying a bill.

Instead, I invite you to give voluntarily of your tithes and offerings, prayerfully working it out between you and God how much to give. I invite you to give voluntarily of your tithes and offerings, choosing to be a part of what God is doing through the work and ministry of our local congregation and wider denomination.

Yes, money is needed to pay our bills, support our staff, maintain our building and strengthen our ministries. Yes, our faith commitments made today are only a portion of offerings received each year. Yes, money is tight within our local congregation as our spending often outpaces our giving. Yes, the staff often imagines other ways we could be in mission and ministry if money were not a stumbling block.

Yet God invites us to give voluntarily, as a heart response to God’s grace and love and hope in our lives and in our world. God invites us to give voluntarily, as a faith commitment that provide practical avenues for God’s work in this world through the church.

In the verse prior to today’s Scripture passage, Paul says to the church in Corinth, concerning the collection of the offering for the Jerusalem church,

“This is why I thought it was necessary to encourage the brothers to go to you ahead of time and arrange in advance the generous gift you have already promised. I want it to be a real gift from you. I don’t want you to feel like you are being forced to give anything.” (v5 CEB)

..A Target cashier was working during the holiday season. Across from her register was the large holiday charity donation box for needy kids, sitting to the left of the 50 cent gumball and toy machines. Over the course of one week, on at least five separate occasions, she witnessed kids standing in front the gumball and toy machines, thinking about what to get, then reading the information on the donation box, and putting their 50 cents in there instead.

--75 Day-Brightening Stories of Generosity marcandangel.com, adapted

We give voluntarily to specific appeals, to UMCOR in times of need, to children collecting for a good cause. May we also view our weekly or monthly tithes and offerings as a voluntary and tangible way to share God’s blessings in our world today.

**Cheerfully**

Pastor Freddy Fritz once said,

.. God doesn’t want your offering if you give it reluctantly—

wishing you could spend it on a new stereo or a new blouse.

God doesn’t want your offering if you give it under compulsion—

because someone is twisting your arm and putting you under pressure.

God is only pleased with your offering when you give it cheerfully—

with a sincere desire to further God’s work.

Would you be pleased with a Christmas gift that you had to force your child to purchase for you? Neither is God pleased with offerings that you give to him reluctantly and resentfully.

 -- Freddy Fritz “What Good Stewards Know About Giving” 11-06 sermoncentral.com

The apostle Paul bluntly tells the church in Corinth,

“Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn’t give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver.” (v7CEB)

Be honest, though. How often do you find yourself giving reluctantly rather than cheerfully? How often do you find yourself giving hesitantly, knowing there are other bills stacked up on your kitchen counter or other places you would rather than spend your money for pleasure rather than giving to God through the church?

What would it take to change your attitude from hesitation to joy as you gave to the work of God in this world?

I had to learn how to give cheerfully. When I first became a pastor, I found it hard to give intentionally when the student loan came due each month. I had to train myself to put my giving to God as my top priority, and sacrifice in other areas in order to stay on top of my loans.

Yet the longer I have been in ministry, and the more I have seen God’s grace evident in my life and in our world, the more joyful I have become in my giving.

..Patrick Johnson found his connection between giving and joy when he wrote a check for an air-conditioner. Johnson is a vice president at Bancorp South Investment Services, so he is doing pretty well for himself, financially, but he has discovered that his greatest joy is not to be found in managing fixed-income portfolios.

Instead, his joy comes from giving, and it’s a joy that borders on hilarity. As he was writing a check to help purchase a central air-conditioning unit for a local homeless shelter, he started praying and thinking about the immense joy that God was feeling as he gave to this worthy cause. He started thinking about the joy that would be felt by the homeless men as they slept in an air-conditioned room in the sweltering Mississippi heat. He then started thinking about the joy these men would feel when they gave their hearts to Jesus Christ and felt God’s love, maybe for the very first time.

And what welled up in Patrick Johnson, as he prayed, was laughter. He was actually so overwhelmed with joy that he laughed. It was spontaneous laughter, born out of the joy that was being experienced by God, by the homeless men, and by Johnson himself, due to one small gift.

When Paul writes that “God loves a cheerful giver” (v. 7), what he says in the original Greek is that God loves a giver who is *hilaros* — the root of our English word “hilarious.” What God loves is a hilarious giver, a person who gives with spontaneous joy and laughter.

 -- Homileticsonline.com 10-3-04 “The Stewardship Paradox”

May we respond to God’s blessings in our lives

through cheerfully giving to God’s work through the church in this world.

**Intentionally**

..“Years ago four good friends and neighbors from a small southern town were driving to a football game in an adjoining state. After a hundred miles or so of sports chatter, the conversation turned to family budgets. The four compared costs of the necessities of life, insurance, automobiles, and other items.

They all had young children and modest incomes, so they found that they had much in common in stretching their dollars to provide the most for their families. One of the foursome quietly stated that the *first* item in his family budget was the tithe. A second, and then a third indicated that they also gave the first tenth of each dollar to the Lord’s work.

The fourth man in the group sat in silent shock. He had thought of himself as a pretty good churchman since he was president of his Sunday school class and fairly regular in worship attendance. He had heard sermons on tithing all of his life, but it did not occur to him that ‘regular fellows’ like these friends and neighbors—football fans even—were tithing. He would have wondered how they could afford it, when he was straining to give one percent. Now he was hearing their matter-of-fact statements that their family financing was working *better* because of these gifts, not in spite of them. At that moment in his life, he felt the presence of God in his three companions, and he resolved to become a tither.”

 --500 Illustrations, p. 230

A tithe is the biblical standard of giving the first tenth of your income, your first fruits, as an offering of thanksgiving to God and to support the work of God in this world.

The piggy banks that are seen in our background image today is one timeless plan of intentional giving that was taught to Pastor Doug by his grandmother. Often it is called the 10-10-80 plan.

The first ten percent of your income you give to God as a sign of faith and an expression of gratitude. The second ten percent you pay to yourself as savings for the future. The remaining eighty percent is what you live on.

I confess that I am better at the first 10% to God than the second 10% to myself.

Each of us will find the time and the money for what we deem most important in our lives.

Maybe that is paying for college. Maybe that is assisting your children or your parents with their bills. Maybe that is financing a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Disney or Europe. Maybe that is financing your hobby, whether golf or model trains or book club or sewing.

I often listen to K-LOVE Christian radio, who happened to have their annual fall pledge drive this past week. Time and time and time again this week they encouraged their listeners to view as critically important the mission of their station, the opportunity to reach the world with the love of Christ through music. Then, if listeners agreed with such as important mission, they were encouraged to give $40 a month on the easy giving plan.

Do we love the church less than music that reaches out with the word of God? Do we not think twice about giving to a nonprofit ministry that is reaching out to the world around us yet reconsider every time a pastor invites intentional giving to the local congregation for the coming year?

Paul pointedly said,

“The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (v6 NRSV)

The harvest is always based on the investment. Put in little, then expect little in return. Put in much, and much more will be sown. This is not based on the amount we give, but on the attitude of our giving.

Today I invite you to invest abundantly in this local congregation of Christ’s church in this world, with however much or however little you can invest. Today, I invite you to change your mindset toward your giving so that it is more about your response to God’s blessing. Today I invite you to give to God your first fruits, an intentional amount as the first check you write each month, rather than give to God your leftovers, whatever happens to be left in your bank account or wallet.

In a few minutes you will be asked to prayerfully respond to the question,

“What percentage of my income is God calling me to give?”

For those of you who have always been tithers and generous givers, I invite you to commit to paper what you already practice, or even more.

For those of you who have never given an intentional amount, I invite you to commit a set percentage of giving as a faith response to God. Maybe you have only been giving the national average of 3% and God is inviting you to step up to 4%.

If you prayerfully looked over the chart mailed to your homes with the commitment cards,

A family making $30,000 a year at 4% is only $23 a week. A family making $60,000 a year at 4% is $46 a week. May family will often spend that in one meal eating at a restaurant.

If you are one who throws in a $5 bill when you have it in your wallet, prayerfully consider if you can commit to $6 every week.

I am not asking you to tell your neighbor today how much you make or how much you give. I am not asking you to publish your commitment on Facebook. The only persons who see these cards are our Financial Secretary and her assistants.

However much or little you have, would you prayerfully consider sharing in God’s blessings by moving up one percentage in intentional faithful giving for the year ahead?

**Thankfully**

Pastor Edward Markquart once said,

“It is interesting to me that in my nearly twenty-five years of parish ministry, I have never met a generous giver who complained about lack of food, lack of clothing, or lack of the basic necessities of life.  Not once in my twenty-five years have I heard a generous giver seriously complain about the lack of basic necessities.

There is a man who told me this story a long time ago: he was a child, six years old, and his father died and his family was dirt poor; and they didn’t know where the next meal was coming from.  Miraculously, a lady from the church came with a basket of food and the family was able to eat.  He said, ever since that basket of food, ‘I knew that God would meet our needs, and I became a tither.’” --Ed Markquart, sermonsfromseattle.com

Last week when I asked on Facebook, “What comes to mind when you hear the word blessing?” the responses centered around family, unconditional love, and a gift from God.

Whether we have little or much to give, whether we have committed to a tithe or struggle to move one percent higher in our giving, we are called to give thankfully, as a response to God’s great love for us. God’s blessings are truly gifts from God.

Paul powerfully proclaims:

“God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to share abundantly, to provide more than enough for every kind of good work.” (v8 CEB and NRSV)

The cliché is true—we cannot out give God. God is abundant in God’s love for us.

So how then do we respond in faith and faithfulness, in giving and generosity throughout our lives? How do we view our lives as those blessed to bless others?

..One morning R.C. Chapman, a devout Christian, was asked how he was feeling.

"I'm burdened this morning!" was his reply. But his happy countenance contradicted his words.

So the questioner exclaimed in surprise, "Are you really burdened, Mr. Chapman?"

"Yes, but it's a wonderful burden--it's an overabundance of blessings for which I cannot find enough time or words to express my gratitude!"

Seeing the puzzled look on the face of his friend, Chapman added with a smile,

"I am referring to Psalm 68:19, which fully describes my condition. In that verse the Father in heaven reminds us that He 'daily loads us with benefits.'"

 --Source Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com: blessing

Paul encourages us to cultivate an attitude of giving that is voluntary, cheerful, intentional and thankful, an attitude of giving that reflects God’s abundant blessing in our lives.