11/10-11/19 Committed to Gifts and Service Rev. Amy Haines

1 Tim 6:6-12, 17-19, Luke 8:4-15 Stewardship: Committed to Christ

What are you thankful for? That is a popular question in this month of November.

Nestled between the consumerism of Halloween and Christmas, there is a growing trend to intentionally give thanks during the month of November.

Several years ago I intentionally gave thanks daily on Facebook for a different person or experience or part in my life throughout the month of November.

This year’s version of a Facebook gratitude calendar asks very basic questions, such as “What smell are you grateful for today?” or “What about your body are you grateful for?” or “What small thing that you use daily are you grateful for?”

Sometimes when we give thanks we get so caught up in the big things of life that we forget to give thanks for the little things, for our five senses, for the everyday items and experiences we take for granted.

Sometimes we also forget to thank God for the many resources in our lives.

When was the last time you gave thanks to God for the resources gifted to you?

your spiritual gifts and your time, your finances and your skills, your relationships and your knowledge, your passions and your possessions

When was the last time you gave thanks to God for the many ways you utilize these resources?

To accomplish your work. To benefit your family. To serve the greater community. To use for the glory of God.

Time and again God’s Word reminds us that our resources are God’s gifts in our lives.

James 1:17: Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.

1 Cor 12:7: To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Cor 10:31: Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

These gifts are not simply for our own pleasure. As we are members of the body of Christ,

these gifts are meant to be shared in ways that lift up God’s love and hope and justice. These gifts are meant to be shared in ways that further God’s kingdom ways in this world, through the mission and ministry of the church.

Yet how often do we consider our resources, and think:

These are mine. These are for my pleasure. These are to care for my needs. I’ve earned my money; I ought to be able to spend it as I see fit. I’ve worked hard to hone my skills; why would I waste them on others. I deserve time away from work; why would I sacrifice my time to help someone else.

Helping others goes against our human nature. Yet our spiritual nature calls us to share in ways

that love God and love neighbor.

So each day we have a choice—will we use our gifts only for personal gain, or will we use our gifts for the glory of God, as a tangible reflection of our commitment to Christ?

This choice is nothing new. Even in the early church, we see a struggle to focus on contentment rather than greed, to focus on community rather than selfish pleasure, to focus on what is eternal rather than what is temporary.

In the Apostle Paul’s words to Timothy and the church at Ephesus, Paul encourages them to continue to fight the good fight of faith, including honoring God with their resources.

He encouraged them to be content with what they had, if what they had covered basic food and clothing needs: “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” (6:8 NRSV)

He reminded them that our resources are temporary: “We didn’t bring anything into the world and so we can’t take anything out of it.” (6:7 CEB) Hearses aren’t meant to pull U-Hauls.

Paul also warned them that their attitude toward money could be their downfall: “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.” (6:10 CEB)

Notice Paul is not saying money is the root of evil, but the love of money. Money pays for our basic necessities. Paul benefited from rich benefactors who supported the ministry of the early church. Our ministry today cannot continue without financial support.

It’s the love of money that can get us in trouble. Yes, the constant voices in our society screaming at us to buy more and bigger and the latest technology and go into debt in the process are hard to ignore. But the constant desire for more can narrow our life’s focus so that we see nothing and no one else in our lives except that drive for more. A constant drive for more money and more possessions will pull us away from valuing relationships, with God and with others.

..Pastor George Truett was once invited to dinner in the home of a very wealthy man in Texas.

After the meal, the host led him to a place where they could get a good view of the surrounding area. Pointing to the oil wells punctuating the landscape, he boasted,

"Twenty-five years ago I had nothing. Now, as far as you can see, it's all mine."

Looking in the opposite direction at his sprawling fields of grain, he said, "That's all mine."

Turning east toward huge herds of cattle, he bragged, "They're all mine."

Then pointing to the west and a beautiful forest, he exclaimed, "That too is all mine."

He paused, expecting Dr. Truett to compliment him on his great success.

Truett, however, placing one hand on the man's shoulder and pointing heavenward with the other, simply said, "How much do you have in that direction?"

The man hung his head and confessed, "I never thought of that."

--Our Daily Bread, October 24, 1992. sermonillustrations.com adapted

God calls us to a different way. God calls us to recognize our resources as gifts from God, to be shared in intentional ways for the glory of God.

When we allow the lure of the world to overshadow the still, small voice of God, then we are like the thorny ground in today’s parable. Once again this week we are hearing the voice of Jesus through the Parable of the Sower, inviting us to be good soil, receptive to God’s Word to take root and grow within us so that we then bear good fruit for God’s kingdom in this world.

This parable of Jesus reminds us of the extravagant love of God, and the surprising ways of the Kingdom of God. This parable reminds us that no matter where we find ourselves, God seeks to reach out to us with his love, his word, his invitation, his redemption. No farmer in his right mind would scatter seed wherever it may land, yet God will scatter love and hope and grace wherever we may be. On the path. In the rocks. Among the thorns. And as good soil.

For many of us sitting here today, this thorny ground is perhaps the most dangerous soil in our lives. For the thorny ground is rich soil. Soil in which good seeds can take root and grow. Soil in which choking thorns can also take root and grow.

If we are not careful and intentional in the ways we live, the thorns will take over so that the good fruit will not mature.

Leonardo da Vinci once said:

Even the richest soil, if left uncultivated will produce the rankest weeds.

-the pastorsworkshop.com

When we are like the thorny ground, we will allow the worries and responsibilities of this world

to lure us away from an active faith. When we are like the thorny ground, we will allow pleasure and wealth and sports to become our priorities, pulling us away from God as the center of our lives. When we are like the thorny ground, we will neglect our spiritual lives in such a way that our fruit will not mature, and slowly we will drift away from Jesus and the community of faith.

How do we counteract these thorns that threaten to choke out our faith? By nurturing our faith lives in intentional ways. Staying engaged with Jesus through a regular discipline of prayer.

Staying grounded in God’s Word. Staying engaged in the community of faith through regular presence and participation in worship, study, fellowship and service. Staying involved in the church’s mission and ministry by investing our resources.

Consider the many ways we are called to invest in ministry and mission.

We are called to invest our skills for the work of God in this world. If you love children, are you investing in our children’s Christian education? If you are skilled at using your hands, are you willing to fix something for another in need, be it a meal or a simple home repair or even a warm blanket? If you are technically savvy, would you be interested in learning how to run our audio/visual systems?

We are called to invest our time for the work of God in this world. Do you build into your calendar time for worship or small groups? Do you clear in your calendar time to serve at church or in the community when a need arises? Do you set aside time each week to spend in prayer and study of God’s Word? Are you open to spending time building relationships with other Christians?

We are called to invest our finances for the work of God in this world. Are you an intentional giver or a loose change giver? Do you give out of a sense of duty or out of a grateful heart?

Are you willing to support not only specific missions, but also undergird our ongoing ministry?

We are called to invest our whole selves for the work of God in this world. How are you offering God all of your gifts, so that when the time to serve comes, you are ready, and when the time to give comes, you are ready, and when the time to lead comes, you are ready?

Imagine how we could expand our ministries if everyone invested at least one hour of their time a month to ministry! Imagine how we could expand our mission if everyone financially committed $10 more a week to their offering! Imagine how many relationships we could nurture if we all took five minutes a week to get to know one another better, across all generations!

We currently reach out to children through our Christian Education ministries and Bright Beginnings Christian Preschool. We currently offer opportunities for youth for fellowship, study and mission. We currently have ways to share in music and building maintenance, studies and Christmas gifts for our community. In the year ahead we are also launching a new avenue of ministry to and with senior adults, learning from their experiences, assisting with minor home repairs, and joining together for multi-generational ministry.

As we invest in the mission and ministry of this congregation, we are investing in God’s ways in this world. As we share our gifts we are declaring to this world the hope we have in Jesus. As we commit to Christ in tangible ways we show others that we have hearts who love God and love others.

We are all called to be faithful to the word of God from 1 Peter that proclaims:

“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received…so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.” (4:10, 11)

What we can invest will be as diverse as we are here today. Some may be able to invest little;

some may be able to invest much. Yet we are all called to do our part.

Pastor Samuel Lloyd has said that

..the whole biblical vision is based on the infinite value of small things—of the widow's small gift to God that nevertheless was all that she had; of the one lost sheep the shepherds leaves the rest to find. No gift is too small to be revered and used in the economy of creation.

The smallest gestures—a letter written, a prayer offered, a child tutored, a check written, help given a colleague—they make the world flow with more grace, hope and love.

--Samuel Lloyd csec.org 3-5-00 Are You Ambitious Enough? adapted

..Sir Michael Costa, the celebrated orchestra conductor, was once holding a rehearsal. As the mighty chorus rang out, accompanied by scores of instruments, the piccolo player stopped playing, thinking perhaps that his contribution would not be missed amid so much music.

Suddenly, the great leader stopped and cried out, "Where is the piccolo?"

The sound of that one small instrument was necessary to the harmony, and the Master Conductor missed it when it dropped out. The point? To the Conductor there are no insignificant instruments in an orchestra. Sometimes the smallest and seemingly least important one can make the greatest contribution and even if it does not seem to make that big a difference to the audience at large, the conductor knows it right away!

--David Leininger “Don’t Lose It! Lose It!” leiningers.com 11-16-08

From Richard Love, Sermon, "Blowing Your Horn," eSermons.com, adapted

I give thanks today for the intentional giving, service and sacrifice of those who have come before us. Those investments large and small of time and money, skills and commitment, knowledge and love.

I give thanks for the intentional commitments and sacrifice you have given to make this church community what it is now.

I also give thanks for the ways God is still calling us to invest our resources so that this congregation continues to share God’s ways in mighty ways for future generations.

Now is not the time to say, let someone else do it. Now is the time to say, how can I contribute?

In what ways can I share my resources through this congregation in response to God’s love for me and to share God’s love with others? How can I make a new commitment to Christ

through the gifts God has entrusted to me?

As we look ahead to next year, God invites us all to be good soil in which God’s Word takes root and grows, then expands to plant seeds of faith in others. As we look ahead to next year, God invites us all to generous, intentional investments of time and money, skills and witness, relationships and service.

Next Sunday, as we finish this series “Committed to Christ,” we will celebrate the commitments made and the ministries lived out over this past year. We will also celebrate through worship our presence one with another. We will then celebrate your faithful financial commitments for the year ahead.

As we reflect on God’s call to invest faithfully and intentionally in the church, remember the encouragement of the Apostle Paul, that says however little or much we have, we are

“…to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for ourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of the life that really is life.”

(6:18-19 NRSV adapted)

The desires of this life are temporary. Yet the ways of God will last forever.

May we honor and reflect God in all that we give and share and commit and serve.

May it be so. Let us pray.