

SHARING GIFTS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

November 11, 2007

Stewardship Dedication Sunday

Scripture: Luke 18:18-27, II Corinthians 9:6-15

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” asked a rich young man one day of Jesus. And Jesus responded rather straight-forwardly, citing the commandments, “Don’t commit adultery, don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t look with a wandering eye at your neighbor’s wife or possessions.”

“Been there, done that,” said the rich man to Jesus, “what else must I do?”

He is a serious fellow, this rich young ruler, a hard headed but earnest inquisitor. He follows the law of God and keeps himself on the straight and narrow. He has the commandments memorized; learned them in Sunday School when he was seven years old, and now he is on to Advanced Religious Studies 202. Jesus must have sensed that he had a *live one* here. Because all three gospels in one way or another indicate that the young man’s earnestness captures Jesus’ attention and Jesus engages him with an even more earnest response.

“One thing you lack,” Jesus said looking deeply into the man’s eyes all the way down to his soul. “Go and sell all that you have and distribute the money to the poor. *Then* you will have treasure in heaven; *then* your heart will be ready; *then* you will be able to come and follow me.” And Luke tells us the young man went away sorrowful because he was very rich.

A colleague in the ministry says that this is the one commandment that none of us can follow. “Go and sell all that you have and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven.” Almost all of us are banking on riches on earth to get us by.

There is a latent Republican in all of us that knows that if we give away all we have to the poor, we will be poor and the poor will squander, not capitalize on what they have received. One need only look to the big lottery winners for evidence that the reversal of poverty does not lead to enduring prosperity or even, necessarily, to much happiness.

“Go and sell all that you have and give the proceeds to the poor,” Jesus said. And not *many* of us in this room, no, not *any* of us in this room from what I can tell, no matter how generous we have been to worthy causes and worthy people, have been that extravagant or that faithful as to sell *all* that we have.

There is something intrinsically illogical about giving away all that you have. We want what we have to count for something. It was hard earned for most of us, lots of chewed fingernails and lost sleep, so we just don’t want to part with it lightly.

Of course, there is some difference in the way the various strata of generations in this country think about giving away what we have, even if it’s not all that we have. The World War II generation was called upon to put life and limb in danger for the sake of a cause greater than themselves.

They went off to war and many died never questioning what they were doing. The nation called. They answered. This “greatest generation,” as Tom Brokaw describes them, are loyal,

generous, for no better reason than it is the right thing to do. Responding to a stated need, well defined is what they have always done since the time they were young. They stood ready to sacrifice all for the sake of something greater than themselves. They are, in any church, the stalwart core who pledge financial support annually. We have very few of that generation present in this congregation. Here, a younger profile is present.

Today's affluent younger generation, Gen X, Gen Y, the products of the dotcom boom and bust and boom again, are not brand loyal as their grandparents were. They learned from their parents, my generation, the Viet Nam generation, to question authority, be skeptical, trust no one, place no faith in organized religion. So the rich young rulers of today want to know what bang they will get from their buck if they give anything away. They learned that from their Baby Boomer, skeptical, flower child parents.

Today's rich young rulers of Wall Street and Silicon Valley want to know where their dollars are going. They are eminently generous, but cautiously so.

The Robin Hood Foundation here in New York, made up mostly of hedge funders, raised \$48 million at its annual dinner last year to fight poverty in New York City. Robert Frank of the Wall Street Journal reports that that organization holds "regular investor updates for its givers. It also creates a 'portfolio' of groups and causes to fund, based on their risk and missions. Its board of directors funds all the administrative costs, so they can promise that 100 percent of donations go to people who need it."

Charity is becoming increasingly competitive among the well off. Today's rich young rulers "don't just want to do well by doing good: They want to be the *best* at doing good. Oracle's Larry Ellison, who's pledged to give away more than \$600 million," writes Robert Frank, "ranks his fellow philanthropists not by how much they've given, but what kind of results that can show."

"Until you start solving problems, Ellison says, "until you start curing diseases, until you start delivering results, what difference does it make how much you give?"¹

Maybe the rich young ruler who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life was a member of the Robin Hood Foundation underwhelmed by Jesus extravagant and reckless approach to self-sacrifice.

Or maybe he was impressed by Bono or Angelina or Oprah going to Africa and investing a lot of money in a worthwhile cause. There is so much good being done these days by people of substantial means. The media coverage is amazing. The lives that are touched are no doubt indelibly marked by the kindness that has come their way.

But the giving models of a new generation of those who have wealth impacts the giving of those of us with less substantial means who are only affluent. We want to be a part of what is good in the world, the solving of problems, the alleviation of suffering. And the world's problems seem so large, global warming, immigration issues, the removal of land mines, AIDS, terrorism, peace in Israel and Palestine and in the Middle East, the sexual mutilation of women, the abuse of children, the need for clean, safe water in villages on every continent, the battle against cancer... we have a lot of good we need and want to do. When we see someone like Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey, going to a foreign setting and doing something to help address human need, we want to be a part of it.

And it is not at all surprising that Christians would be especially interested along with all people of good will who look to make the earth a more habitable, more peaceable world. Because we understand about self sacrifice. We know what the gold standard of that is. It is the life, death, and resurrection of the man to whom the rich young ruler asked a question about

eternal life.

No one knew or did more to show us the meaning of self-sacrifice, of a life lived for others, than did Jesus who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and who became obedient even to the point of death on a cross, in order to provide for us a living expression of the love of God and God's extravagant gift to us of eternal life.

Jesus, unlike the rich young ruler, counted the cost of emptying himself, and did not go away sorrowful, but embraced the sacrifice that was his. Ever since, all our giving is measured against that standard.

In light of that level of giving, we know two things; that our lives find meaning when surrendered in service to God, and God does not ask more of us in giving than God has already given in abundant measure.

St. Paul writing to the Corinthians in the passage we read today urges those young Christians in that fledgling church to be generous in collecting an offering for the people in Jerusalem who are in need. It is as if he were asking for a special collection for those affected by Hurricane Katrina. A special offering for people in need.

He reminds the Corinthians that God has blessed them generously, and now they are being asked to share their gifts in the same manner. So, as he says, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ... and by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."

For the sake of those who want the bottom line, our younger members and those who are new to making a pledge, let me just say why it is that we ask all our members to make a pledge of financial support to the church for its ministry and mission in the coming year.

Some of you come here because you have children and are looking for support in raising your children with religious values, faith, and a church community. Okay, we are committed to doing that too. The church school every Sunday, the First Kids program on Friday nights, the children's choirs, the Easter Egg hunt, the Advent Family Night Dinner, the Little Children's Christmas Party, the Baby Gatherings, even the Penny Harvest today are all ways that we are shaping the life of children and sharing with parents the responsibilities of raising their children in the Christian faith.

"Family" in this church is broadly defined and includes two mommy and two daddy parents, children that are adopted from countries all over the world, and a wonderful mix of kids of all races who bind our lives together by their example of openness to one another. Just look at the array of children that run up the aisle and sit on the steps for the children's prayer each Sunday. They exemplify the way God sees the world, a rich palette of color and diversity, hue and shading, joy and uniqueness, in which we all are blessed by our distinctiveness while bound together in our oneness in Christ.

If what you want to do is make the world a better place, well, make a commitment here. Whether it be making sure that effective help arrives quickly in places of human suffering like Darfur or Iraq or the Gulf coast following a hurricane, it's Presbyterian Disaster Assistance that is so often arriving earlier and staying longer than even government resources do. Ask the people in Louisiana and Mississippi where the continuing help in the recovery efforts in the Gulf area are still coming from and they will tell you from church groups, like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and even local congregations like our own who have sent workers there to restore and rebuild.

If it's making city life better for people that moves you, then here's a good place to make

an investment. Seventy-five senior citizens who live in the neighborhood come here every day for lunch and friendship, making their lives a little less lonely, a little happier. We provide a warm and well-lighted meeting place for the Twelve Step groups that gather here nearly every day and evening of the week. Our school for autistic children, which meets here every weekday and is part of the New York City school system, is the most sought after school in the whole special education system for these poorer families who obtain through free public education here at First what wealthy families pay tens of thousands of dollars to obtain in specialized schools.

And yes, we have some overhead costs, heat and light and electricity and building maintenance. It costs money to run a large set of buildings in New York City. But we share the building all day and all night. Whether it be social workers getting education in child protection through Good Shepherd services, or ten homeless men sleeping in the parlor all night, the building is an instrument for outreach and mission.

It's not sexy paying the light bill. There's not much payback in seeing that the sanctuary is warm and there is bread to break on communion Sundays, and there are enough magic markers in the church school classrooms for kids to draw. But what would our life together be if we did not have these simple things on which we rely and count so much and which cost money to provide?

In order to keep providing for the church's ministry we ask our members and friends to make a financial commitment of a percentage of their household income, to be contributed throughout the coming year, so that we can prepare a budget and plan for expenses.

We ask you to do it, because we don't have anybody else to ask. The church can only be supported by its members who either provide the financial support we need or not, and if not, then we do less, offer less, reduce mission and ministry and cut back. It's as simple as that. The more committed our members are, the more we are able to do.

We have an endowment, yes, but it is donor restricted and cannot make up the difference between what we need to do and what we have contributions to do. As it is, every year, it comes down to this, we defer maintenance on our buildings, and we do not give away as much in mission dollars to others as we would like. We never give extravagant increases in salary to our employees, but we do try to keep our employees with us, even though in other churches and other jobs they would likely be paid more money.

The trustees and session who administer the church do so carefully and frugally. We don't have an old guard that pays all the bills and controls all the decisions. No one with deep pockets that serves as a sugar daddy when the chips are down.

We live carefully and simply, sharing the gifts that we have been given, thankful that we have as much as we do, and hopeful that our members and friends will support us even more generously in the next year than they did in the last. In plain language, that's what your pledge means and does.

How much should you give? The biblical tithe is 10%. And Presbyterians nationally average about 5% of household income annually, giving to all causes they support, with the majority saying the church is their top giving priority. If you are giving \$500 a year right now, based on the national Presbyterian average that would mean you have a family household income of only \$10,000. If you are giving a thousand dollars a year, your household income would be only \$20,000. The largest number of our donors are giving at level. Clearly there is room for some prayerful reassessment.

Only you can decide what your commitment will be. I can only ask you to commit it to prayer and to be as thankful in sharing your gifts as you have been joyful in receiving them.

That's the bare bones meaning of what you are asked to do today when you place your pledge in the offering plate.

A long time ago, a rich young ruler asked Jesus what he had to do in order to inherit eternal life. And the answer Jesus gave him asked of him so much that he couldn't live up to it. He went away sorrowful. Don't you go away sorrowful.

God still asks us to take stock of what we most treasure and be willing to let go of what is good for the sake of what is even better. At the heart of stewardship is that challenge, to trust God so much with our lives and our possessions that we let go of that to which we hold so dearly, trusting that God, who loves us infinitely, will not let us fall.

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¹Robert Frank, **Richistan**. New York: Crown Publishing, 2007. 166