

With Glad & Generous Hearts

Romans 12:13

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In this hand I have a twenty, a five and a one dollar bill plus a dime. In this hand, in this bag, I have twenty-six dollars and ten cents in ones, fives and some change. The same amount of money but perhaps we feel differently about how they came to be. With this one [show bills] we get the impression someone took it out of their wallet; with this one [show bag] we can surmise that someone has been saving it over time. For some, \$26.10 represents a fraction of an hour of work; for others, \$26.10 represents three and a quarter hours of work at the current minimum wage. Why \$26.10...to share with you a modern day story of a gift like that of the widow's mite.

In another church I served, there was a little girl named Abby. One year when Abby was nine years old she went Christmas shopping with her mom and brothers on the Friday after Thanksgiving. She had worked and saved lemonade stand money, pet walking money, and allowance since the summer for this big shopping day. She had kept it in a bag just like this one. As they were going into the mall, her mom and brothers went ahead...but Abby stopped at the Salvation Army Santa ringing his bell. Holding the door, her mom watched her. Abby looked at the Santa. She looked at the pot. Then Abby unsealed her baggie and dropped all \$26.10 in the pot~ then her mom watched her skip into the mall! Few of us would feel like skipping after we had just given away all the money we had. Like the widow in Jesus' time who gave away all she had, Abby was glad and very generous to share what she could; what she had worked so hard for, with others.

A stewardship sermon is never easy to preach or to hear. This year, in the larger context of our economic uncertainty; the challenge is even more obvious. Some optimistically say "we're in recovery;" and that may be true, but others realistically still "feel the sting" of being let go or the changes in life that a reduced income, due to changes in the market or in employment, brings. The national unemployment rate is now 10.3% and according to a radio program I heard this week, 35% of people that are employed are wrestling with some aspects of depression due to the uncertainty of these economic times. In our adult education class earlier this fall on "Faith, Hope and the Economy and the Greatest of these is..." we knew that the topic was relevant but what we couldn't know was that one in attendance had thoughts that went to suicide due to the economic strain in their life. Last week when I preached on Paul's admonition "to contribute to the needs of the saints," I had no idea that there were two more in our Covenant community who had been let go of their jobs that week. Their hearing the good news of the gospel that the church is admonished to contribute to them as well as to strangers brought hope and comfort. Indeed, "Grace Happens" as we open our hearts and minds to being the church. And a part of being the church is stewardship and we all know it is stewardship of time, talents and money. Unfortunately, this time of year, we mostly think of the money to support the budget...that supports our ministry and mission. In the next couple of years, I hope that we can embark on a year round stewardship program so that our addressing the concerns of our budget is not the main focus of our stewardship.

For the last six months we have been looking at what it means to be the church, including the stewardship of our non-monetary gifts. In the sermon series this summer, “Embracing the Spirit and Receiving Our Gifts” we heard the Biblical foundation that the gifts of God are for building up the church and for service in the world, now we see that this includes our monetary gifts as well. The balance between the building up of the church and service in the world continues to be an ongoing challenge for a healthy, dynamic congregation. It’s a challenge in economically strong times and it’s especially a challenge in economically stressed times. This fall we’ve seen that a church can be pulled as in a bad game of tug-of-war between supporting their local ministry; “contributing to the needs of the saints,” and supporting their mission; “extending hospitality to strangers” near and far. Covenant is no exception. In Covenant’s fifty-five year history we can look back at this tug-of-war. The challenge is to find balance! I knew of a church of several hundred members that had at one time committed to sending up to 50% of their operating budget to mission ~ a wonderful goal but within a decade their programs diminished and their worship attendance dropped to below fifty and the money to mission therefore drastically declined. I knew of another church whose membership at one time was also several hundred but as is the case of many mainline churches their membership declined and as it did, they tried to conserve their spending and didn’t give any money to mission outside their own congregation...their attendance dropped to under twenty. Of course, in both churches there were other contributing factors but the point is made. In a balanced approach to being the church, it can’t be contributing to the needs of saints or supporting mission, it has to be both!

But what makes a church different than any other organization doing the same thing; striking the balance between meeting the needs of their own members and serving others. We all know there are many excellent philanthropic organizations needing money right now and asking for money right now, most if not all of these, have a fellowship component...I belong to a couple myself; so what makes a church unique? The answer is seen in our Acts text as it shares with us the first Christians’ experience: they gathered “with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” First and foremost a church is a community that gathers to worship God! Unlike other organizations, our purpose isn’t first to contribute to the needs of the saints, “the members of the organization” nor is it to “extend hospitality to strangers,” philanthropic support in local, national and global ways. What makes us different is that we gladly first respond to God’s grace by praising God, and then in gratitude we respond to God’s grace by generously sharing our gifts with saints and strangers!

This week you all should have received this year’s Stewardship brochure. In it you will have read that Covenant is blessed! We have rich worship opportunities praising God together here in the sanctuary and also in small groups. We have dynamic programs that enhance our Christian faith and experience. We support over thirty local, national and global organizations. We subsidize another twenty + local organizations that use our building at little or no cost. We have hundreds of volunteers serving in dozens of different ways, each seeking to be good stewards of their time and talents.

In this difficult economic time, the Session and the stewardship campaign committee knew that we are all challenged, although in different ways and for different reasons, by the economy. So we did not put forth a challenge budget, where each council and committee submitted what their “dreams” were, rather we asked for each council and committee to put forth what they needed to

continue their essential and effective ministry and mission. The result is proposed budget that is forty thousand dollars less than last years' adopted budget, equal to the actual budgets falling in-between the years of 2004 and 2005. Some of us may feel like we only have two cents to rub together and we may not feel we can be like widow. Some of us may feel like we have worked so hard for every dollar...whether it goes beyond \$26.10 or not...and we may not feel we can be like Abby. Some of us may feel we are doing okay but are worried about the future. Some of us may feel like we are in an economic recovery and all will be better very soon. The Session and I appreciate how you are experiencing this time and we know it is different for each one, what we also know is that you love God. We know that you have and will continue to share your gifts to contribute to the needs of the saints and to extend hospitality to strangers. So together, next week on Commitment Sunday, we *will* respond with glad and generous hearts as we seek to be good stewards of our money, individually and as a community of faith, that God's ministry and mission in and through this place can continue to thrive! Thanks be to God! Amen!