

The Abundance of God's Blessings
Stewardship Sunday, Nov. 6, 2011
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I am going to share with you a little clergy secret this morning. I'll bet you never thought of this but the annual sermon on stewardship is not generally considered the pastor's favorite sermon of the year. In fact if the truth be known it is usually greeted with private grumbling and mumbling from the pastor. You may have heard some rumbling and grumbling noises coming from my office this past week, maybe not.

I do have something I want to say on giving though, so this is my time to say it. Vibrant, fruitful and growing congregations practice extravagant giving. Giving is central to Jewish and Christian practice because people perceive God as extravagantly generous; God is the giver of every good gift. God is the source of life and love. People give extravagantly because they know they receive extravagantly.

Scripture is just full of examples and teaching that focus on possessions, wealth, giving, gifts, generosity, offerings, charity sacrifice and sharing with those in need. Abraham gave a tenth of everything to God. Throughout Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we are invited again and again to bring our tithe of first fruits to the house of the Lord. Jesus' teachings abound with tales of rich and poor. The story of the widow with two coins focuses on the importance of giving in proportion to your means.

And Jesus warns us Take care! Be on you guard against all kinds of greed; for ones' life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Acquisition of material goods doesn't foster life rich in God. And Paul, why Paul warns his followers with material resources not to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides everything. Our own John Wesley practiced generosity as a

necessary and indispensable aspect of discipleship. That's the theme here this morning.

Tithing and generosity are essential for the maturing of the soul and for the work of the church. Wesley said, "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." At this particular moment in history we are not living in a time when we feel that we are all living the good life. We live in a time of fear. Fear of falling stock markets. Fear of bank failures, fear of recession and economic depression, fear of a worldwide economic down-turn.

It may seem that there is no worse time in the past fifty years to be asking people to give generously even extravagantly. The unemployment rate is the highest it has been since 1969. Everyone is afraid. How can we ask people to pledge income they are worried about? I don't think there has been an economic crisis like this in my life. It has to be the worst time to ask people to give generously.

Well maybe not, perhaps this is the best of time to reflect on why we give, what we give and how it affects our lives. The reason that this is the best time is that giving extravagantly is a great blessing to us as individuals that we cannot afford to go without this blessing in this time when the people around us and the rest of the world is panicking.

We live in an extraordinarily materialist society. We are completely immersed in a culture that tells us every day in many subtle ways that our self-worth and self-esteem is based on our material wealth.

I think it is so important, not to talk about stewardship in general terms, but to speak confidently and faithfully about money, giving, generosity, and the difference it makes in the life of the giver and in the life of the church. We Christians have a stronger

need to give than the need of the church for money. I remember in my small rural church where I started ministry, we were sending out a letter asking for money for a new church roof. The secretary pulled off one of the addresses and said to me, oh we shouldn't ask her for money, she can barely afford to eat. I said no, we need to offer her the opportunity to give. It is completely unfair not to offer everyone the blessings of being able to give whatever he or she can afford in proportion to their means. When we offer what we have, there is a steady growth of spirit and a steady growth of relationship with Jesus Christ. People delight in giving. Pledge campaigns are not about money, dollars, and budgets but about mission, spiritual growth, and relationship to God. People feel strengthened and grateful to be able to serve God through giving.

Extravagantly generous churches believe that faithful Christianity should challenge the prevailing materialism and individualism of middle class culture. Thank God, that there is a place to go that is not blinded by materialism and the fear and anxiety that go with it.

How do we do this? It's not too difficult; in fact I think we are already on the right path. We emphasize mission, purpose, and life-changing results. We provide a compelling vision that invites people to give joyfully. Thereby finding purpose, meaning, and satisfaction in changing lives. Rather than becoming obsessed with income, survival, and maintenance, they continually return their focus to changing lives, reaching out to new people, and offering significant mission.

I want to add a note of caution here. Too often in the past, liberal mainline churches have focused on mission alone. If we forget to keep spirituality and mission together, we get spiritually vacuous activism. If we do not combine activism with

traditional sacraments, prayer, Bible study, and personal piety, we might as well be the Rotary club.

There is nothing wrong with the Rotary club, but that is not who we are.