

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE GRACE OF GIVING”

Scripture Lesson: 2 Corinthians 9: 10-12

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, October 27, 2024
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

2 Corinthians 9: 10-12

10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

The Grace of Giving

Earlier this week, I attended a Lamb Institute luncheon where Dr. Suzy McCall talked in greater detail about her ministry to the children, the very lambs of God in Honduras. Suzy, thank you again for being here this morning. It really is helpful and encouraging for us to hear about how God is using you and allowing us to be supportive of your good work in Honduras. And to think you have been at it for 25 years, that's remarkable!

Just prior to that luncheon I mentioned, we were mingling about, and I met one of the Institute's board members, and she was talking about the Hebrew word for testimony, and how it is that within the context of Jesus' power and authority, it translates, "do it again." It reminds me of a Session meeting during a Stewardship Season when the wealthiest Elder stood up and shared a portion of their faith story. "I'm a millionaire," the Elder said, "and I attribute all of it to the blessings of God." The Elder went on to say, "I can still remember the turning point in my faith like it was yesterday: I had just earned my first dollar, and I went to a youth meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. And so, at that moment I decided to give everything. All I had, I gave to God, and I believe that God blessed that decision, which is why I am wealthy today." And with that, the Elder sat down.

Now, that Elder just happened to be sitting next to the Chair of the Stewardship Committee, and when as the meeting continued, the Chair of the Stewardship Committee leaned over and whispered into the Elder's ear, "That was a wonderful story! I dare you to do it again!" The idea of a testimony being an expression of God's grace that happens again; well, that speaks volumes to us on a day like today. Because a little later in the service, and when we are invited to come forward during the singing of the hymn, Here I Am, Lord, and when place our Commitment Cards in the basket here at the front of the church, that is our joyful response to what God has already done for us. It is a token of our delight in the multitude of God's blessings and the richness of God's gifts. It is, in a word, our "testimony," our individual and collective opportunity to "do it again," to joyfully respond to God's goodness and grace with a grace of our own. "The Grace of Giving!"

And praise be to God, grace begets grace, which is to say that we give with the expectation that God will use who we are and what we give of ourselves to bring glory to Him and further His

kingdom. In other words, by God's grace, what we do here today, it can become the living testimony of someone else! We have been blessed to experience God's grace in countless, undeniable ways! Today is known by many as "Reformation Sunday," because it was back on October 31st, 1517, when the great reformer, Martin Luther, nailed his 95 Theses for debate to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany! And so, it seems very fitting that we would take to heart something of the grace of God that has been transmitted to us from within our reformed theological heritage.

Earlier in the service, we sang those lyrics which were penned by Martin Luther himself: "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing; were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing." We know those words, and to many of us they are like second nature, and we sing that hymn at least a couple of times a year! But to the church in the Middle Ages, and to those who advocated for a "works righteousness," which is basically the idea that that if we work hard enough, if we do enough, that we can somehow make ourselves right with God. Well, to that kind of theology, Martin Luther and others a resounding "No!"

And the grounds for their rebuke? The Bible – listen to God's Word as it comes to us from Ephesians 2:8-9. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast." That particular theological contribution to the church and its members, it functioned as a means of grace, because it reminded us that we can do nothing to earn God's favor! And we deserve nothing! And yet God, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, He gives us everything! That Biblical premise is not just at the heart of stewardship, it is at the heart of the Gospel -- that all that we have, and all that we are, is a gift from God!

Sadly, that is a reality which probably escapes all of us at one time or another...we praise ourselves, we praise our ingenuity, we praise our results, when what we really need to do is "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..." Consider the banquets of God's grace that we have already experienced this morning in the joyful voices of our children, in the waters of baptism, in the incredible testimony of one of our mission partners!

In our New Testament Lesson, we are given a glimpse into how Christ's church in another time experienced God's grace. It was in the first century, and there was a young and energetic church in the city of Corinth and the Apostle Paul loved them. They weren't perfect, mind you. In fact, at times, they were quite confused. Their spiritual gifts were abundant, but it seems that those gifts got the best of them to the point that Paul, on another occasion, was compelled to remind them that if they thought of their spiritual gifts too highly. If, for example, they spoke in the tongues of mortals and of angels, if they had prophetic powers and understood all mysteries and all knowledge, and if they had faith so as to remove mountains, but had not love they were nothing! For Paul, it was never a question about what spiritual gift was the best, or what program was most effective or sought after or how many vans you rented to take relief supplies to Western North Carolina. No! For Paul's part, the question he would have the Corinthians to ask themselves was not "Whose spiritual gift was the best?" but rather, "How is who I am and what I am doing reflecting God's love?"

And God's love, God's grace, it happens! It is an actuality, and in our New Testament Lesson this morning, Paul talks about the activity of God's love like this: that the one "who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food [would also] supply and multiply [their] seed for sowing and increase the harvest of [their] righteousness." What Paul is telling the Corinthians, both ancient and

modern, aka us, what he is saying is that giving is not simply a matter of meeting financial needs. It is a matter of meeting spiritual needs! Paul wants us to think of our giving as a spiritual discipline. He doesn't talk about a budget. He talks about the righteousness of God that is given and received and given and received, again and again, and again. And "...For the rendering of this ministry," Paul goes on to say, "not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God."

I wonder if we ever think enough about God's economy of grace like that. That our gifts, our joyful response to God's goodness and grace, our testimony, if you will, would contribute to the thanks and the praise that someone else would one day offer to God! In so many ways, stewardship is about taking the gift of faith that was first sown in our hearts by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, and which has produced a harvest in our lives, it is about taking that blessing and helping it to become a blessing for someone else, a blessed harvest that they would receive! Such Biblical precepts are not new to us! In our Old Testament Lesson this morning we glean something of what is to be the spiritual disposition of our lives. The posture of our giving, if you will. It says, "They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever..." The Biblical concept of tithing is expressed in Malachi 3:10 in this way, "Bring the full tithe (that is one-tenth)...bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." This very one who gives us the food in the first place, gives us the blessings. He is calling us to return to Him a portion of those blessings.

In ancient Israel, one's tithe was used to support the priests, and the Temple, and the poor in the community. It was also a visible and tangible way through which the people trusted that the one who had provided in the past could be counted upon to provide in the future! Jesus put it this way, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Now, to be certain, the richness of God's grace is not necessarily counted in dollars and cents, it is counted in lives! It is counted in lambs! I love the joke, which I have shared with some of you before, it is about two men who were marooned on an uncharted and deserted island. One man paced back and forth, worried and scared, while the other man sat back and enjoyed the sun.

The first man asked the second man, "Aren't you afraid? We might die out here."

To which the second man responded, "No, I make \$100,000 a week, and I tithe faithfully to my church every Sunday. My pastor will find me."

Now, if someone's plane went down, I'd be happy to be counted among those who would be a part of the rescue effort, but I don't know what people give! That is between you and God! In keeping with that little joke, however, what is not a laughing matter is that when we were dead to sin, when the wages of sin and death were starving our spirits and leaving us as good as dead, it was God who determined to save us. Not because of something we did and certainly not because of our tithing. No! We have been saved by grace through faith, such is the profound gift of God's grace to us!

I was talking with Tom Johnson the other day. Tom chairs our Stewardship Committee, and he shared with me that he had recently heard someone refer to stewardship as a kind of "re-gifting." You know, at Christmastime, when you take a gift that you may have received the previous year and

you wrap it up all over again, and you give it to someone else. Well, similarly, the gift of God's grace that is ours. Oh, we keep it, alright. But in a way, we also re-gift it. We do it again, as it were!

Shortly after the sermon we will sing the Hymn, *Take My Life*, and what we notice from one verse to another is that the whole of our lives, our moments, our hands and feet, our voice and lips, our silver and gold, our will, and our heart, and our love, that everything about us would be about the business of glorifying God! But what does our glory to God, our love look like? How does our love reflect God's love at a time of stewardship? More to the point, what is God calling us to give to the work of Christ's Church? How does our love happen in a financial way? How does it supply the needs of the saints, both our missionaries down the hall, as we like to say, or to those living in more distant places like Honduras or Haiti or the Middle East? How do we, and I mean tangibly, how to we work glorify God, make disciples and meet human need? It's not an ask, and certainly not by me, and giving is not on God's wish list. It's not something God would like for us to consider. On the contrary, our gifts to Christ's Church are, for God. An expectation!

But, here again, it is not an expectation that we pay the light bill, ah, it is so much more than that! You see, stewardship is one of the ways that God's transforms us spiritually. It helps us to trust God, and love both God and our neighbor! Simply put, Stewardship helps us to become the people and the church that God would have us to be. I'll let you in on something that is hardly secret. God has already provided for our church's budget, and by that I mean that God's gracious provision is more than evident in our lives. It boils down to how we joyfully respond with our gifts, out of the abundance with which God has already blessed us! Wouldn't it be grand if next year's budget cycle allowed us to do even more than we did this year? How many more sinners of God's own redeeming could come to know God's love? How many more lambs could learn to hear their shepherd's voice?

On Rally Day we considered the first part of our Lesson this morning from 2 Corinthians 9:10-12 and we considered how it is that God gives us faith and grows our faith through Christian Education. And today, well, stewardship is part of what a maturing faith looks like! It looks like a faith that is united by the same heart and mind that was in Jesus Christ, our Lord. It looks like a faith that knows precisely from whom our blessings flow. Indeed, ours is to look, and act, and be the kind of faith which recognizes the special and significant call that God has placed upon our lives to give cheerfully and even sacrificially to the work of Christ's Church!

Still, at the end of the day, God alone is the author of salvation and the giver of grace, which is to say that we don't sow with any expectation of a divine harvest apart from God's good pleasure, and, praise be to God, we have God's good pleasure, we have God's delight! I for one think God is so excited about this morning because he has blessed us with the awesome responsibility of being a blessing to others! Listen again to those words from 2 Corinthians 9:11-12, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but overflows with many thanksgivings to God." This God has done countless times before and ours is a living testimony that God will do it again!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.