

The Vows of Church Membership: 3. Gifts

Matthew 6.19-21
Mason United Methodist Church
7 March 2010

When you heard the scripture read this morning from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and realized again that today's sermon was on the stewardship of gifts, you were likely preparing yourself for the *Sermon on the Amount*. What this church is about is far more than the collective contribution reports on our income tax forms. A sermon on stewardship should go far beyond an appeal for giving money to the church; and that is the attempt of the third sermon in this series.

One little girl became quite restless as the preacher's sermon on giving and tithing to the church dragged on and on. Finally, she leaned over to her mother and whispered, "Mommy, if we give him the money now, will he let us go?"

One little boy shook the pastor's hand after church and said with all sincerity, "When I grow up, I'm going to give you some money." "Well, thank you," the pastor replied, "but why?" "Because my daddy says you're the poorest preacher we've ever had."

The focus of this series of sermons (of which this is the third) comes from the covenant made when a person joins the United Methodist Church. The covenant question is found on page 48 of our hymnal and reads: "Will you...uphold [the church] by your *prayers*, your *presence*, your *gifts*, your *service*, and your *witness*?"

Stewardship is defined in the dictionary as *management*. A steward is a *manager*. To exercise the stewardship of gifts means that we manage our money, our time, and our gifts and graces so that God can be glorified through the blessings and gifts He has entrusted to us. We manage God's gifts in at least two ways: we are stewards of the gifts that are *given* to us *by* God, and we are stewards of our gifts as they are *returned to* God.

Though money is often the first thought a person has when thinking of (or preparing to hear a sermon on) stewardship, being a good steward of gifts goes far beyond finances. As the text this morning points out: the stewardship of gifts begins in the heart.

Our heart, our passion, can rarely be hidden. Jesus said, "Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also." If our treasure is in *things*, our heart will be drawn to the collection of *things* that, unfortunately, can be "corrupted by moths and rust or can be stolen by thieves." At the end of life, *things* go to someone or somewhere else. Funeral shrouds do not need pockets.

Some people have spoken to me during the course of previous stewardship campaigns with a longing in their heart to be able to do more in the area of financial support. Two of these phrases caught my heart and my attention. "I would really like to join Mason Church, but I can't afford to give a tithe (ten percent) of my income." And – "I would give more if I could; but I'm on a fixed income, and even that is about to be decreased." In both instances my response was, "It is *you* the church needs. Not your

money. It is *you* who need the *ministry of the church*. You don't have to *pay* for that."

When the Bible speaks about gifts the message includes, but goes far beyond, money. Eugene Peterson writes Romans 12.6-9a in his paraphrase The Message about the different gifts God has given in the Body of Christ, the Church: "If you *preach*, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you *help*, just help, don't take over; if you *teach*, stick to your teaching; if you *give encouraging guidance*, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're *put in charge*, don't manipulate; if you're *called to give aid to people in distress*, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you *work with the disadvantaged*, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face. Love them from the center of who you are; don't fake it." [Italics added]

This church is full of people giving many of their *giftings*. From woodworking to watching over children, from teaching to typing, from coordinating to compassion, from digging to designing, from music to mowing, from helping to hospitality, from stuffing bulletins and envelopes to stuffing homeless stomachs, from painting to praying, from visiting to van driving, from quilting to quiet Christian service – all done for the sake of and in the name of Jesus. Many of you have responded by volunteering your *gifts* of time and talent, putting your gifts to work for the sake of ministry at Mason Church. This church would not be able to do effective Christian ministry without those gifts.

Persons have taken training in the facilitation of special study groups for Mason Church resulting in key leadership of *Disciple* Bible studies; the *Companions in Christ* series for small groups in spiritual direction; the *Christian Believer*, *Beginnings* and *Jesus in the Gospels* study series for a deeper understanding of the classical doctrines of the church and our faith; training in effective methods of ministry and volunteering at camps, youth group meetings and other youth events. The synergy effect of these groups, and many others, has resulted in some who were students moving into leadership roles as these groups continue. This list is only a *start* on the plethora of ministries to which folks at Mason Church give their time and talents.

As you can see, the ministries of this, and any church, are operative through the *stewardship of gifts* given from the passionate hearts of its people. It is where there treasure is. It is where their heart leads them.

Yes – it takes money to operate any business, any home, and the church. Financial gifts, especially, should come from the heart – not out of coercion. It is during this time of year when many folks report their charitable contributions to the Internal Revenue Service.

The telephone rings. Father O’Malley answers.

“Hello. Is this Father O’Malley?”

“It is.”

“This is the IRS. Can you help us?”

“I can.”

“Do you know a Mr. Ted Houlihan?”

“I do.”

“Is he a member of your congregation?”

“He is.”

“Did he donate \$10,000?”

“He *will*.”

Financial times for all of us are more difficult these days; and the economy can be summarized in the inimitable words of Yogi Berra when he said, “A nickel ain’t worth a dime anymore.” And about the only thing you can do on a shoestring anymore is *trip*.

But the financial gifts given through this church are being meticulously administrated. (Note that the root word of administration is *ministry*.) The money presented is given sacrificially to God in worship for the purpose of effective ministry to God’s people, much as sacrifices were given in the Old Testament through the temple for the support of the operation of the temple (even while traveling through the desert), and for the Levites and their families as they performed the tasks God had assigned to them when they were set apart from the other eleven tribe groups for the purpose of ministry.

The gifts given here at this church, however, are not designated solely for the support of ministers – rather to support ministries. These ministries occur in our own church; but ministry and work goes far beyond the walls of this building into our local community, state, nation and world. It is a timely ministry, too. Within the last few months special financial gifts have been

given through the United Methodist Committee on Relief to support the victims of the recent earthquakes.

So, why do we ask for people to pledge an *estimate of giving* for the coming year? Unlike a salaried individual who plans a budget based on a set salary, the church operates on the amount given and pledged through offerings. Given the current state of the national economy, and the ability of people to give, ministry in this church is projected. When more is available, more ministries can be done. When less is provided, less can be accomplished. The financial planners of this church, a Finance Committee of people employing their gifts of management, prepare the budget for ministry activities based on the amount available. It is no small task. And yours have been no small gifts.

This is no high-pressured sales pitch; nor is it an attempt to lay a financial guilt trip on anyone. For over 119 years God has provided the financial means for this church to do ministry from a base in North Tacoma.

What you are being asked to do is to prayerfully consider what personal gifts you have to offer to God and God's people through Christian ministry, and to combine those personal giftings with your prayerfully estimated financial gifts that will enable your church *to discover, build and express Christian faith*.

Mason Church *is* growing because people are employing the *stewardship of their many gifts* to reach out in prayer, presence, gifts, service and witness. Our *breadth* is increasing; and so is our *depth*. You are

growing into a deeper knowledge of God in your life. That is why God is blessing Mason Church.

The *stewardship of your gifts* right now may mean an encouraging note or phone call to someone, a word or a touch when God's Spirit leads you to speak to or be present with someone, reconciliation between you and another person, forgiveness of someone...or yourself. Stewardship of gifts may mean a new direction for you, leading you to a place where you never thought you'd find yourself.

The *stewardship of your gifts* may mean a check, or a pledged estimate of giving, to your church prompted by the leading of God's Spirit...enabling you to do more than you ever thought possible, regardless of the amount agreed upon between you and God.

What we do now has eternal implications for us, for those around us, and for the church.

Your gift in God's timing may change eternity for someone.