

Stewardship Commitment Sermon Series

“Why I Give: Part 1”

Jeremiah 31:31-33; Psalm 145:1-11, 21; Mark 12:38-44; Ephesians 2:4-10

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As the New Year approaches, the church begins to plan for next year. One of the ways we plan is with a church budget. We project what our ministry expenses will be based on the previous year's ministry expenses and then we ask the congregation to financially commit to giving to the church's ministries. The ministries of the church rely on the generous support of the congregation. Without your support the church would not exist. This is beginning to sound like an infomercial used for any non-profit organization. Is the church like any other non-profit organization? Or are we different?

About this time each year we begin to receive requests in the mail or in our inbox for money for a variety of non-profits, especially if we have supported them in the past. Someone once asked, “How do I support all these requests for money?” It can be overwhelming. And then there are those who complain that the church is always asking for money. Do we always ask for money? Here at Salem we strive to rely on faith that God will provide, but when we see ourselves getting too far behind on our giving, we do share this information with the congregation. And this congregation always responds generously. Thank you. However, as a spiritual leader, I ask this question, “Why does the church need to ask for money?” If we say we love God and each other, and if we are committed to living out this love through the church, then the church should have more than enough money not only to fund the current ministries, but also to create new ministries so that we can extend our mission of expressing God's love to all and helping people grow in their Christian faith. What would a church like that look like?

As a spiritual leader, I claim that the church is not like any other non-profit organization. We are the original non-profit. If we can set aside denomination differences and focus on the Christian Church, we are the only non-profit whose the founder is Jesus the Christ, the world's Lord and Savior. No other non-profit has that. Many non-profit organizations were started as an extension of the church's mission. They were created to serve the least of these in our communities. Or to be good stewards of God's creation. Or to stand up for those who are suffering from injustices. These are all very worthy causes, but even though they are doing God's work, they are not the church.

So what is the church? How would you define church? Here is a definition that comes from *The UMC's Book of Discipline*. “It is a community of believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship...The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world... The local congregation is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society. The function of the local church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is to help people to accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to live their daily lives in the light of their relationship with God” (*The UMC Book of Discipline 2016*). The church exists because of Jesus, not because we are a group of people who like each other. We could form a club to do that. The church exists because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us, is doing for us, and will be doing for us. This is a great reason to give to the church.

All the scriptures today point to reasons we can give to the church. I chose them because they describe why I give. Take Psalm 145. This Psalm reminds us of the attributes of God. God is both great and good. God does wondrous works and awesome deeds. God is powerful yet merciful, compassionate, patient, and is faithful in love. The verses of Psalm 145 that are omitted speak to God as being trustworthy, supporting those who fall down, providing for those in need, protecting those who love God, hearing the cries for help and then saving us. As I reflect over the challenges in my life and the good times, too, I would not be the person I am today without God providing for me, supporting me when I fell down, protecting me, hearing my cries of help and continually saving me from my ego and selfishness. As a person who is still growing in my faith, I have come to recognize all that God has done in my life. I acknowledge this in prayer, through song, and giving witness to it by how I

live my life. Through the years as I have matured spiritually, I have come to recognize that all that I am and all that I have belongs to God, not me. Through the years I have come to recognize that one way I can show my thanks is to give back to God. So I give of my time, presence, gifts, service, and witness. I give as a way to thank God.

The next scriptures I chose are the Jeremiah and Ephesians passages because they go together. They explain why I am a Christian and what God does for us through Jesus. The passage from Jeremiah is about the only passage in the entire book that offers hope. Here is some background to help us understand the value of this passage. As the Hebrew people were entering the Promised Land, God made a covenant with them. The covenant or a binding agreement was the Law, The Ten Commandments, along with a lot of other laws. During the time of Jeremiah, the people have forgotten the covenant and are no longer keeping the Law. Jeremiah rebukes them and calls them to keep the covenant again, but this time God will make a new covenant. They will no longer keep the law for the law's sake, but will have the law in their hearts-the law of loving God and neighbor. Then God will be our God and we will be God's people. God will both forgive our sins and forget them. God's mercy is very rich. The early Christians soon recognized this New Covenant as Jesus, the one who came to forgive our sins and help us renew our covenant with God which leads right into the Ephesians passage. Paul doesn't mention the term, New Covenant, but he does explain what it is. Paul says, when we do wrong, we were dead to God. God could have said, "I'm done with them!" Instead, God continues to pour out God's great love for us. God offers us grace in Jesus and gives us new lives. What a great gift! We were dead to God and God gives us new life. That's God's grace. We cannot buy it. We cannot earn it. All we can do is receive it. We are saved by grace. We are new creations. We are made alive. The New Covenant transforms us, changes us to be like Christ doing good things. I have been dead to God. I have said things that hurt others. I have done things that has caused harm to others. And I have even harmed myself. But once I came to realize that I needed something in my life that I could not provide, I turned to God and said, "Will you accept me?" And with open arms I was accepted, loved, given grace, and a new life. Why do I give to God? Because I can never repay God for all God has done, is doing, and will do in my life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The last scripture is actually the lectionary scripture for today, and it fits the topic, "Why I Give" Jesus is observing those who were giving in the Temple. Some were giving out of obligation. "Oh, there's the collection box, guess I should put something in. Let's see, what's in my wallet? What can I spare? Well, I need to keep this much to pay for the place I'm staying while in Jerusalem, and I need this much for lunch. Oh, I maybe I can spare this much." And some were giving to look good to others. They made a show. "Are you watching? I want you to see how much I give? I want you to hold me in high esteem. " Then along came a widow. Without a husband she had no means to support herself and she had no identity. She was a non-person living in extreme poverty. What does she do? She gives all she had. Why does she give? She doesn't give out of obligation or for show. She had nothing except two coins. She gives not out of generosity, but out of trust. She trusts in God to meet her every need. She gives out of humility and gratefulness. She gives from her heart. Jesus recognized someone that society refused to recognize.

Why do you give? Because the offering plate is being handed to you and you have to put something in there, so you see what's in your wallet and what you can spare? Or do you give out of obligation so Salem can pay its bills? Or do you give out of gratitude for what God in Christ has done, is doing, and will be doing in your life?

When we focus on money, the getting and the keeping of it, we tend to lose our spiritual connection with God. When we focus on our spiritual connection with God, then the getting and keeping of money changes. For John Wesley, it became this. "Gain all you can without hurting yourself or neighbor... Save all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire, and then give all you can..."

Take a moment to reflect on why you give.

Resources: *United Methodist Book of Discipline 2016*; *Money Isn't Is Everything* by Herb Miller; *Simple Rules for Money* by James Harnish

