



Liturgical Day: Reformation Sunday

Date: October 29, 2006

Sermon Title: Financial Generosity

The roof of the church hall of a little Swiss church, at the turn of the 20th century, was falling down, so the members of the church held regular prayer meetings in the hall after the service to pray for funds to repair the roof. There was an old man, known to be very tight with his money, who used to attend and sit near the back of the hall. He could sneak out just before the collection plate came round at the end of the prayer meeting.

One Sunday the Pastor held him up in the hall on the way to the prayer meeting, and he could only find a seat at the front of the room. During the prayer meeting, a piece of the ceiling fell and hit him on the head. Believing that God had spoken to him, he stood up and said, "Lord, I'll give \$1,000." A voice at the back of the church was heard to say, "Hit him again, Lord!"ⁱ

Today we are focused on financial generosity, and I have to tell you: it's a hard sermon to preach, because I am aware that sometimes we need to be thanked for our faithfulness, and sometimes it seems as though God needs to hit us over the head to get our attention.

I wish I could see into each of your hearts right now, because it would make it a lot easier to know what to do this morning. We could divide the congregation into two groups. Some of us, who are giving sacrificially, and whose financial contributions have made such a difference for Saint Peter and its ministries this year, could stay here in the Worship Center and celebrate what God has been able to accomplish through us. Others of us, who have not yet been touched by God's spirit of generosity, or who have decided that other causes will be a higher priority in our giving than our support of this church, could head down to the Fellowship Hall where we could have a come-to-Jesus meeting. I wish it was that easy. But it's not. Not here at Saint Peter, in this moment at time. And not as we look back over the years of our own lives.

That's how it's been with me. There have been times, especially early on in my faith life, when I have been a stingy giver. I've always given in a regular and dependable way. But it has not always been in a generous and sacrificial way. I used to give twenty or twenty-five dollars a week – and to be honest, I thought I was being generous.

But there were two problems with that approach. First, I never really gave with a generous heart. I gave because I thought I had to. I gave because I knew someone needed to pay for the heat, the lights, and the Pastor's salary. Since I was benefiting from the services, I figured I had an obligation to cover the cost of having me there. Twenty or twenty-five dollars seemed about right for my share, and I dropped it in the plate, often times imagining what else that money could have done for me, if I didn't have to give it to the church. That was the first problem.

The second problem was that I wasn't giving as much as God had gifted me to give, and at some subconscious level I think I realized it. It's not that I wrote out my check and thought to myself, "I really ought to add one more zero." But I never felt at peace with my giving. When I'd walk past a panhandler on the street, or when I'd get a phone call from the homeless shelter, or when I'd see an advertisement for some organization that was trying to make a difference in the community, I'd feel terribly guilty. It was as though I actually knew that God wanted me to do more than I was doing – that God had gifted me to do more than I was doing. The guilt would come and go, but it never became strong enough for me to change my giving patterns. So I continued to drop my check in the plate each Sunday, and I continued to feel uneasy about that part of my life.

FIRST LESSON
JEREMIAH 31:31-34

GOSPEL LESSON
ST. JOHN 8:31-36

PRAYER OF THE DAY
ALMIGHTY GOD, ALL THAT WE POSSESS IS FROM YOUR LOVING HAND. GIVE US GRACE THAT WE MAY HONOR YOU WITH ALL WE OWN, ALWAYS REMEMBERING THE ACCOUNT WE MUST ONE DAY GIVE TO JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

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But one day, God hit me over the head. Not with a piece of the ceiling, thankfully. But with the words of a pastor-friend of mine. It was in the days when Jim Lundeen and I were pastoring Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Paradise Valley, Arizona. Pastor Jack Niemi was visiting with us to speak at a stewardship banquet. He spoke about giving sacrificially to the church's ministry. He spoke about tithing – about giving 10% of annual income to the church. And interestingly enough, he then spoke about giving beyond the tithe – giving enough so that it actually affected what we were able to afford for ourselves. He shared how it was a struggle for him to start giving at such a level, but that once he did, it soon began to bless him beyond his imagination.

We invited him to that banquet in hopes that he would be able to convince our members to give more. I don't remember what affect his presentation had on them. But I'll never forget the affect it had on me. It started me on what I expect will be a life-long journey of growing in generosity. Betsy and I began to tithe that year, and we have tried to find ways to grow in our giving every year since.

And do you know what? It has changed my life. I feel good about my support of Christ's church. The check I write out to Saint Peter is of my favorite checks to write. And I don't feel guilty every time another opportunity to give comes along, because I see God growing me and stretching me year-by-year, and that is my focus. And it has made a difference in our lifestyle. When we compare ourselves to others of our age and income level, we see them buying more expensive vehicles or living in larger homes or taking nicer vacations. But the interesting thing is that over time, I've become very much at peace with that. I feel better about where our money is going, and that makes a huge difference.

God hit me over the head a few years back. I know God has hit some of you in the same way. And I pray that this fall's discipleship emphasis will be a way that God gets our attention all over again, and moves us forward in faith.

Today we are celebrating Reformation Sunday. It is a day when we recall Martin Luther and the other pastors and theologians who worked with him to make changes in the church during the early sixteenth century. It is a day when we pledge ourselves to continue the work they began, the work of constantly reforming the way we gather as God's people, so that the Gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – stands at the very center of who we are.

This weekend, our custom is to read from the 31st chapter of Jeremiah. The prophet speaks of God's deep desire to form a new relationship with believers. And he dreams of the day when believers won't have to be told what to do, but instead, from the depths of their hearts, will desire to live lives that are pleasing to God. In one of the best-known passages of his writing, Jeremiah speaks on behalf of God, saying:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

[31:33b]

There is a certain irony about reading this text in the middle of a discipleship study series. In the middle of seven weeks of laying out before us a plan for discipleship. In the middle of seven weeks of quantifying what discipleship looks like. In the middle of seven weeks of claiming that a disciple does this and that and the other thing. It is ironic, isn't it? Are we just setting up another set of laws? Are we giving up on the reformers' love of God's grace, and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit?

If discipleship became the one goal and focus of this congregation, then I would fear that we are. But especially on this day, it is important for us to remember that nothing the church says or teaches or does can ever presume to take the focus off of a living and growing relationship with Jesus Christ. Nothing can ever replace the message that lies at the core of our identity: that we are people, hopeless apart from the grace of God, who through Jesus Christ have been invited back into the family, forgiven and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit, and empowered by grace to live as God's presence in this world.

Hoping, then, that a call to discipleship can give us a glimpse of what that looks like, we press on. Trusting, then, that financial generosity is a key component of a faithful life, we challenge ourselves this weekend. Do we trust God enough that we can give so generously that it makes a difference at Saint Peter? Do we invest ourselves in the life of this congregation, giving enough so that our leaders can stop focusing on how to trim the budget, and start focusing on how to make a difference in the world that surrounds us? Do we share enough of ourselves with this ministry so that our proclamation of the Gospel might be stronger, and

our care of the needs in this community might be more concrete.

But even more so: do we give enough so that our giving is proportionate to our gratitude? Is our financial generosity a fitting response to the many ways that God has graced us?

I've been trying to end each sermon with a question or two over the past few weeks – questions that I hope will keep you thinking about what we've learned together from God's word. This morning I'm going to ask you a number of questions, and I want you to think about them for the next two weeks. Don't raise your hands in response. This isn't for public consumption. But these are questions that each one of us needs to ask ourself, as we consider what it means to be generous in our financial support of Christ's ministry at Saint Peter Lutheran Church. The questions are these:

1. Do you know what percentage of your annual income you give to Saint Peter?
2. Have you committed yourself to give at least a tithe to the ministries of this congregation?
3. Does your giving to the church make a difference in what you can afford for yourselves? Or let me put that another way: are you keeping for yourself more than you need?
4. How will you plan to give more to Saint Peter, starting this coming November 19th?
5. What impact do you expect that to have on your own heart, and your own relationship with God?

Let's consider those questions as we turn to page 11 of our *Habits of the Heart* booklet, and give some thought to how each of us is being called to support ministry through this congregation.

[Give time for each worshipper to consider the questions in the *Habits of the Heart* booklet.]

Thank you for taking time to do that with us. May God bless you richly, as you invest yourselves in the ministries of this congregation. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (October 28, 2006)

First Lesson (English Text)

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson (English Text):

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” ³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ⁱⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

³¹ ἔλεγεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πρὸς τοὺς πεπιστευκότας αὐτῷ Ἰουδαίους· ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ, ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἐστε ³² καὶ γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς. ³³ ἀπεκρίθησαν πρὸς αὐτόν· σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἐσμεν καὶ οὐδενὶ

δεδουλεύκαμεν πώποτε· πῶς σὺ λέγεις ὅτι ἐλεύθεροι γενήσεσθε; ³⁴ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν δούλος ἐστὶν τῆς ἁμαρτίας. ³⁵ ὁ δὲ δούλος οὐ μένει ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ὁ υἱὸς μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ³⁶ ἐὰν οὖν ὁ υἱὸς ὑμᾶς ἐλευθερώσῃ, ὄντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε. ^{iv}

October 29: *Financial Generosity*

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jesus teaches that it is harder for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (St. Luke 18:18-30). This following story provides a glimpse as to why that is true.

The chair of the Stewardship Committee made a personal visit to one of the wealthier families in the congregation, hoping to receive a pledge of financial support. Very carefully, the entire program was laid out: "These are our ministry goals for the coming year. This is the level of support we received last year. This is how much we'll need in the next twelve months. Can we count on you for a major gift?" The wealthy member looked the Stewardship Committee chair in the eye and said: "Did you know my mother is terminally ill, and in a rest home?" Sheepishly, the answer was: "Well, no I didn't." "Did you know that my brother just declared bankruptcy, and can hardly afford to take care of his family?" Again: "No, sir, I didn't." "Did you know that my daughter is teaching school in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood?" Now almost ready to die, and looking for a way to slink out of the room: "No, I had no idea." "Well then, if I haven't given a dime to any of them, what makes you think I'd give my money to the church?"

The key question for wealthy Christians (and by world-standards, that includes every participant at Saint Peter) is this:

Is wealth our servant or our master?

Healthy and faithful Christians make use of wealth to accomplish great things for the sake of the Gospel. But wealth has a seductive power. Often without even realizing it, people become enslaved to their wealth – spending far more time on accumulating it and protecting it than on anything else.

The call to generosity, ultimately, is a call to obey the first commandment. We are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things (according to Martin Luther's Small Catechism). When wealth has become our master, it has displaced God at the center of our lives. And so disciples of Jesus develop habits of generosity, to guard against that possibility. Disciples of Jesus tithe (give 10% of income) to Christian ministry, supporting the local congregation and other Christian mission efforts throughout the world. Beyond that, disciples of Jesus are generous with other organizations that seek to meet the needs of their communities. It is by sacrificial generosity – generosity that makes a difference in what luxuries we can afford ourselves – that we seek to put wealth in its place: refusing to allow it to become our master, and insisting that it be servant to our goals and values.

Above all, disciples of Jesus offer financial support in a spirit of joy and gratitude. Generosity is not a burden that is imposed upon the Christian. It is the opportunity to say "thank you" to God, who has already provided so much. In that there is great joy, and a deep sense of meaning.

At Saint Peter, we invite you to join us in developing habits of discipleship in your life. Will you live and give generously in the weeks and months to come?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

What does the habit of generous financial support look like in a believer's life? Those who have grown in this area find it helpful to be careful, prayerful, and intentional as they plan how they will give to Christian ministry each year. Many have embraced the Biblical concept of tithing (giving 10% of one's income to support ministry), and find it to be a joy and an inspiration. At the heart of generosity is learning to trust in God instead of in ourselves.

1. What fears prevent me from being as generous with my wealth as God wants me to be?
2. What could I give up (sacrifice) that would allow me to be more generous with my own church?
3. What is my response when someone encourages me to tithe (contribute 10% of my annual income to Christian ministry)?
4. In order to strengthen my financial generosity in the coming year, I plan to:

ⁱ Illustration borrowed from a sermon entitled "A Pattern for Giving" by Dr. Joel Santos of *Evangelical Life Ministries International* in Manila, Philippines.

ⁱⁱ Jeremiah 31:31-34, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 8:31-36, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. John 8:31-36, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.