

Wholistic Stewardship and the Thriving Church

2 Corinthians 8: 1-2, 7,9; 2 Corinthians 9: 6-9

Many of us grew up with the annual tradition of a Fall Stewardship Sermon as our churches were raising the money and pledges for the next year's budget. I've heard more than a few say, "Oh great, I showed up for the Stewardship Sermon!"

I've been here 8 years and this is my second Stewardship Sermon, that's about one every four years. We don't overdo talking about money here. If you have been here for both sermons, you will get a gold star after worship. Some of you may go home and post on Facebook one of those "Marked Safe" postings some put out when they've survived a hurricane or some other catastrophe: "Marked Safe: Survived Two Stewardship Sermons!"

It is however a spiritually good thing to ponder stewardship in church every once in a while. Given how often I've preached about stewardship in this church, this may be my last, so I'm giving it my best.

Stewardship sermons are a little dicey because we all have such complicated relationships with money. When I was at Broadway Baptist, we invited a leader of The Church of the Savior in Washington D.C. to lead a group of us, about 20, in a year-long Servant Leadership School. Diana Chambers came

once a month to lead us. It was an amazing experience in the deepening of our spiritual lives. Early on we were given this exercise: to write a “money biography” describing our life long relationship with money. It was both challenging and illuminating, and we discovered how differently we each had grown up dealing with money. It is often said that in marriages one of the top three stressors is money. I think this is so not just because money is a finite resource and none of us like finite resources, but because we bring different money biographies to the marriage.

Preaching about giving is a tender thing in any congregation with a wide range of incomes. For some money and the weekly budget brings worry and pain. I will not lay any heavy burdens on you. Jesus warned religious leaders away from such.

Also adding to the complexity of preaching about stewardship is that our congregation is comprised of a wide mixture of church backgrounds and teaching about stewardship. It is important to me to leave you with some things I’ve experienced through the years about how good stewardship helps the church thrive.

A therapist once said to a client: “What are we not going to talk about today?” Well, let’s be brave and talk about money!

When I talk about stewardship, I am not talking only about the stewardship of our money. I use the words “wholistic stewardship”. It’s about the stewardship of life, the stewardship of self. Your major gift to the church is you! Stewardship can be the time you give. Or in gifts and talents you bring. If God has prospered you in a monetary way, this is an important way you help the flourishing of the church. And part of the covenant we make to one another is to do what we can, what we feel led by God to do, in the financial part of our life together.

For me raising money in church is like the barn raisings you may have seen where everyone in the community comes together, young and old, to build a neighbor’s barn. It’s a beautiful thing to watch. I’ve seen it in time-lapse film. Some hauling water, others up on the roof. Some bringing lunch, some nailing or sawing. Everyone is involved.

To me wholistic stewardship can be pictured this way: we each give from our fullness into another’s emptiness, whatever that fullness or emptiness may be. And we take turns doing both, giving and receiving.

Right in the middle of his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul stops and takes an offering! Like in worship. There is what looks like a hymn verse in his words to the Corinthians:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

that though he was rich,
yet for your sake he became poor,
so that by his poverty you might become rich.

This is no Prosperity Gospel preacher's promotion. Here is how I hear it:

For you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
that though he was full,
yet for your sake became empty,
that we who are empty may become full.

It all begins in the generosity of God in which we share. It's at the heart of our ministry. When, where we are full, we pour from our fullness into another's emptiness. And where, when we are empty, here comes someone to fill our cup. Whatever our emptiness, whatever our fullness, we are giving and receiving all the time.

Another image of stewardship is "care-taking", like a wine steward taking care of the wine or a farmer's caretaking the land. Today we are talking about the caretaking of the church we have been given. It's about all of us offering our strengths to the church, whatever our strengths are. That's a picture of a thriving church.

Paul, in our text for today, was taking an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. He did this everywhere he went. We have from our beginning done something similar. We give a double tithe of our budget to missions, 20 per cent. For every dollar you give to the church, 20% goes to missions. Off the top. I've never seen another church do that. And we've done it for 50 some years.

As Paul writes to the church in Corinth about joining in the offering, he says to this church he knows well: "Some poorer churches than you in Macedonia have given to help the poor in Jerusalem. I hope you will too!" Then he closes with this appeal: "You excel in so many gifts and graces of the Spirit —faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness to do good works—we want you to excel in the grace of giving too!"

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I see you every week engaged in the stewardship of your lives to help build this church and sustain its vital mission and witness in our community. But because we almost never talk about the financial part of our stewardship on behalf of the church, I want to offer some biblical principles that have been helpful to me and which can help the church thrive. Not commands, principles, as even Paul said as he took the offering in Corinth, "I do not say this as a command!"

The first principle is “Proportional giving”— giving as God has prospered us. The biblical standard some of us grew up with was the measure of the tithe, or 1/10th of our income. My guess is that many of Grace’s first generation of members grew up with this standard of giving and gave a tithe to the church. This kind of giving has helped the church thrive even to this day.

I not think a tithe should be a legalistic measure of our giving or measure of our devotion to the church, but I like the principle of proportional giving, that is, giving some percentage of what God has prospered us with. Like, if you can give 1%, this year, give 1%, or 3% or 4%. Then, if conditions are good, challenge yourself to grow one % a year. You can measure your growth in stewardship. It can even feel good.

A second biblical principle is, “First fruits on the first day of the week.” First fruits began as an agrarian practice. People brought the first and best fruits of their garden or live stock to God, not the tail end. A worthy gift is what they wanted to offer. These gifts came first.

“On the first day of the week” was what the early Christian practiced in Sunday worship. They took up an offering for the church and an offering for the poor every Sunday. We in a sense do the same as 20 % of every dollar goes to missions.

We might translate it this way for today: The first check of the week on the first day of the week, the principle being, decide what you are giving to God first.

Now, many people today don't even write checks! And many of us give monthly or quarterly, or by bank draft. What then can the Sunday morning Offering mean? And how can it mean more? I heard of a woman in a church that never gave when the offering plate passed on Sunday Morning. But every Sunday she would say in a stage whisper to those near her: "I mailed mine in!"

Some ideas: What if we decided to put *something* in the offering plate every week? Our check for the church, or a 10-dollar bill, or some change, like on our Noisy Offering Sundays? Make the Offering more than just something we do every Sunday because we always have. In one of my churches, we decided that all loose offering would go to missions. Some worried that would take away from the budget offering, but it had the opposite effect. It made the morning offering more real.

Evelyn Underhill was the British mystic and scholar who wrote a classic on *Worship*. She wrote about every dimension of worship, symbol, words, liturgy, music, but concluded with these striking words: "Worship is summed up in sacrifice." The Offering, she wrote, is the way we unite our small gifts and sacrifices to the eternal giving of God and Christ. It's the way we share in the

generosity of God. God poured God's own life out for us in Christ. Now we become the "poured out church" for each other and for others.

Throughout the history of Christian worship most often the Offering has come after the sermon and prayers, a practice that made the Offering the culmination of worship, an offering of our full selves to God. In many churches today as the offering comes back down aisles, people stand and the Doxology is sung, ringing out throughout the congregation, the response of the whole person and whole congregation to God.

There is another principle that Paul laid out as he took the offering in Corinth. He uses an agrarian example: "If one sows sparingly, one reaps sparingly. If one sows bountifully, one reaps bountifully." Don't be stingy with the seeds; you'll get a disappointing harvest.

And then the last words which I love:

"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Do you know the difference between the feeling of being *drawn* and being *pushed*? God wants you to give as you are being drawn to give, not pushed! The kingdom is not advanced by grouchy givers.

And now that word cheerful? It comes from the Greek word "*hilaron*" from which we get the word hilarious! God loves hilarious givers, like the way lovers

give to the one they love, joyfully, extravagantly, wishing only they had more to give. Gospel giving is glad giving. God will *use* money from a grump, but God loves a cheerful giver.

Now in conclusion, and this is where the shoe leather hits the ground! I'm talking about our Standing On The Shoulders (acronym SOS) effort to raise money principally for paving our deteriorated parking lot.

Our parking lot is like the front porch of the church. Think of all the wonderful things that happen on the parking lot. I see you on that parking lot greeting one another and loving on one another, welcoming visitors to the events of the church. Young people in the neighborhood shoot baskets. It has deteriorated over the years (thank God!) because of all the car and foot traffic! And now it needs tending, especially for the safety of little feet or older feet coming into church.

I am so grateful for Chris Brown and his committee's leadership in this campaign. We are getting closer and closer to our goal! Over 39,000 toward our 63,000 goal! Let's do this thing! My wish is that every person and family give enough to feel that they are part of this community project.

In my only other Stewardship sermon, I told this story. It was at Broadway Baptist Church, and we had decided to build a magnificent new pipe organ to the glory of God. The goal, was to raise between two and three million to accomplish

our dream. Near the end of the campaign, I rose to announce the exciting totals to date: One million, nine hundred and sixty-one thousand, four hundred and twenty dollars and 17 cents! As I made my way from my chair to the pulpit, I debated inside whether to announce the full total or round it off. I decided to announce every penny! After church, a young boy came up to me in the foyer and tugged on my sleeve. I bent down to him and he said, "That was my 17 cents!" I was so glad I did not round it off. God does not round it off! Every person, every gift counts, every gift matters! Always.