

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, October 26

As the children came to the steps on Sunday, we sang our Hymn of Faith. The lyrics were from The Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 6:33**: “*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.*”



I’ve been focusing on Paul’s 50 AD Stewardship Campaign over the past few weeks. As I mentioned in the sermon on Sunday, he must have been doing something right because the Macedonians “**begged for the favor of taking part in the offering**” (2 Corinthians 8:4).

According to Paul, “**First, they gave themselves to the Lord...**” (2 Corinthians 8:5). The operative word is *first*. They sought first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness. They prioritized. They made their hearts’ priority their pocketbooks’ priority. Their Good Confession—*putting* God first—led naturally to their Good Offering—*giving* to God first.

The result? “**During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty... overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part**” (2 Corinthians 8:2).

Speaking of the extraordinary things that happen when people in a church give themselves first to God, I’ll never forget the story the late Ben Gerardy told our North Carolina congregation years ago about a church in western Kansas where almost everyone was involved in raising wheat.

One day the church treasurer resigned her position and everyone wondered what was going to happen to the church. She had been the treasurer for years and the church had appreciated all her hard and dedicated work, but the day she resigned everybody began to wonder, “Who’s going to do that work for the church now?”

Finally, the church officers asked the manager of the local grain elevator if he would be willing to serve as the new treasurer of the church. He agreed to do so, but on two conditions. First, the congregation had to agree that no treasurer’s report be given during the first year he served as treasurer. Second, no questions would be asked about the finances of the church during the year.

The people were taken aback by his request, but since no one else was willing to serve in the capacity of treasurer and since most of those wheat farmers did business with him at his grain elevator on a regular basis and trusted him, they agreed to his conditions.

That year, everything at the church seemed to be going great. No one was worried about the finances since everything seemed to be going fine.

At the end of the year, it was time for the yearly congregational meeting. All of the business items and the elections took place as expected and everyone was very, very pleased with the ongoing ministry of the church. Finally, it was time for the year-end financial report. The treasurer stood up and gave the following report:

- Outreach giving has been paid over 200% more than the previous year.
- Our programs of faith formation for children, youth, and adults are fully underwritten with room for expansion.
- We have such a surplus in our Operating Budget we're able to fully underwrite an additional mission trip this summer.
- There are no outstanding bills and the cash balance is 20% more than it has ever been.
- The church's mortgage has been paid in full.

"How is all that possible?," someone asked. "Where did all that money come from? What did you do? Rob a bank?"

The treasurer then quietly answered: "All of you bring your grain to my grain elevator. Throughout the year, I simply withheld 10% on your behalf and gave it to the church in your name. You didn't even miss it. Do you see what happens when we give the first fruits of our fields to God who owns it all but entrusts it to us to use in ways that honor God and bless others?"

Whether it's a church in western Kansas or in Bible-times Macedonia, miracles happen when people **"first give themselves to the Lord."**

After Paul writes of the Miracle in Macedonia—people begging for the favor of taking part in giving and then giving sacrificially and cheerfully-- he concludes by writing, **"Just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:7).**

May we excel in the grace of giving this Sunday, October 30, as we place our pledges for the 2017 calendar in the offering plate.

A PRAYER OF ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding
and my entire will,
all I have and call my own.
You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace; that is enough for me. Amen.