

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 14, 2010, dedicated to the Stewardship Committee and the great givers of First Church, and always to the glory of God!

“A Generous God Creates Generous People”

***Isaiah 65:17-25; II Corinthians 9:6-15;
Luke 21:1-11***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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As children, many of us remember popsicles with two wooden sticks. On hot summer days, we would come home from playing outside and our moms would pull out the popsicles which were designed to be shared with our siblings or friends. There were times when we really loved the flavor we'd been given, but the engineering behind the popsicle meant that it soon would be broken in two parts and shared with others.

Perhaps our one-stick popsicles of modern time create good consumers but people poor in sharing with others. Something to reflect upon.

Anyway, as kids, no one wanted to be accused of being stingy with popsicles. In our baby-boom neighborhoods, it was the lick of death in territories filled with kids. Like the popsicles, we were designed to share with one another.

Those popsicles came to mind this week as I was going over the text from II Corinthians 9:7. We were designed to share by a God who loves giving - more specifically Paul tells us "God loves a cheerful giver." Actually the word "cheerful" is best translated as "hilarious" or "full of laughter."

Essentially, God loves someone who happily splits their popsicles! It is clear that joyfully sharing your sweet, flavorful life is applauded by God. Sharing this way is great stewardship.

Stewardship is about giving to God. It is about turning total control of our lives over to God. It is about living the words of the Lord's Prayer we speak each Sunday - and for many of us - many times during the week - "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." In other words, we want God's reign in our life and God's will for our life to become the guiding principle of our daily living. (Drawn from *Giving to God* by Mark Allan Powell, Erdmann's Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. xii)

Stewardship is about a prayerful and thoughtful attitude of sharing with others, which translates into the action of sharing. It is about sharing time, talents and financial resources. It is about living carefully and well in relation to the earth and other people. Stewardship is about conserving water, recycling paper and aluminum, preserving wetlands and rain forests, rivers and water tables, exercising, eating right, managing stress, flossing our teeth, nurturing our relationships and marriages, raising happy and healthy children, caring for aging parents, as well as caring for the poor and oppressed in our city, state, nation and world. And yes, stewardship is about sharing and living into the life giving message of faith in Jesus Christ. All of these - all of life lived well for God - is important to stewardship.

Stewardship never happens by accident. We don't stumble into stewardship by showing up at church and suddenly become generous givers of our time, talent and financial resources. We also don't care for ourselves, God's creation or other people by accident.

The Apostle Paul knew this as he was writing to the church at Corinth. He presents his faithful and principled teachings on stewardship in his first letter and wraps it up in his second. I shared a snippet of II Corinthians 9:7, but there is so much more.

In I Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul gives four directives for how to give to God in response to how God has given to you. First, your giving is an act of worship. In the week leading up to Sunday, pray over your gift and then present what you are giving to God. Second, your giving is systematic. Give when you are at worship and give regularly. Third, give you should give proportionately of your income. We cannot give what we don't have. But we can withhold what we have received. Giving a percentage of our income is important (I'll return to this). Fourth, plan your giving in advance. In other words, consider your gift and come ready to give.

In II Corinthians Paul chapters 8 and 9, Paul continues with 10 more guides to giving, exhorting the church to follow the example of the people of Macedonia. His call echoes across time - first to the Corinthians and then through the ages - across the National Highway and East Broad Street - to First Congregational Christians. We are called to follow the example of the magnificent Macedonians because they were remarkably generous people.

Like them, we are called to be graceful givers to God (II Cor. 8:1). Out of the grace-filled attitude the rest of our giving flows (8:2). Second, give voluntarily, not under compulsion (8:3). Third, give in proportion to your income and circumstances, as each of us is expected to contribute according to our means (8:3, 11-13). Fourth, give sacrificially because in so doing some of us will be inspired to give beyond our means (8:3). Fifth, giving is a privilege, something we appreciate being able to do as a result of the grace of God working in our lives - so give joyfully (8:4). Sixth, since giving involves more than financial contributions, give your whole being as an example of total involvement and the vibrant faith and commitment God has placed on your heart (8:5). Seventh, give as a witness to the gospel demonstrating the genuineness of the church's love. (8:8).

He continues in the Ninth Chapter. Give a pledge for in your commitment and fulfill it over time because it shows your depth of commitment – each person making up their own mind how much to give (9:7). Ninth, God will provide for cheerful givers, so give out of the faith God has laid on your heart (9:8-11). Finally (10) - Giving brings glory to God and leads you to give thanks, praise and glory to God (9:11-13). (Drawn from Mark Powell's book)

The generous people of a generous God look like this: They give with grace-filled extravagant generosity. It is worshipful, systematic, proportional, planned, sacrificial and joyful. Such giving reflects the entire being of the giver, demonstrates their total involvement in the community, the vibrancy of their faith and exceptional commitment and in trust of God. It is a witness to God's gospel of love, given purposefully over time, given out of faith in God and given in trust and confidence as a way to glorify God and praise the great steward of the universe and the great steward of each one of our lives.

And remember: All this giving is done cheerfully! It is true! A generous God really does create generous people! Amazing! Praise God!

In the next week, our Stewardship Committee is asking you to reflect, pray and act on your stewardship commitment for the church year beginning in six weeks. I want to lift up six practical realities to remember as generous people glorifying our generous God - as you go out to reflect, pray and act and then cheerfully return next week.

First, your pledge is your most important financial investment in the daily operations of our ministry and mission at First Church.

You can place money in the offering basket or plate each week, but your pledge is your investment in our future. Studies have shown people who pledge give 100% more with increased joy than those who simply put money in the passed by offering plate.

Here is how your investment is split up. The first 10% (or a tithe) of all pledges goes to missions. Before we keep any money for First Church, we give away the first 10% of our pledged dollars. In addition, we send an additional \$75-90,000 away in mission through your generosity in weekly offerings and other exceptional gifts. Our first dollars are mission dollars.

Approximately 62% of our budget goes to the operations of the staff at First Church. A few years ago, we did a little research. Other congregations of comparable sizes spend between 60-66% of their budgets on staff costs, including salaries and benefits. In smaller churches, this percentage often rises well above 75% of the operating budget. Here, the rest of our budget goes to care for the building and grounds (25%), and invest in our program life of the church (3%).

Second, each year we know the cost of running the church will rise about 3-5%. To keep up with these inflationary costs we must either increase our giving, or cut back on staff positions or mission support.

With the cost of doing business going up, we have to find ways to keep up. Between cost of living increases (which we have not met for at least four years now), increased medical costs and utility increases, we have to keep up with inflation each year. Without increases in pledges, how will we keep up with costs? We will save money through our “greening of First Church.” I happen to believe, when we all shoulder the increases through our increased pledging, the church continues to grow and flourish. When we don't, programs and people are cut.

Third, every dollar is accounted for!

Our management of your investment is transparent, while at the same time your pledges and your actual giving are absolutely confidential. The entire annual budget, monthly budget and giving patterns are available for you to see. Our business manager, Sharon Leidheiser, has them in the church office. At year's end, all organizational financial statements are posted in the annual

report. From our trustee-endowed investments to our income and expenditure of every penny, First Church shares its financial information with its members.

This is true - WITH ONE MAJOR EXCEPTION - how much you pledge and how much you give is absolutely confidential.

Fourth, you can make a pledge on our Web site, online. You can also pledge by direct deposit through your bank.

Pledge online if you are not currently pledging. You can do this anytime, day or night at www.first-church.org. As for direct deposit, I love the direct deposit of my pledge. It helps my family and my church.

First, it is simple and safe. Every two weeks, Susan's and my pledge is sent electronically to the church. Once we set up the account, we have never had to worry about it the rest of the year (or actually ever again). Second, it allows us to give in the weekly offerings and concentrate on the rest of the mission of the church without worrying about our weekly pledge. Third, direct deposits help the church - especially in the summer time.

Since this form of pledging has started, we spend A LOT LESS TIME in the newsletter begging you to remember and send your pledge. It's safe and simple. It clears your head for mission. It also stops us from needing to beg, cajole and bug you. Call Sharon Leidheiser at 614-228-1741, ext. 11, or go online to www.first-church.org to pledge online anytime! In fact if you are not pledging now, you can do this simply and safely from your home today.

Fifth, how much should you give?

On average, our pledges are flat over the last couple of years. An average pledge comes in at about \$2,400 a year, or \$46.15 a week. I feel that each of our households needs to increase our pledges by percentages, not a few dollars. If we seek to be tithers, we should give 10% of our income to the church. If this was the case, we would be running a budget well into the millions! Since we

are not Muslims, Seventh Day Adventists or Church of God, you are not required to give 10% as a minimum gift to the church (or mosque). But, if you were, we would have a fully-funded building and capital campaign already. Guaranteed!

But, each one of us can move steadily toward a tithe, starting at 4-5% of our income given to the church. So if your household makes \$50,000 a year, you would give at least \$2,000-2,500 (a tithe would be \$5,000). If your household makes \$100,000, give \$4,000-5,000 annually (A tithe would be \$10,000).

I would rather say that each of us as households of faith needs to increase our giving to 4-5% of income in 2011. If we did this, all of our programs would be funded and our staff would have its first pay increase in five years.

Finally, what kind of giver will you be? If you remember nothing else that I have said for 11 years, remember my giving mantra: “Poor Givers inspire poor giving. Good Givers inspire Good Giving. Great Givers inspire Great Giving.”

When we are poor, uncharitable givers, we do nothing to inspire others (children included) and reflect the glory of God. Such givers have a poor church in spirit and budget. When we give begrudgingly as “okay” givers, we have a okay church. It is a good church, but will never be a great one at this rate. When are great givers and give with gusto, we are a great church, like the Macedonian church.

On the poor end of giving, we have all too many poor givers in our congregation. Such a model of poor giving sets the bar of giving so low we could trip over it. Others mumble and complain, saying, “She doesn't give. He doesn't give, so why should I?” My question is: Do you want to be a poor giver?

Moving from poor to good, we have a lot of people stuck in neutral, a driving position that might move you if you are facing downhill on a mountain. But it is not a place from which a generous giver can move forward. Is that what you want?

Bill and Natalie Wright have been my model for great givers through the years. Now that they are gone to Massachusetts, I would like to lift them up as stewards. They raised their children to become great givers, too. The generations that have followed them are all committed to ministry, to our Lord Jesus Christ and to his church. Bill and Natalie modeled great giving for a lifetime and led our congregation as great givers for many years.

Now that they are gone, will step up to fill their shoes? Who will take the mantle of great giving and reflect such a generosity for the generation of children and young adults rising among us? An okay, good giver or a great giver to the ministry and mission of this church? I see lots of good givers! Our God loves surprises! How about you stepping up to great giving?

What kind of giving will you inspire? How about all of us stepping up and attaining greatness of giving and greatness of spirit in our giving! We love and serve an awesome and generous God! I encourage you to reflect greatness and generosity in your giving! What started on a hot summer day with twin pops can come around in this coming week to reflect our spirit of generosity in the second decade of this new millennium. Amen.

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