

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 19, October 18, 2009, dedicated to all the children of the world on this Children's Sabbath, all who have died and those suffering with the H1N1 flu virus. and always to the glory of God!

“Together in (Estimates of) Giving”

Isaiah 53: 4-14; Mark, 10:35-45

(Part I of IV in the sermon series “Together”)*

Our Fall Stewardship Campaign is called “Together.” On November 8, each of us will be asked to support the ministry and mission of First Congregational Church through our “estimates of giving.” I would encourage us to call them “estimates of giving” rather than “pledges” for a few reasons.

Pledges have a contractual nature. Estimates of giving are your best estimate of the proportion of your annual income or other resources you are able to share. When we make an estimate of giving, evidence points out that we will give twice as much as members who “place money in the plate” when they are here.

So today, I offer you 10 reasons why it's important for us to promise our estimates of giving to the church as we move forward “together in giving.”

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

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Here are my top ten reasons to present a written estimate of giving to the church for 2010 on November 8, 2009.

1. First, estimating risks in faith and reflects the need to put God first. Martin Luther (the first Lutheran and great Protestant reformer) once said that every Christian goes through three conversions in life – first the heart, then the head and finally the purse. For God to be first in our lives all three conversions are necessary. Truthfully, most of us find that the last thing to be transformed by God is our wealth.

Addiction to money is an insidious societal addiction. When money has power over us and it constantly on our minds, we leave no room for God to be in our hearts and minds. I believe estimating our giving makes our God the God of our lives. Growing our commitment each year risks in faith. We trust in God to provide and get away from our belief in our own power and ability to make everything happen.

2. Estimating acknowledges that God asks for our commitment. Jesus emphasizes time and again, the need to put God first. In Matthew 6:33 he says, “Strive first for the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness and everything else will be added onto you.” Throughout scripture, God doesn’t just ask that we give, but that we are committed to justice, mercy and faith in all the world. As Christians, our estimates of giving are the foundation of all the “right things” we do for God. An estimate helps our church plan

for and provide ministries.

This is no small matter. All of our staffing for missions and ministry are planned according to our estimates of giving. How we move forward in 2010 will be determined by your estimates of giving in November. In addition, when you estimate a gift to the church it increases another commitment – the commitment of your time and talents. I have truly found that the greatest givers give of themselves in more than dollars and cents. They usually commit and engage their lives as well.

3. Estimates emphasize that God is vital to our lives. Our estimates show in a public way that support for Christ's ministry and mission in the heart of Columbus matters to each one of us. Our estimates of giving provide a public witness to the role God plays in our lives.

While standing by the bedside of dying Archbishop Janis Matulis of Latvia, Dr. Paul Wee of the Lutheran World Federation tells this story. Another friend standing by the bed had just finished singing *Give Me Jesus*. He had sung, "*And when I am alone, and when I am alone, and when I am alone, give me Jesus.*" Archbishop Matulis looked up and said:

"Do you know why I love that song so much? Three times war passed over Latvia killing two-fifths of our people. They burned down my church and destroyed the Bibles and hymnals. They took away my wife and I never saw her again. When everything was gone, I realized I had nothing else in the world but Jesus Christ. It was like a breath of freedom.

"From that moment on I learned how to use whatever came my way – little bits of medicine left over, a piece of coal, apples, spices – so that somehow the sacrament of God's love would be shared with the larger community because of Jesus Christ."

Let us emphasize, through our giving, that Christ (alone) is vital to our lives.

4. Making an estimate frees us! That's right. Making an estimate is a form of liberation. We don't have to fret about what to give each week. We simply do it. Tithers (and we have a growing number!), in other words those giving 10% of income to the church, tell you how freeing it is to tithe. It is freeing because you are giving in gratitude for all that God has given you. You are returning, in great thanksgiving, a blessing to God. Once you have made this estimate of giving, you feel free to serve. I agree with this completely.

My family does direct deposit to the church. We have faced some difficult days financially. But, we always keep giving to the church through direct deposit. We never waver on this and we find each week we need only think about and act on the Sunday offering for additional missions. We don't fret about the gift. Our estimate gift is simply given and we are fully liberated to give elsewhere to the needs of God's people in this world.

5. Christians lead by example. Sometimes I am amazed by how quickly we move from the sacred to the profane. We come to church and we leave all filled up and fired up for the week and then we lose it, literally and figuratively. We seem like we have "the right stuff" for the week of living and giving, but we head out the door and lose track of all that we have gained. Our language and our actions reflect that we have lost track of living as the image of Christ in the world.

As Christians, or as the word means "little Christs," we are called by God to lead by example. Remember what St. Francis said, "Meeting you and witnessing your example may be the only Gospel someone ever reads." Our lives are a magnifying glass through which people see either Christ or someone else. Jesus set the example for stewardship by giving everything he had for us. Therefore, we should not be embarrassed, burdened or hesitant to

give as examples of our living in Christ.

6. Estimates of giving reflect our disciplined response to Christ's love. In his masterful book on Matthew's gospel entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christian martyr at the hands of Hitler's Third Reich, wrote on "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Of "cheap grace," Bonhoeffer wrote:

"Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church. Cheap grace means grace sold at the market. Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipline, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Contrasted with this, said Bonhoeffer, is "costly grace."

"Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs us our life and it is grace because it gives the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, it is grace because it justifies the sinner. And most of all, it is costly because it cost God the life of His Son, and what has God so much cannot be cheap for us." (*The Cost of Discipleship*, Macmillan Publishing, 1959, pp.47-48).

The sharing of our estimate of giving is one way to show our response to God's amazing and extravagant love given to us in Christ Jesus our Savior.

7. Estimating begets ministry. We need to remember that Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 started with an offering. Ministry to the crowd began when the disciples brought five loaves and two fish. In the same way, the offering of Jesus' life for us began the ministry of redemption and hope. Paul calls the early church to make an offering to the starving people of Judea. Giving is not just for the

spiritual life of the giver. It results in ministry given BACK to others.

8. Estimates enable the church to plan. Picture yourself about to go on a cross country trip. You have your car checked out, the oil changed, the tires checked. You make sure you have enough money for gas, food and lodging.

Each year our congregation embarks on such a journey. We hope to take on some new challenges for ministry. We hope to embark on new missions and new adventures. For example, since August 3, our Associate Minister Search Committee has been meeting regularly. For the past eight weeks we have met every Monday night. Rev. Cunningham will finish her ministry among us on December 31. We have seen more than 25 profiles or resumes in the search process so far. We are planning for a new Associate Minister to arrive early in the new year.

More than once, committee members have asked if we will have the funds to support this new person. I ask you, will we? Are you willing to step forward and make sure our new associate minister – working with young adults, church growth, small group development and church administration – will have funds to support his or her exciting new ministry? We can't make the trip without your estimate of giving support. We need the giving to make the plan. We need to create the vision for the future here. A vision for ministry with no challenges is nearsighted vision. We need your support to make our plans, "TOGETHER."

9. An estimate is not a contract. I am sure many of us have horror stories about "pledges" in the church. The worst I ever heard is that during the Great Depression, one congregation sold their pledges to the bank at 90% face value. Some congregations have sent out bills to members (with interest) who fall behind on their pledges. We have no contracts for membership in the church. We do not bill you. We do not assess your ability to give.

Your estimate of giving is your personal decision that flows from our love of Christ Jesus. All of us as Christians want to be givers. This estimate of giving flows freely, openly and generously from our desire to give. We have no promissory notes. When you turn in your estimates of giving they are more like birthday cards to Christ, rather than bank notes to the church. When we send out our quarterly statements, it is hopefully received as a reminder of the love you felt when you made your estimate, rather than a bill. If we fail you in this, less us know.

10. An estimate enables intentional decisions. Christians who fail to make intentional decisions about their giving often find they are “bucking” the Lord. I love to tell the story about an older couple in one church. They loved to complain about the church. They were overheard having this discussion one Sunday. The husband said to his wife, “The music here stinks. The choir isn’t as good as they should be. The preaching is lousy. The pastor never calls. He isn’t even a nice person.” After agreeing with her husband on all these observations, the wife responded, “Well, what do you expect for a buck!” Great question – what do we expect when we put in a dollar?

All of us need to stop “bucking” the church.

When you lack conscious awareness of your intentions to give, you produce lower giving. Lower giving produces less ministry and mission. Less ministry and mission produces less presence in the community and in the world for Christ . . . You get the picture.

I believe in this church. God and the congregation willing, I hope to spend many more years with you serving, activating and ministering in Christ’s name in this city. We have the ability to do this if we do it together.

I did some quick math (which is always a dangerous thing). Consider this: if all the households of First Congregational Church (500) were to give an average “estimate of giving” (which is about

\$2,300/giving unit), our total budget for mission and ministry at First Church would be \$1,150,000 for 2010 compared for the \$700,000 we had this year. If every household presented an estimate of giving and increased this average by 1% (\$2, 530) for the coming year, our estimate of giving income for 2010 would be \$1,265,000. Imagine what we could do as we “depart to serve” with at least \$450,000 in our 2010 church plan and as much as \$565,000 in our budget plan!

First Church – we have the capacity and capability to make a huge difference in this city for serving and for giving if we do it “TOGETHER.” Together, we can – the words of Paul – turn the world upset down. Let us estimate our giving and boldly step forward in faith. Amen.

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* This sermon is largely drawn from Eugene Peterson’s book *Generous People*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1992, Chapter IV, pp. 47-61.