

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 22, October 28, 2012, Reformation Sunday, dedicated to the memory of Laura Turnbull Barndt, and always to the glory of God!

“Give Until it Feels Good”
II Corinthians 9:1-8; Mark 10:46-52

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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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Mark’s Gospel opens our eyes today to see the truth about faith!

Cast aside, left behind, forgotten, forsaken, with nothing in this world but the cloak on his shoulders, a true disciple of Christ is born today in our Gospel text, as the blind man - Bartimaeus - cries out over and over and over again against protests from the crowds all around Jesus - **“Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”** (repeat three times!).

Bartimaeus is crying out the truth! Jesus IS the son of David and Jesus IS merciful. Jesus calls Bartimeaus to step up and face him. Jesus asks him what he wants him to do. Acknowledging that Jesus is his rabbi, the blind man simply says *“I want to see.”* In his mercy and in his power, Jesus heals Bartimaeus’ blindness – not by touching his eyes or waving his hands over Bartimaeus’ head. Jesus heals Bartimaeus’ through the blind man’s own faithfulness to God! Jesus says, **“Go! Your Faith has made you well.”** Interestingly, Bartimaeus goes nowhere – but in the footsteps of his savior - following Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him.

The healing of Bartimaeus is the final scene of Jesus' Galilean ministry in Mark. The very next scene in the Gospel is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And in this final twist of storytelling, Mark shows us that the blind see, but also that the seeing are often blind to the nature of faith.

I have been thinking a lot about the truth of Gospel faith this week. As we turn our eyes to Stewardship Sunday, next week, we have been called into the circle of faithful generosity. We have been called to see, in our faith, the things that God intends for our lives. We have been called to stand up, to be generous, and to be stewards for our Lord!

You see, stewardship is all about giving to God. It is all about faith! 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 in our blindness 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 saw 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. He knew how to call the church to be stewards and see others with the eyes of stewardship.

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, your giving should be proportional to 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 very important and that is why our Stewardship Committee has called us to Plus 1 Giving – to move up in our giving by one percent of our income – allowing us to grow spiritually and provide new opportunities for First Church's ministries! **Fourth, plan your giving in advance.** In other words, consider your gift and come ready to give. When we come ready to give, our giving is stronger, clearer and has grown out of our prayer and devotion, not out of guilt and inattention.

In II Corinthians, Paul finishes what he started in his first letter. In chapters 8 and 9, he 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 first Christians of Corinth 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, **give joyfully. It is a privilege to give so do it with joy**, showing the grace of God working in our lives (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, in 9:7 he says, "God loves a cheerful giver." Actually the word "Cheerful" is best translated as "hilarious" or "full of laughter." So, give **hilariously! God will provide for cheerful givers**, so give out of the faith God has laid on your heart (9:8-11). Finally (10) - **Give with Praise and thanksgiving in your heart** - since 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).

So the generous people of a generous God look like this: They give with grace-filled extravagant generosity. Their giving 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. Such giving 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.

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. Here are six practical realities to remember as to make your commitments in our Circle of Faithful Generosity.

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 offering plate.

Here is how your investment is split-up. The 6.5% of all pledges goes to missions. Before we keep any money for First Church, we give away the first \$35,000 of our pledged dollars. In addition, we send an additional \$50,000-\$75,000 away in mission through your generosity in weekly offerings and other exceptional gifts. Remember, the First Dollars of First Church are mission dollars.

Approximately 62% of our budget goes to the operations of the staff at First Church. A few years ago, we did some 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 (6.5%).

Second, each year we know the cost of running the church will rise about 4-6%. 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. In January at the 2012 Congregational Meeting, following an extensive two-year compensation study in which we determined that our Senior Minister, Associate Minister, Music Minister, Christian Education Director and Program Manager were under median incomes, we voted to bring our staff up to median income ASAP. Although we tried to do that through an extra mile campaign, we fell short. All five of these positions remain 4% under median income and the other three positions have had no cost of living raises in three

years. Without increases in pledges, we cannot meet the median for our staff or grant COLA to the other staff.

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. It is that simple.

Third, we account for every dollar at First Church! 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. One member has affectionately called this our “Mops and Mats” budget. In other words, we can even tell you how many mops and mats we plan for and pay for each year! Our business manager, Sharon Leidheiser, has all the records 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 all 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 online at www.first-church.org. If you go to the home page and click on “Give” you can set this up today (please wait until the sermon and worship is complete). You can also set-up your pledge by direct deposit through your bank or employer. Pledge online if you are not currently pledging. You can do this anytime, day or night.

You can also use direct deposit. I love the direct deposit of my pledge. It helps my family and my church family. 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. This last summer, we

came through the “lean” months with flying colors thanks to direct deposits.

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 it also 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! Remember, 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 have grown slightly over the past few years. An average pledge comes in at about \$2,500 a year, or \$48.07 a week. I believe 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! Consider the PLUS 1 approach suggested by our Stewardship Committee. Since we are not Muslims, Seventh-Day Adventists or Church of God, or a host of evangelical traditions (to which a number of our children and family members belong), we are not **required** to give 10% as a minimum gift to the church (or mosque). But if we did, we would have a great budget for mission, ministry and a fully funded capital campaign.

Since ours is a choice, we can all choose to 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 2013. Again, if we did this, all of our programs would be funded and our staff would be far beyond the median paid to church professionals in central Ohio. Our mission commitments would rise for the United Church of Christ and beyond.

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 an 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 really want to be a poor giver?*

Moving from poor to good, we have a lot of people stuck in neutral- a driving position which 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 has been my model for great givers through the years. They have been in Massachusetts for several years now. Some of you don't know them. They were great givers. 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.

So, who will take on the mantle of great givers here at First Church – reflecting generosity for the generation of children and young adults rising among us? A poor giver, a good giver or a Great Giver to the ministry and mission of this church? Our God loves surprises!

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 road to Jerusalem with a blind man filled with faith but no sight comes around to us and this week ahead of us. Jesus calls us into the circle of faithful generosity. We have been called to see, in our faith, the things that God intends for our lives. We have been called to stand up, to be generous, and to be stewards for our Lord! Let us reflect, pray, and give – out of faith convictions. When we give until it feels good, there is no better feeling in the world. So let us be great givers. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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