

St. Mark Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Ada, Ohio, Year C., Pentecost 19
October 7, 2007, Luke 17:5-10

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Celebrate Generosity – 2

If you had the faith of a mustard seed you could move a mulberry tree... Luke 17:6

On the first day of each week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need be made when I come 1 Corinthians 16:2

Introduction:

Once a local vocal member of a church would often go into the Pastor's office and proclaim, "Pastor! If I won the Lotto—I SWEAR on a **STACK of BIBLES**—I would give MORE money to the CHURCH! If God would only let me win the LOTTO I would be a better giver. ***Really Pastor...If I could only win the LOTTO!***"

Well, the man finally DID win the state lottery. But he did not win the huge Jackpot. Rather won around \$50,000.00. Very quickly and quietly, he and his family fled town. They were gone for a couple months. When they returned, they had stickers from a vacation. They had a new grill in their backyard. They had new clothes. They also had other new small appliances in the house.

But nothing more or nothing less went to the local church offering. In fact, since the man was such a braggart in town, some of the people would ask him about the promise he made to God and swearing on a **STACK OF BIBLES!** The man was quiet and tried to avoid he Pastor and Church Council.

Now his winning became a source of the "law" rather than the "Gospel" that set him free. Had this man been a *Systematic Giver* and given a certain proportion of his income or amount, he would not have to feel so guilty. What would he do now about his weekly giving?

Today's theme from "*Celebrate Generosity*" is "Giving is *Systematic*." *Luke 17* points to community giving, also.

When I was younger growing up in a rural area outside of Flint, Michigan, my brother Louis and I both had respected systematic duties to do, as the rest of the four children were under the age of ten. My task was to help my mother with the kitchen, household and bathroom work. My brother Louis helped my Dad with the outside work. This included car maintenance, lawn or driveway work, and assorted work in the garage and barn. This was like a weekend "routine." It was time and efforts we gave to the family systematically.

We did it as being members of the family. As the other children grew-up while Louis and I went out and got jobs, each child respectfully inherited either the outside or inside chores. This is what was needed to maintain a large family with a large family farmhouse.

- To give systematically of *Money, time and efforts* is to KNOW already what has to be done for the family or group to function in a healthy way. If one person does all the giving and the others do all the taking, the group will *grow unhealthy* and suffer.
- ***In our gospel lesson, the house servants are doing their duty as a part of the household. It is what is expected—as they are part of the community.***
- On “*Celebrate Generosity*” Sunday, giving is a habit that St. Paul reminds us of the 1 Corinthians 16 text.
- Also, in *Luke 17*, the mustard seed text reminds us that we each have a seed of faith and gifts that the family, church or group needs.

In one of the episodes of “little House on the Prairie,” entitled, “Little Lou,” the cranky Mrs. Olson shunned this local vertically challenged-sized man who is a midge, named Lou Bates. She blocked his application to work at the local bank. Then one day her little daughter fell down a water well. It took the small size of that Midget[dwarf] sized man, Lou Bates to be lowered down into the water well to get the little girl. The man did this without seeking a reward. He had a gift. He had a seed of faith, which the community needed. He did not without any request of bounty. His giving and risk of his life was assumed! It was systematic giving.

The second point of the “Celebrate Generosity” theme is giving is good for us. It is how we grow *spiritually*.

*A family made a good-faith effort to pledge to give a certain progressive portion of their income to the local church. Both parents were working. They had three children in school. Then one day, the father’s employer informed him that the company has chosen to close down and move overseas for cheaper labor. **The family is devastated!***

Do they continue to give and honor their pledge? They talked with their pastor, and some church members with whom they are close. They decided that since their giving was in proportion to their income, they will continue to give, but probably not as much money. They also discussed helping out with the Sunday school ministry and even helping with building projects. Meanwhile, certain members of the church are keeping their “eyes open” for another potential job for the father.

Why do they continue to give to the church? Because they NEED to do so for their own good!

- i. Corporate America sees the father as “expendable.”*
- ii. The global situation is as such that companies are willing to exploit cheaper labor overseas.*
- iii. **But the church is still there for this family.***
- iv. Finally, this family concluded that while corporate America is letting them down, God will not. They are giving to a larger reality of the Kingdom of God.*

In this difficult time, the family’s giving to the church is saying “YES” to hope, while corporate America has said, “NO” their father.

- This is the good news of Stewardship Theology. We give to God to usher in *Christ’s Kingdom*.
- This is an opportunity for the church to live out its confession of a “*Theology of the Cross*.” Rather than avoid this family because they are no longer the “Model of Financial success,” they once were—the church has a chance to be like the suffering servant of *Isaiah 7*, when King Ahaz was in trouble—*Immanuel, God us. This God suffers alongside us*, but points us to new life after every death [in a theology of the resurrection which we develop from *Daniel 12:2* and *Ezekiel 37*, into the New Testament gospels and Pauline epistles, NT Wright].
- Giving reminds this family that Corporate America does NOT have the final word *on this family and their meaning for life* [i.e. not in Corporations, but the crucified and resurrected Christ, Paul Tillich, Douglas John Hall]

The final point of this “*Celebrate generosity*,” is that giving is “Good for the church.” Douglas John Hall in the book entitled *The Steward*, shares the following story:

A Midwest church organization attempted to gather a group of farmers together to create a strategy for the difficult conditions of the family farms. Many farms had gone under or folded up. Nobody has had a good holiday for a long time. There were many pathetic complaints and cries for the present conditions and future of farming in this Midwest community.

So publicity and fliers went out for a conference for farmers to discuss and possibly organize Cooperatives or other such organizations to preserve their farms. But the conference was very poorly attended!

The conference had splendid speakers with great ideas as to what strategies work elsewhere. Much planning and publicity went out for this event for the future of family farms in this Midwest community. Again, it was poorly attended.

*Why was this event not well attended? It later came out that there were many farmers who are still holding their own and **able to remain “well enough” for now**. They do see their neighbors going into bankruptcy. They do see other family farms putting their items on the auction block. But there were still enough that thought they can hold their own which translated into a poor attendance for this conference to plan strategies and Cooperatives for farmers.*

*In the eyes of many farmers, the situation was not bad enough for them! They failed to realize that once neighboring farmers go under, it is only a **matter of time** before each of their own family farms will be threatened.*

As this applies to the church, we all need one another in the community of Christ.

- Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the grave for the whole church! It is the church who must stick together. There no “Lone Ranger” Christians. We are all in this Kingdom of God community together.
- New Testament scholar at Trinity Lutheran Seminary asks the question, Where is God? According to the New Testament, God is in Christ. So where is Christ? Christ is in the Church? Where is the Church? The Church is in the world doing ministry. The world knows God and Christ through our ministry.
- *Celebrate Generosity* is a reminder that when we give our money, we give to further the Kingdom of God on this earth.
- *Like the farmers in Douglas Hall’s story*, we need each other in this community whether we know it or not. We all give to the church because it is good for the church as it proclaims the Word of Christ. *We give because it is good for us—spiritually!*

On this Sunday, it is our prayer that people remember to give to God in a regular or systematic way. It is part of *spiritual growth*. It is *how the Kingdom of God is advanced*.

To conclude:

There was a man who died at the age of seventy. He had a full life. He looked very depressed, unshaved and dirty as he lay alone dying. He had a very empty, barren hole in his soul.

How did he try to fill that hole in the soul? He tried to fill it with the billions of dollars he earned. He tried to fill it with fancy gadgets and inventions. He tried to fill it with the power he exerted over other people. But despite this accumulation of power, money and material goods, he died very depressed and alone. He was the family billionaire: Howard Hughes.

Death is the great equalizer. We recall from the last week of Celebrate Generosity, the core issue of stewardships is who or what do we worship? The good news of the *Luke 17 text and 1 Corinthians 16* is that God has given us all the faith we need. All he expects in return is a regular, systematic portion of all that he has given us. We give because it is good for our *spiritual growth*. We give because it is good for the *community of Christ*. Amen.

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