

“My First Stewardship Sermon”
November 15, 2009

A Sunday School teacher was describing to her students the ways their weekly offerings made a difference in people’s lives. Like we’ve been hearing each week here in worship at MGLC with our Stewardship Moments, and hearing how our gifts make a difference for God. Well, the students were really excited to hear the ways their gifts touched peoples’ lives, so when the teacher asked, “If you had \$1 million dollars would you give it to the church?” the students shouted “YES!”. Then the Sunday School teacher asked, “What about \$1,000 dollars? Would you give that to church?” And everyone shouted “YES!” again. Finally the teacher asked, “Would you give one dollar?” and all the student said “YES!” except for Billy. Billy was tightly clutching his pocket and the teacher asked, “Why didn’t you say yes, too?” Billy replied, “Because I actually have a dollar!”

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

I was listening in my car to Minnesota Public Radio this week and heard a good report, for a change, on the projected yield for soybean and corn harvests in Minnesota. Did you know it rained 21 of the 31 days in October this fall? There’s been a lot of concern about getting the harvest in from the fields; and about the cost of drying the crops for storage. But the US Agriculture Department was able to increase it estimate, this week, of the soybean and corn yields. So it looks like the rainy fall won’t hurt the size of the Minnesota harvest.

Harlan Marble, a southern Minnesota farmer was interviewed, saying, “Harvest time is a favorite time of the year because that’s payday! All the accomplishments that you ‘ve done throughout the year show up.” Harvest time coincides with Stewardship time in the church; it echoes the harvest cycle because that was pay day in farming communities. That’s when parishioners could tithe to the church from their harvest earnings.

Farmer Marble said it’s been a little tough this year, but at age 69 he’s never seen a perfect weather year either.

Meanwhile a difficult ‘economic’ climate has worried and tested us all. It has taken faith, courage and hope to persevere, one day at a time.

So, I’d like to begin this morning by give thanks for the labors of your hands, the faith in your hearts, and the generosity of your financial support this year. Our Stewardship Team is helping us see the harvest coming in from our service to our Lord Jesus Christ- working as we have in this field here at Maple Grove Lutheran Church.

As pastor, I have the privilege of seeing a more cumulative picture of your labors- I get to see you share Jesus with people and how you care for people, like Jesus cares for us, not out of duty, but true compassion. From prayer shawls, to phone calls, hand written cards, taking time to make home visits, praying, meeting as teams and committees and set up for events and church school and communion and rehearsing music. It’s been a busy year of improvements to our church and property too. As you do all these things, you are also busy sharing encouragement and faith in conversations. Take this past Tuesday evening: we had church- stewardship and personnel and knitting and scouts and green team and altar guild all going at once. I like being in Fellowship Hall in the midst of this liveliness, seeing everyone engaged in ministry to make a difference for God here at MGLC!

But what about when we don’t see results in front of our eyes? Our human nature can get discouraged.

But isn't it true that God is at work in so many ways, none of us really can even fathom how God works. This is part of faith. We only have to open the Bible to find this story told again and again by the people of God before us: God is working in ways we cannot see, in His time, for His good purposes. The Psalmist wrote, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, to lofty for me to attain." Even more, Jesus tells us God takes our faith and uses it to bear fruit thirty, sixty and a hundredfold to bring an abundant harvest for His kingdom. That's God's multiplier effect.

While we like seeing how our gifts make a difference, we also know God works in ways unseen. So, let me ask you this. On what do you base your giving?

Let's look at a widow, whom our Lord commended above all others, one day at the temple treasury. What can we learn from her giving?

We know this: that Jesus saw himself in this widow who gave everything she had to God. Her act of courageous and faithful giving echoed in Jesus' own heart; like a kindred spirit on this earth. Her faith resonated with his own willingness to give all he had, his very life to God.

We know this: that this story isn't telling us to go liquidate all our possessions and drop the proceeds into the offering plate-because it isn't a story about the amount of money the widow gave. This widow gave two copper coins called lepta. The lepton was THE smallest coin in circulation. They surely would have made a small difference in the Temple budget. So this isn't a story about the amount of money, but the complete generosity of a woman who was up against it. She gave all she had.

We know this: the widow gave to a greater purpose. You know what astounds me about the widow's giving? Look at that remark Jesus made- "beware of the scribes, they devour widow's houses." The people at the Temple charged with caring for widows, seemed to have retooled the charity operation into something for their own personal gain.

The widow gave to an institution that had personally failed her!

She didn't give to a perfect church. And it's the same today. And yet the church is made up of people who have problems, for people who have problems. We gather because we want to change, because we seek to keep growing in faith, because we know that material riches turns back to dust in the end, because we want to live out Jesus' new commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. I love our church and I'm so thankful for our church.

On what do you base your giving?

We know this: The widow had a mature faith. She wasn't a beginner. She had practiced relying on God. She possessed a priceless wisdom: she knew that she was totally dependent on God, with nothing but the riches of his mercy to live on. Her faith helped her to overcome fears about her future. And that is our reality this year.

This year it takes courage and faith to give, because we are still living through an economic crisis. We have all had to make adjustments and are looking still for more ways, changing our spending, our household budgets; even our lifestyles. Two of my neighbors have to commute out of state to work and get to be home only on the weekends. We had the whole family over for dinner on Friday, including my brother in law who was laid off from work a week ago. As he walked through our front door I gave him a hug. Christopher says he is getting lots of hugs from the church women. He smiled and said "hey, maybe this isn't so bad after all". But it's tough; to wake up and have your world change one day.

It isn't just economic uncertainty, but emotional uncertainty that comes hand in hand with it. If you have a job, you are likely doing more, with less, and you are worried about whether you will continue to have a job. Satan will use these fears to distract us and corner us and try to bind us up, instead of our living in the freedom, joy and abundance that God gives us every day in Jesus Christ our Lord. I spoke to a woman this week who described being trapped in a pattern of expecting the worst whenever a problem arises, a pattern she wants to change. Change for her will require faith.

The main teaching in the Gospel of Mark is the Parable of the Sower. The widow has avoided becoming like the seed sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. We want to be like seeds planted in good soil, and we want God's word to grow in us and bear fruit, an abundant harvest.

This year it takes faith and courage to give.

But not because we have less TO give. It's our hearts God is after.

The widow shows us to base our giving on our faith and trust in God. I want to thank you for your faithfulness because it has taken faith and courage to give- and because you have, Christ is made known here in this place. And we've keep living in the new life He alone can give us.

I'm challenging every one of us to pledge; entirely out of faith. Look to God to grow our hearts through this pledge, by giving to a greater purpose, and allowing faith to overcoming fears, giving generously out of what God has first given us, relying on God's perfect love and complete care, and living in his rich mercies.

And all the time, thinking of next year. Even as farmer Harlan Marble takes in the 2009 soybean harvest he is thinking and preparing for next spring. Without a planting there is no harvest! Our pledges plant seeds for a new harvest, a new season of hope in the coming year.

And our giving today will make a difference for God tomorrow. Amen.