

“The Joy of Giving”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
November 18, 2018**

Old Testament Lesson: 1 Chronicles 29:17-18

New Testament Lesson: 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

The pastor had just suggested the congregation give to a great and worthy cause, after which a certain woman came and handed him a check for \$50. As she handed it to him, she asked if her gift was satisfactory. The pastor replied, “If it represents you.” After a moment of soul-searching, she asked to have the check back, and then she left with it.

A day or two went by, and she returned handing the pastor a check for \$5,000. Again she asked, “Is my gift satisfactory?” The pastor gave the same answer as before: “If it represents you.” After a few moments of hesitation, she took back the check and left.

Later in the week she came again with a check. This time it was for \$50,000. As she placed it in the pastor’s hand, she said, “After earnest, prayerful thought, I have come to the conclusion that this gift does represent me, and I am happy to give it.”

Today is Commitment Sunday when we recognize and celebrate all the ways we contribute to the life of the church, and especially through our financial giving. Many of you are holding pledge cards. Some of you may be asking if the amount you wrote down is satisfactory. The answer, of course, is: Does it represent you? Is it a true representation of who you are, the generosity in your heart and the faith in your soul?

That is the same question the Apostle Paul asked the congregation at Corinth. Paul was taking some time to visit the various churches he served through his work of ministry, his spiritual and practical guidance, and his constant and faithful prayer life.

During his travels, he sends a letter to the Corinthians saying, “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia.” Paul points to the Macedonia churches as an example of faithful, joyous giving. He longs for the churches of Corinth to experience that same joy in giving, which I, too, hope for each and every one of you here today.

The joy of giving comes through the grace of God. By grace, God gave his only son, Jesus, that we might have life and have it in abundance, life overflowing with joy. The thing about joy is it wells up in people regardless of how they’re doing in life – whether they are rich or poor or just getting by, healthy or sick or even near death, surrounded by family and friends or living a more quiet, solitary life.

Joy is not about having a perfect life with lots of money in the bank. Consider the condition of the grade school child in the following story.

In Hollywood there is an exclusive school attended by children of movie stars, producers and directors. Asked to write a composition on the subject of poverty, one little girl started her essay like this: "Once there was a poor little girl. Her father was poor, her mother was poor, her nanny was poor, her chauffeur was poor, her butler was poor. In fact, every person in the house was very, very poor."

I don't know how that little girl ended her essay, but I believe her about being poor. If the adults in her household share her relationship to wealth and privilege, then that whole family is indeed very, very poor – poor in spirit, where it truly matters.

When people have a healthy relationship to money and giving, the Spirit of joy wells up in them regardless of how they're doing in life, whether they are rich or poor or just getting by.

Paul points to this when he shares that the churches in Macedonia gave "during a severe ordeal of affliction..." and still, "their abundant joy and their extreme poverty ... overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part."

In other words, their generosity of spirit shown through in their giving, regardless their financial condition. The struggles they were having, the darkness they feared was washed away in the glorious light of their love of the Lord and their faithfulness to the church.

That same power and joy is available to you – to each of us here today – as we bring our pledge cards to the Lord's Table. Look at the Macedonians, Paul says "... they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging ... earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints – and this, not merely as ... expected...."

Giving freely and eagerly beyond expectations – that is what has that inner sense of joy well up within us, and then overflow out into our lives and our world.

How do we get that? Where do we find that inner sense of joy amid any struggle or darkness that surrounds us? Of course, that joy is found in the Lord. Paul says the Macedonians "gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us," to the church.

In other words, joy in giving comes, first and foremost, from knowing and loving the Lord. This church is committed to helping you grow in your knowledge and love of the Lord.

That's why the Stewardship Committee worked tirelessly on this Stewardship Brochure, which you should have gotten in the mail. There are some on the Credenza, after worship, if needed.

I know you can't see this, but the cover here shows the faithfulness of the Lord in shepherding us through an insurance claim for a new roof this year. Because of your past giving, we had insurance that paid for well over \$200,000 in storm damage, and that is reason for joy.

On the inside, these pictures show the 18 children and youth from last year's Christmas pageant, 12 of our wonderful choir members being led by one great music director, more than 60 people enjoying an honest-to-God authentic Seder Passover Meal at Westminster Hall on Maundy Thursday.

Fifteen people can be seen studying the word of God (though many, many more do so here). There's a picture of countless community members enjoying our annual Chocolate Festival fundraiser; more than 50 members, friends and visitors staying after one Sunday for our Rise Against Hunger mission project, one person (bless her heart) serving as cashier for the Craft Bazaar fundraiser that brought more than \$300 for Procter Elementary School and our newly created Local Disaster Relief Fund.

I tell you all this so that you will know the joy of the Lord as you bring forward your pledge cards. Whether you give out of meagerness or abundance, you have much reason for joy in your heart, as long as you give faithfully like the Macedonians, who gave freely and eagerly, even beyond expectations.

Don't miss this opportunity to experience the joy of the Lord while bringing your pledge card forward today. In fact, does anyone need a pledge card – right now!? Maybe yours is at home, and you don't want to miss out on this wondrous and holy experience of giving. Raise your hand right now and an usher will bring you a pledge card. Don't be shy. Don't be shy about filling out a pledge card right now, or updating the one you brought, upping it to a gift beyond expectations! (Surprise yourself by how trusting you can be in the Lord) Why not? What do you have to lose?

Consider, also, what you have to gain – a chance to show the Lord, and yourself, just who you truly are, by pledging an amount that represents you, whether you are giving out of your abundance or out of your place of caution and future need.

Regardless of what you give, let it be a joyful experience for you. True joy is a gift we experience when giving of ourselves first to the Lord, and then to the world around us. Just as Paul desired such joy for the Corinthians, he desires it for you. The Lord wants you to get joy out of your experience of giving. And the truth is, it's not the amount that matters. Everyone can experience the joy of pledge something – whether its \$50 like that woman started out with at the beginning of our sermon, or \$5,000 – the middle figure she landed on.

Oh, and please, feel free to pledge as she did in the end – \$50,000, though that would mean you're making \$500,000 a year, if you were a true tithe of 10%.

Probably not for most everybody. No, in reality I suspect most of us are somewhere between the fifty- and five-thousand-dollar range or thereabouts, more or less.

The point is that whatever amount God puts on your heart to pledge, it can and will bring joy to the Lord, and in that, joy to your heart, and abundant, overflowing blessings to the world.

Let that joy rise within you now, as we prepare during our next hymn to bring a gift to the Lord that represents who we truly are, both in faith and practice. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

With gratitude we come to you in prayer, gracious God. For the gift of life and daily blessings, we offer you our thanks and praise.

Especially we thank you for your presence when we come to you amid our struggles and darkest moments – moments not of faith but of fear; not of certainty but doubt.

When we are overwhelmed with anxious questions, O God, help us to be still. Remind us of all that we have which assures us of your love for us.

In the midst of our darkness, let us be reminded that you enter into our pain and faith amid our fear and doubt.

Next to the great need of this world, O Lord, we come to know and appreciate all that we have. Though we sometimes feel that we have so little, we know in our hearts that, in fact, we have everything we need. Because, Lord, we have you in our lives and the blessings of God showered upon us.

So it is with thanksgiving that we come to you in prayer, using the words that you taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**