

## **“Paying It Forward AND Back”**

**First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
November 11, 2018**

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 116:12-19**

**New Testament Lesson: James 1:17-18**

One day, a Missionary in Africa heard a knock at the door of his hut. Answering, he found one of the native boys holding a large fish in his hands. The boy said, “You taught us what tithing is, so here – I’ve brought you my tithe.” As the missionary gratefully took the fish, he asked the young boy, “If this is your tithe, where are the other nine fish?” At this, the boy beamed and said, “Oh, they’re still in the river. I’m going back to catch them now.” “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty,” asks the Psalmist.

That question raises another question: Do we give to the Lord in return for the blessings we’ve received like a transaction? Or do we give in anticipation of future blessings, like the boy who gave the first fish he caught and then ran off to catch the other nine, so that the first fish would in fact be a tithe, that is, one tenth of all the fish he would catch that day, the first fruits of his labor.

Giving in return like a transaction or giving in advance like a prayer. When the Psalmist asks, “What shall I return to the Lord,” he is actually giving in return like a transaction. Psalm 116 starts by saying, “I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.”

You see, the Psalmist was remembering a time he faced certain death, saying earlier, “The snares of death encompassed me.” And the Lord saved him, answering his prayer for deliverance. And that set up a lifelong pledge or vow to give to the Lord.

Have any of you had that type of an experience? You were in desperate need and your prayers were being answered and that brought you into a faithful, giving relationship with the Lord? That’s certainly one way we experience God’s loving presence in our lives, and then we faithfully respond by giving of ourselves in service to God.

What’s another? How about the example of the boy and the fish – giving in anticipation of blessings yet to come? While giving in response to blessings received shows great faithfulness, giving in anticipation of blessings yet to come shows true faith, that we truly trust in the Lord.

Consider the faith of a certain guy whose friend found him on the verge of tears one day. “Hey, my friend, how come you look like the whole world has caved in?” The sad fellow said, “Let me tell you. Three weeks ago my uncle died and left me \$50,000.” “Why, that’s not bad ...!”

“Hold on, I’m just getting started. Two weeks ago, a cousin I never knew kicked the bucket and left me \$95,000, tax-free to boot.” “Well, that’s great! I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Then last week, my grandfather passed away and I inherited almost a million dollars from him.” “O Man! So why are you so glum?” “This week – nothing!”

Being joyful in response to blessings received is easy. Giving joyfully in anticipation of future blessings; now that takes faith.

Think about it. If you’ve been blessed, you at least have the benefit of that blessing, right? You’ve gotten something from God and now you can choose to faithfully give of yourself in return, or not.

I mean, plenty of people have enjoyed blessing upon blessing and then squandered it, hoarded it, or just taken it for granted. Not very faithful, right?

But then there’s the faith of those who give in anticipation of future blessings. Now that’s amazing, isn’t it!?! You have so much faith that God will bless your life and provide for your needs tomorrow that you give freely and joyfully today. Can you imagine!?!

I hope so, because that is what we do when we bring our pledge cards to the Lord’s Table each year, which we will do next Sunday. Next Sunday during Commitment Sunday, we will recognize and celebrate all the ways we give in service to the Lord.

That means this week is your opportunity to decide how you will pledge, and what you hope to accomplish or show in making that pledge.

You can give in return for God’s blessings in your life or you can give in anticipation of blessing yet to come. Either way, it’s an act of faith, which God will honor, an act of faith that will deepen your relationship with the Lord. When we pledge money to the church we are making a statement, a statement that we trust our future – our very lives – to God.

Do you? Do you trust God enough to give financial to the work of the Lord through this church? I firmly believe that giving of our money is a spiritual act with spiritual blessings. Letting go of our money is an act of letting go of our fears and trusting in God, thankful for past blessings and confident of blessings yet to come.

As we look back on 2018 with thanksgiving and forward to 2019 with hope, we are called to express our faith in the most concrete way possible, by giving of our money, as well as our time and talents. I ask you to consider where your faith is. Do you believe that God has been alongside you in the past, guiding you, providing for you, blessing you and your family? Do you believe that God will be there in the future, out ahead of you, preparing the way for a better tomorrow? If so, you are blessed, and you can give to the Lord freely and joyfully, sacrificially and confidently, prayerfully and faithfully. If not – if you’re not certain of God’s presence in your life – then you, too, can give faithfully.

Give in a way that stretches your faith, grows your faith. Maybe you've never pledged before. What's stopping you? Let God help you overcome that fear of scarcity. Make next Sunday your first Pledge Sunday, and then walk out of here more certain of your faith in God than ever before of your faith in the Lord and of God's presence in your life. Even those who pledge every year can do that by stepping out in faith and increasing their pledge this year.

In the end, it doesn't matter whether you look at giving as paying it forward or paying it back. The truth is that paying it forward is paying it back. When you bring your Pledge Card to the Lord's table next week, you are recognizing and honoring the giving of those who've come before, the people who made this church possible for you and your family. You're paying God back for all his faithful servants of the past.

But also, when you bring your Pledge Card next week, you are paying it forward, you're laying the groundwork for the future ministry of this church, ensuring that this beautiful church will be here for those who come after you.

There is no doubt for any one of us that God has been there for us in the past, and that God will be there for us in the days and months and years to come. The question for us – for you – is, will you be there for God? Will you answer God's call to give in return for all God's blessings in your future blessings sure to come? Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Holy God, you are deserving of the very best we have to offer – the devotion of our hearts, the place of honor in our priorities, and the first fruits of our labors.

We enter this place of worship seeking you, seeking your message of love and mercy, conviction and challenge.

We welcome and embrace your Spirit, knowing that in so doing, we abandon control and open ourselves in faith and trust to your purposes and plan, rather than our own.

As we put our trust in you, we pray. We pray for ourselves and for other, particularly for all those who need the confidence and provision of your eternal presence and love.

Draw near to us this day, we pray, in the name of your Son, who gave us the Lord's Prayer that we might pray as one, saying:

**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.**