

“Freely you have received; freely you give”

**Proverbs 3:1-2, 5-10
November 13, 2022**

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson**

A little boy was in church one Sunday morning with his grandmother. All went well until the offering time. Then the grandmother began to frantically search through her purse for her offering envelope, but she couldn't find it. She had left it on the dresser. Embarrassed, she kept looking through her purse for something to put in the collection plate. Seeing her dilemma, the little boy rose to the occasion, saying “Here, Gramma, you take my quarter and put it in, and I'll hide under the seat.”

Next week is Commitment Sunday, when we bring our pledge cards to the Lord's Table, lifting them up in prayer and thanksgiving. And I know that nobody wants to be caught hiding under the pew for lack of commitment. We give of ourselves to the ministries of this church and the work of God through our pledges, but also in giving of your time and talents. You may write that on your pledge card, as well – your gift of time and talent. You may also use the Officer Nomination Forms to build up the body of servant leaders here at First Church. Lots of ways to show our commitment.

Today's Old Testament lesson from Proverbs provides us with a great deal of encouragement as we look at all the ways we give to the church. Proverbs is full of wisdom and guidance designed to keep us on track as followers of the Lord.

Today's reading begins by saying, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart...” Trusting in Jesus Christ above all else – that's the foundation from which all giving arises. You can't be a giving person if you don't trust in something greater than yourself. Proverbs underscores this by adding, “... And do not rely on your own insights.” In other words, if we are so self-reliant as to dismiss the Lord's presence, we may not feel the need to give to others, and we certainly rob ourselves of their giving to us. In our commitment to self-reliance, we don't open ourselves up to receive what others can contribute to who we are.

This is why Proverbs entreats us, saying, “In all your ways acknowledge (the Lord), and he will make straight your paths.” Well, we acknowledge and celebrate our connection to one another in Christ when we give to others and allow them to give to us.

Our pledges, our time and talents, they give witness to our relationship to the Lord, showing the world that it's not all about us, but rather it's about God and what God is up to in our lives and in our world.

Take for instance the man and his young son coming out of church one day. All the father could do was complain that the service was too long, the preacher was no good, and the singing was off-key. Thinking back on all that he saw during the service, the little boy said, "Daddy, I thought it was pretty good for a dollar." That's what they put in the collection plate. Not a very good reflection of what giving in faith is all about.

No, it is through our giving that we bring our faith to life, showing our trust in the Lord, giving it legs and hands and feet and a heart. Otherwise, our faith remains trapped inside us, doing little good for us or anyone else.

When Proverbs says, "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil," it's telling us to resist the temptation to believe everything we hear out there on the street corner versus what we know in our hearts. Out on the street corner, it makes no sense to give of yourself unconditionally for the sake of someone else, whether that person is a friend or family member, a neighbor or a stranger.

When our giving is conditional, it's not really giving at all, is it? We're not giving; we're exchanging; we're bargaining. We get what we want or we don't give. That's the way of the world, and that way only takes us so far. Our world gets smaller and smaller when people withhold their gifts and talents, their blessings and resources.

But God wants an expansive world. God wants a world of abundance. God wants the world as he created it – a world growing and evolving toward peace and happiness for all, even for you, especially for you. "It will be a healing for your flesh," says Proverbs, "and a refreshment for your body." The Lord cares about you – flesh and blood, from head to toe and all the worry and aches and pains in between. He wants health and wholeness for you.

And it is through a loving and faithful system of give and take that such health and wholeness is possible. We have to be willing to give our share and we have to be willing to receive what's good for us, what's needed. This means setting aside our certainty that nothing's going to make a difference, setting aside our conversation of scarcity in which there's never enough. It means opening ourselves up to the blessings God extends to us – a little extra financial support when needed, the guidance of doctors, the support of family and friends, the opportunity of a new job or volunteer role.

So often, the only thing holding us back is ourselves. When we don't put our trust in something greater than ourselves, then we don't put forth the effort, we don't give what we can. And yet, Proverbs says right here, "Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine."

We're called to serve. We're called to give of our very substance, our very being, the first fruits of all we have.

If everyone did their part and gave of their first fruits – rather than only of what's left over – then there would be plenty for everyone. Bless and you shall be blessed.

In Proverbs, we see the blessings promised to us represented as barns filled with wheat and vats bursting with wine. Wheat and wine, food and drink, and all that comes from it.

If God promises us food and drink sufficient to sustain us all our days, he will surely provide with it everything else that makes life worth living – friends and family and loved ones, meaning and purpose in life, safety and security, wisdom and guidance, joy and happiness.

We think we have to compete for all of this. We think we're left to fend for ourselves. But that's the world's way of thinking; it need not be ours.

This is a community of faith, a church family standing as witness to another way of being, a way in which we give of ourselves in faith and not in commerce, we receive in thankfulness and humility rather than stand in self-reliance. We recognize and give witness to the reality that God has put us here to help each other, and to do so unconditionally, selflessly.

It's your choice what kind of a world to live in. And next Sunday is your opportunity to show the world who you trust and follow.

We all struggle to give as we should, and that's natural. And yet, this is a place where we can be bold to give of ourselves in the assurance of the Lord. This is a place where the presence and provision of the Lord is felt and known and celebrated through our faithful acts of giving and serving and receiving. Amen.

Our prayer today is a paraphrase of Psalm 23, as posted on a website called Sacredise (sacredise.com, September 14, 2019)

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, you are enough for us. You give us rest in soft fields and beside whispering streams. You restore and renew us, and lead us into life-giving ways.

When death and evil come close to us, you carry us through, you protect and comfort us. When others seek to do us harm, your grace uplifts and provides for us in public view. You fill us with your strength and we enjoy overflowing abundance.

We have confidence that your goodness and compassion will fill our days, and we will stay immersed in your life and presence forever.

Lord God, we ask your protection and comfort for those we've been keeping in prayer, your spirit of hope and peace for those struggling with life's circumstances.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who brings us into relationship with you in new and wonderful ways, and who taught us to pray as one body, the church, 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.