

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

October 25, 2009

Every Generous Act of Giving

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 6:1-4; James 1:17-25

On a Sunday in which our congregations receive financial pledges for the work of the church, we preachers feel a bit of an obligation to exhort our flocks to commit themselves fully and generously. I purposely chose the word ‘exhort’ which means ‘to urge someone strongly and earnestly to do something’ and not the word ‘extort.’ You know what that word means, and some preachers try that method, too. They assume the congregation is something like a sponge. The more you squeeze it, the more pressure you use, the more you get out of it.

As a child, my family occasionally attended a Baptist church in the mountains of western North Carolina near where we vacationed every year. I’ll never forget the Sunday morning when the preacher announced that the church needed to raise money for a new bus. He spoke passionately about the need for this bus, and the good that could be accomplished through it, and then he asked if any of the members were ready to offer a pledge. A few hands went up, and people shouted out amounts in the range of \$50 or \$100. Then there was an uncomfortably long lull. No other hands were raised. So, the preacher began calling on members

of the congregation. “Brother Smith,” he said, “where is Brother Smith seated this morning?” A man behind us raised his hand. “Brother Smith, can I put you down for \$500 for the bus fund?”

Brother Smith had little emotion on his face. I couldn’t tell if he was surprised or not, but he said, “yes.”

Then, the pastor pointed to Brother Jones seated at the back of the sanctuary. “Brother Jones, can I put you down for \$1,000.” He, too, nodded a yes.

Next, he spotted Brother Johnson and asked if he could give \$1,500, and with the whole congregation listening expectantly, Brother Johnson said he could.

I nudged my Dad and suggested he raise his hand for a twenty dollar pledge. If we waited for the preacher to call on us, he’d be up to \$5,000 by that point. But, we didn’t have to raise our hands. A lot of other people got the same idea and raised theirs first. A stream of one and two hundred dollar pledges helped them to reach their goal.

The comedian Soupy Sales recently died. He once got into a lot of trouble by pulling a bad stunt on his children’s television show. He asked all of the little boys and girls to look through their mommy and daddy’s closets, check their pockets for green pieces of paper with pictures of men on them, and if they found any to send them to him. A few kids actually did as he instructed, but the network was not amused. They nearly kicked him off the air.

Certainly, in the church, we want to talk about stewardship and giving in honest ways, never to trick someone into doing something they never intended to do. It's not a conversation that should happen just once a year. If that is the only time we talk about such things, then the pressure builds and we preachers make the mistake of focusing only on the money and not the broader pattern of the Christian life which always involves the giving of oneself.

One very old preacher got so worried about his stewardship sermon that he forgot to put in his dentures. He stood before the congregation and encouraged them to give their "tie." He couldn't quite form the word 'tithes.' So all of the men took off their ties and put them in the offering plate.

We Christians give. That is a key part of who we are, a reflection of the God whom we worship.

It's a basic message of the letter of James. "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above." God gives good stuff, never bad stuff. God does not place harmful things in our path though our own desires may tempt us to pursue what is hurtful or base.

There is giving which is good, and there is giving which is not good. It's important for us to know the difference.

After Hurricane Katrina hit, I went down to south Louisiana as quickly as I could. Since New Orleans had been closed off, I spent some time in the small town

of Thibodeaux, about an hour from there. My first evening there, I helped some members of the Presbyterian church unload several trucks that had driven for several days, all the way from Wisconsin. The first truck had a lot of food in it. We sorted it and stacked it on pallets in a warehouse so that it would be ready for distribution over the next several days.

Then we opened the next truck. It was filled with clothing of every description—fancy clothes, simple clothes, leather, cotton, polyester, even heavy wool coats. I know it might be hard for the folk in Wisconsin to imagine, but no one ever needs a heavy wool coat on the bayous of outh Louisiana.

The other volunteers had been dealing with the effects of the storm all week, but they were ready to work through the night unloading the clothes even though we had to make do with flashlights—there was still no electricity.

The next day fresh volunteers started to sort that huge mound of clothes. The Biden family from Delaware was in that group of sorters, a thankless job for anyone. Because as soon as they got things organized, another truck full of clothes pulled up and the next day another truck came.

A lot of Americans cleaned out their closets and drawers that week, and their cast offs all ended up in the middle of a disaster zone, straining the resources and the patience of those who were trying their best to respond to the overwhelming human need in their midst.

No one had bad intentions, but these were bad gifts. In another time, or at a different place, these could have been good gifts, but in that context they were a problem.

Good gifts add life to those who receive them. They create the conditions for prosperity to increase and for love to flourish. Bad gifts diminish those possibilities. They detract from life. They drain away energy and enthusiasm.

Giving which is good always takes into account the deepest needs of the recipient. That is how God gives. God knows what we need the most. And God provides it. There is, you see, a purpose to God's giving: to create a new humanity. So, God gives the gift of Christ so that we may experience rebirth.

To be generous givers of good gifts does not require vast resources. In fact, having too many resources can lead to some laziness about giving, not taking the time or energy to understand true need. Perhaps the best example of this is the affluent parent who gives their child a lot of money but not much love. What a tragedy that can be.

A generous giver of good gifts is ready to listen, seeks to be aware, thinks and prays about where the deepest needs lie, and then is willing to respond to them.

In fact, this discipline of discernment and response is what we try our best to practice in and through the church. Have we perfected it? In all likelihood, no. However, the effort we put into it together—discerning and responding through

shared giving—helps us to do it better than any one of us could ever do on our own.

I want you to know that your officers work very hard in this congregation. They take very seriously their responsibility to be wise stewards of the resources entrusted to our church. They consider with great sincerity the needs of our congregation, the needs of our community, and the needs of our world. They discuss regularly how we are called to meet those needs, and they make their decisions prayerfully, and with great care.

Finally, they reflect on the results of our stewardship, and you may, as well. Does our shared giving through this congregation create more life, share more love? Does it serve God’s purpose for us and those around us? Does it promote compassion, open up new possibilities, and spread the truth of the gospel? For weeks now, the Stewardship committee has tried to express how they believe our congregation does those very things. Somewhere along the way, I heard someone say, “we’ve made some good investments.” I’d like to correct that by saying, “we’ve done some good giving.” And I know it will continue, because God has given so many good things to us.

Amen.