

GIVE TILL IT FEELS GOOD

A SERMON FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF  
*COMMITTED TO CHRIST: SIX STEPS TO  
A GENEROUS LIFE*  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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LUKE 21:1-4

Remember the old saying “Give till it hurts”? I think the point of it was to encourage sacrificial giving, to encourage folks to give until they were actually making a sacrifice, giving up something else in their lives, to give until their giving had an impact upon lifestyle.

That’s not what we’re about in this church. That’s not what the purpose of this year’s commitment season is about. We’re talking about a lifestyle that is committed to Christ, and when one is committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as Lord of our lives, we give not out of a sense of sacrifice but out of a sense of gratitude.

It is really who we are supposed to be as Presbyterians, as Calvinists. John Calvin described the Christian life as one of grateful obedience or obedient gratitude depending on how you translate from the French or Latin.

Jesus said, “I am come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly...” In truth, we have an abundant life. We have an abundance of blessings.

Even though congress is fighting over healthcare, we have arguably the best healthcare system in the world.

Even though there are children and senior citizens who go to bed hungry every night, we have an abundance of food in America, and we share that food with the needy, the hungry, the poor. Some of the folks that come through our food pantry are over-weight, obese, and it is obvious that they have an abundance of food if they have a lack of money.

I think it was Will Rogers who said that America is the only country on earth where the unemployed are out looking for jobs in their automobiles. And if he didn’t say it, he would have if he’d lived long enough.

We live in a land where there is poverty in the midst of plenty, where people of limited means have unlimited credit, where people spend their resources foolishly, where people who have the most fear the most, and people who have the least dream the most.

And in the midst of our time, in the midst of our lives, as we near the end of our season of commitment, we must ask ourselves the question that the Psalmist asked so long ago: “What shall I render unto the Lord, for all His benefits to me?” (Psalm 116:12)

Our answer: give until it feels good.

In the last year of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Walter Bruggemann, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Seminary, under whom I studied in my doctoral program, wrote an article entitled “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity”.

One of the points he made was that the majority of the world's resources pour into the United States and that as we grew more and more wealthy money was becoming kind of a narcotic to us. He wrote: "We hardly notice our own prosperity or the poverty of many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more money and less and less generosity—less and less public money for the needy, less charity for the neighbor..." He added: "We never feel that we have enough. We have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean, and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out the ambiguity...The gospel story of abundances says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of Saint Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things—nothing can separate us from God." (*The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999)

A lot has happened since Bruggemann wrote those words. The tragedy of 9/11 and the crash of the stock market that followed, the hurricanes and tsunamis of 2004 and 2005, the collapse of the banking industry, the collapse of the real estate market, the decline, bail-out, and recovery of the automobile industry, the bankruptcy of cities, the shut-down of the government.

Fortunes have been lost. We have experienced a recession if not a depression. Unemployment and under-employment have become the norm for many folks we know, our families, ourselves, and not something that happens to someone else. We've seen business failures and home foreclosures that we never would have imagined in 1999. The words short sale, under water, upside down, have taken on new meaning.

Yet the United States remains one of the richest countries in the world, even if we do have to borrow money from China. There are more millionaires now than there were 20 years ago.

But you know, it doesn't take a lot to be worth a million dollars on paper today. I know a widow in DeSoto County where I used to preach, who is living on a ranch that is worth at least that. So her net worth is over a million dollars. She drives a truck that is at least ten years old. She can't pay her property taxes, her house needs repairs. She lives off her monthly Social Security check. The fellow who leases her land to run his cattle supplements her income with his rent checks, and keeps her pastures mowed and fenced. She lost all of her orange groves to citrus canker, citrus greening, and Hurricane Charley. If she could sell her land, she'd be a millionaire. If anybody wanted to buy the land. Which nobody does. So she's a millionaire, living below the Federal poverty level.

She's a little better off than the widow in our story from scripture. She is in a state of scarcity. She isn't poor. Michael Oher, whose story of his rise from poverty to the National Football League is told in the book and movie *The Blind Side*, says that you are not poor if you know where your next meal is coming from.

The widow in the temple hadn't a clue where her next meal was coming from. She put everything she had into the treasury in the temple. Two coins, total value a penny. She could have bought a crust of bread. She could have bought a little cake of meal and oil. She might have bought a sparrow. But instead, trusting in God, relying on God's providing hand, she placed her coins in the offering box in the house of worship.

And don't you know that when she walked away from that treasure chest, she felt good!

In the immortal words of “Bobby McGhee”, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” She was free! Free from the worries and fears of how she would spend her little bit of money, of how she would stretch it to make ends meet. Don’t you know it felt good, to be so free?

A colleague in ministry of mine, Valerie Bell, has served congregations with a lot of folks in nursing homes and hospitals. When she visits them for the first time, she takes them a gift, a little ceramic or rubber or plastic frog. She tells them that FROG reminds us to Fully Rely On God. FROG. When we fully rely on God, we don’t worry about anything. We don’t ask about tomorrow, we let today’s own trouble be sufficient unto the day. And every day, it is like my favorite hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*, proclaims: “All I have needed, thy hand hath provided, great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.” When you fully rely on God, what you give back to God, well, when you give it, it feels good.

Have you seen the television interview that Warren Buffet did a couple of years ago? What a charming and endearing man he is! A dyed in the wool Nebraska football fan! He is firmly committed to giving away 99% of his wealth before he dies. Which if he wrote a check for it today would still leave him with around five hundred million dollars or so.

Sad to say, it is often those who have the most who give the least. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon was once invited by a wealthy man to preach at his small rural church to help the poor members raise funds to pay off a debt. The man told Spurgeon he was free to use his country house, his town house, or his seaside villa while he conducted the preaching mission. Spurgeon wrote back, “Sell one of your houses and pay the debt yourself.”

But there are others, who have much, who give generously.

I never got to meet Mr. Sam Walton. I did meet “Miss Helen”. She headed our Presbyterian Foundation for a number of years. Sam and Helen worshipped in a Presbyterian Church about the same size as this one, in Bentonville, Arkansas. Sam tithed his income. Gave 10% of all he made to the Lord’s work. But he would not give all that money to the local church. He said it would spoil it. So he agreed to give 10% of the local church budget. The rest of the members could come up with the other 90%, and the Session could set that budget as high as they wanted, but they had to spend it all.

The rest of their tithe, they gave to mission at the national and international level. That money still funds new church development work in the Presbyterian Church (USA), more than twenty years after Mr. Sam’s death.

Don’t you know he’d feel good if he knew that?

Give till it feels good...