

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

November 19, 2017

Pledge Sunday

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

I Chronicles 29:10-20

Mark 14:3-9

God's Abundant Love ~ Our Grateful Response

Back in September and October, I preached through a series of Christian Clichés, based on Adam Hamilton's book *Half Truths*. Today, I'm adding another sermon to that series with another half-truth, which I hear around stewardship season.

My giving is between God and me.

It IS true, because God does know what is in your heart when you decide what to give. He knows what we think and how we feel in a way that no one, even those closest to us don't know. So yes, our giving and what we give IS between us and God.

But if we mean that it is ONLY between God and each of us....well, that's the half that's NOT true. Because while the amount that you pledge/give is confidential, what you give has very real implications for a LOT of people. As members of the body of Christ - the church - we belong to Christ **and** to each other. We are bound to each other, just like the hymn says, "Blest be the tie that binds, our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred hearts is like to that above."

We are not just a bunch of individuals who come together for worship, and learning, and serving. NO, when we gather, we become something else - a BODY of its own.

And just as how we speak to each other matters, how we look at each other matters, how we respond to each other when things happen in our lives matters....

How much we give to the church matters - to each other! When we don't give generously, we create stress for those who are responsible for carrying out the ministries of the church.

And the spirit in which we give matters as well. Giving from a place of fear, or resentment, or insecurity, or frustration is not what Jesus wants for his church - the body - nor for us as individual givers.

When we hold tightly to our giving being "just between God and me," we are dangerously close to a mindset that doesn't take into consideration others, and the impact that we have on others in our giving.

Because, to be honest, nothing in our lives really is just between God and ourselves. Even things that are super private impact and influence who we are, which in turn impacts our relationships with others and our perspective on things. And God made us this way. We are not just connected, we are interconnected - and that's actually a good thing!

Remember back to the Sunday we looked at the Christian cliché, *God helps those who help themselves*?

In it I said that, as Christians, our calling is not to shrug off responsibility for helping our neighbors by invoking that phrase, *God helps those who help themselves*. Instead, God commands us to take special concern for others.

Releasing our firm grasp of "mine, mine, mine" is how God makes sure those who are struggling have enough, and how God grows His church.

God's abundant love is not something we earn, buy, or work for. We cannot *help ourselves* into God's grace. The very essence of grace is that God helps those who CANNOT help themselves!

There are times when people cannot make it on their own, and God prompts us to help. We become God's answer to someone else's prayer, God's instruments of love and grace. God's abundant love ~ our grateful response!

Jesus' response to the woman who was criticized for using her finest perfume to wash his feet, was "Let her alone! She has performed a good service for me. Those who have been forgiven of much, love much in response."

Knowing we are forgiven, loved, blessed.... changes everything! Because now we know that everything we have - even the things we work for - actually belongs to God (because don't forget - WE belong to God).

We THINK we own things, and according to the ways of the world and our market economy, we do. But according to a Christian mindset - we don't. God is the proper owner of EVERYTHING, and has made us stewards - ones who take care of - what is really His.

It's a hard shift to make! But when we do, it's quite freeing! Understanding that everything we have - not just our wealth, but our talents and abilities as well - has been entrusted to us to fulfill God's purposes and desires for - not just us - but for EVERYONE - is a wonderful way to live!

Responding to God's generosity toward us with generosity toward others is what Christians do, and what the church as a body does. That's why our corporate mission giving - what goes out from our operating budget - is so important.

The church also must steward the money that you pledge and give according to biblical principles, which are defined by generosity and caring for others.... In other words, it's not all about us.

A sense of ownership, of deserving, of having earned the good we enjoy in this life is, I believe, the mortal enemy of gratitude. Gratitude recognizes that we start with empty hands and can only give thanks for what and who has filled them. Gratitude looks around in wonder at all that furnishes our life and feels not so much a sense of accomplishment, but rather a surprised delight that life is so good.

When we feel grateful, it's hard to be mean or cruel or indifferent, for we understand that all of life is a gift, and the gift of our good life moves us to respond. How can we not give back when we realize how much has been given to us?

Margaret Atwood wrote a poem that expresses well this need for us to understand that we don't own / possess everything in our lives. She is writing about nature, but hear her point applying to any / all our possessions.

The Moment

The moment when, after many years
of hard work and a long voyage
you stand in the centre of your room,
house, half acre, square mile, island, country,
knowing at last how you got there,
and say, I own this,

Is the same moment when the trees unloose
their soft arms from around you,
the birds take back their language,
the cliffs fissure and collapse,
the air moves back from you like a wave
and you can't breathe.

No, they whisper. You own nothing.
You were a visitor, time after time
climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.
We never belonged to you.
You never found us.
It was always the other way round.

Our God has blessed us, sought us out, and found us. And acknowledging this in grateful surprise is a cornerstone of the Christian life.

I love that Pledge Sunday is the Sunday before Thanksgiving - because the two have so much in common. They are both our - not my but **our** - response to God's great love for us.

On Thursday when we pause to give thanks - remember **who** you're thanking - Christians don't just fling their gratitude out into the universe - No, we **know who** to thank for what's before us, who is sitting next to us, and all that is around us.

Same with Pledge Sunday. We don't just make a secret pledge to God to give a little bit to the church. No - again - we **KNOW** that in our giving we are making an impact in very real and specific ways. Most especially in the lives of our children and young people.

So many of the kids from our church, who were raised here during the last ten years or so and are now in college, are engaging in Christian ministries on campus, are finding ways to serve the needy, are reading their Bibles and growing in their faith.

Your pledge is NOT just between God and you - it's sowing into the lives of our children is powerful ways.

Sharing Christ ~ changing lives.
God's abundant love ~ our grateful response.

Amen!