

"Practical Ministry"

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 11, 2012**

**Old Testament Lesson - Isaiah 55:2, 10-12
New Testament Lesson - Philippians 4:10-20**

Stanley Jones was a missionary in India during the early 1900s. While there, he hired an Indian driver to take him over a very narrow, steep and dangerous mountain road. Before starting out, the driver got down on his knees in front of the car and prayed ...; (then he) got in to drive. Jones, being more practical but equally religious, asked this faithful driver if he had enough gas. They looked and discovered (they had) just about t enough to get them to the most dangerous and loneliest part of the road.

Retelling this story in his book "Washing Elephants & Other Paths to God," writes Minton C. Johnson notes that "no amount of praying does any good for a car out of gas."¹

Now there is someone who recognizes that prayer is important, and so is practical ministry – ensuring that you have what's needed to get the job done, especially when it's God who has put you on a pathway of service and praise.

It's become increasingly clear that God has put First Presbyterian Church on a unique path of service and praise, through our genuine expression of Christian hospitality and our hands-on passion for mission outreach. This can be seen in our worship services and Sunday school classes, our LOGOS youth program and adult study groups, our missions ministries as well as our ministries of care and compassion. And this can be seen even in our ministry of administration – the hiring and retaining staff that reflects our particular calling, and the upkeep of our buildings and grounds to ensure that church members and friends have facilities that enable the ministry that God expects and expresses through this family of faith.

Prayer is important as is practical ministry. And the Apostle Paul knew this. In his letter to the Philippians which we read from today, Paul walks the line between prayer and practical ministry, specifically the money needed to do the work of God. In fact, he seems to be just as uncomfortable talking about money as we do. And that's kind of refreshing, isn't it? When Paul says "I rejoice in the Lord greatly that you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it; not that I am referring to being in need...."

¹ (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 79.

– when Paul says such things, he comes off a little uncomfortable or embarrassed, doesn't he? Talking about the financial gifts given by the Philippians.

And yet throughout this section of Paul's letter, there is a discernable theme that can be outlined like this: First, thanks for the money, really, thanks, "I rejoice" says Paul; let us rejoice. Second, he says "I don't really need anything", I have learned to be content with whatever I have." Let us be content. Third, you don't really owe me anything says Paul, "I have been paid in full;" God has it covered; we don't owe (or own) anything. And fourth, my real joy in receiving from you is seeing how God is working through you, or as Paul puts it, "I seek the profit the spiritual blessings that accumulates in your account."

This is Paul's central message to Christians giving to the ministry of the church in the spirit of Jesus Christ – rejoice, be content, you don't owe the church anything, and God is at work as a blessing in you and through you-through us.

There are untold blessings in what Paul is saying. Not the least of which is, it doesn't matter how much you give, but rather it's the act of giving that pleases God. But of course, giving what's easy for us to part with isn't really giving, is it? That's more like leaving – just leaving scraps that others might be able to use, and which are of little or no value to us. The problem with giving at a level where it has little or no value to us is that such giving has little or no "profit" to us, to use Paul's word. And of course, he's talking about us profiting spiritually from our practices as Christians.

There are few practices as Christians more sacrificial and more enriching than giving of our time, talents and treasures. And there are few things more difficult and agonizing for people than deciding how much money to pledge to the church.

The story goes that a chicken and a pig were looking through the farmhouse window at a family eating ham and eggs. The chicken turns to the pig and says, "Doesn't it make you feel good to know that you can make a contribution to the happiness and well being of a family like that?" To which the pig answers, "O sure, for you it's a contribution, but for me it's a genuine sacrifice."² Pig ...; ham

For many of us, giving financially to the church represents a genuine sacrifice, and we truly struggle with it. And yet, God has made this very

² Based on the writing in the editorial "Containment Of Plans," 15 June 1967, Salisbury (MD) *Daily Times*, pg. 4, col.1.

easy for us. Not only does God set 10% of our income as a starting point for a faithful tithe – and that’s income regardless of where the “in” comes from – not only does God do the math for us that a tithe is 10%, but God does even more for us. God attends to our natural hesitation or reluctance when it comes to giving of our time, talents, and treasures. (And those of you who truly cannot pledge or who are visitors but who give sacrificially nonetheless or those who can give only of your time and talent, please, know that your giving is honored by God and appreciated by this church as much if not more than any financial pledge).

It’s just that for 99.9% of us, God has placed it upon our hearts to give financially. And thank God that God does go that extra mile for us, that God does address our natural hesitation and reluctance; that God makes it easy for us if we’re paying attention. Because if we’re paying attention then we can see that before God asks anything of us, God gives everything to us. God gives us the divine Word and the faithful witness of the Lord and all the blessings in life that come from that. Through Jesus Christ, our Heavenly Father assures us that like the best parent imaginable, God will provide for all our needs, and even surpass them with unforeseeable blessings.

Paul prays for the Philippians – prays for us – saying, “My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” Well, you know the “ever and ever part” in Paul’s prayer, that’s you and me – the ongoing and never ending community of faith.

And Paul not only prays for us, but Paul gives himself to us, as an example of just how faithfully God provides for the material and spiritual needs of those who worship and serve the Lord. Paul left his position as a wealthy Pharisee to become a lowly tentmaker, and God provided for his needs even though Paul not once asked for money. Paul never accepted money from anybody for himself personally while planting churches. And by turning over to God his natural hesitancy and reluctance to give himself in service to Christ, Paul received a peace and a contentment that no storehouse of cash can acquire for you. “I know what it is to have little,” says Paul, “and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstance I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” And what is that secret, you ask? Well Paul reveals it to us, when he says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Faith in Jesus Christ and service through the church, that’s Paul’s secret – “doing all things ... strengthened by Christ.”

First Presbyterian Church also knows the secret of having little and of having plenty, and of being unconcerned in either situation. We need not be concerned when looking at the budget of this church. Not that the

numbers don't matter, they do. But they just needn't concern us – not as long as we are being good stewards of what God has given us, both as individuals and as a church.

Part of being a good steward is building up the family of faith, not for our sake, but for the sake of Jesus Christ. And the only place we as individuals can really do that – build up the family of faith – is here (point to head), here (point to heart), and here (display hands).

By attending to our own Christian walk – which includes coming alongside others in and for ministry to and with each other – by attending to our head (or our knowledge and beliefs about Christ) and our hearts (our expressions of Christian care and concern) and our hands (the things we do to stay active in our faith – whether through service work or letter writing or whatever), by attending to our own Christian walk, we do more to ensure the growth and stability of First Presbyterian Church than any worrying could do for us. And that includes worrying over how much to give.

Don't worry about. Give a 10th, and call it day. Or decide what you can afford to give, and then give 10% more. Or increase your giving by tithing on gross income rather than just what you net after taxes. However you seek to be faithful to God's call that we give of our financial resources in service to Christ's ministry, whatever method you use to make a pledge for next year, make it one that grows your faith and expresses your trust in God. Because, if we're all not doing that – growing our faith and trusting in God – then like Paul, First Presbyterian Church doesn't need or want your money just to keep the doors open.

No, the only way your financial gift – my and Yuri's financial gift – is worth anything is if it stretches us as Christians, reflects our trust in God, and is given with a joyful spirit,

Next Sunday, as we bring forward our Commitment Cards for 2013, let us all rejoice in our ability to give back to God; be content with the blessings we have; know that we don't really owe – or own – anything, that God has it all covered; and then let us watch expectantly as God continues to work through us – both as a church and as individuals. Amen.

Let us close our sermon time in prayer, using as a model the prayer that Paul prayed for the Philippians and, through the living word of Holy Scripture, the prayer he prays for us this day. Let us pray; as we contemplate our giving through the church: May God "fully satisfy (our) every (true) need- (spiritual and material) –according to God's riches.....in Christ Jesus...Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Lord Jesus, who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly, come to us now that all would have full opportunity to live; come that we would extend opportunities to all who lack the basic necessities of life and who suffer needlessly.

Come and break down all that hinders spiritual growth, if not also material progress in life. Come and console those for whom life is a struggle, and comfort those for whom life seems too short; be with those who grieve.

Come also, O Lord, and give us wisdom and patience, courage and resolution. Help us to discover how your goodwill may play out in the lives of all people.

O Lord our Ruler, come to all people of the earth and take the world's nations under your merciful care. Guide them by your providence that all might live secure in your peace.

Grant to the President of the United States, the Governor of this State, and to all in authority, the wisdom and strength to know you and to do your will.

Fill them with love of truth and righteousness, and make them ever mindful of their calling to serve as you would have them serve.

And as for us, O Lord, fill us with your own strong desire, with your own brave hope, that we and our loved ones and all people may draw ever closer to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray 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.