

**Walk the Talk!**  
**The third in a three part Stewardship Series on**  
***Being Rich and Giving Richly***  
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Holy Trinity United Methodist Church

Twenty years ago, the movie *Ghandi* hit the screen. It was a moving portrayal of this most amazing political and spiritual leader. In one of the scenes there is a moment when Gandhi is nowhere to be found. People hunt high and low, but still no Gandhi. Eventually he comes walking toward them. They ask him “Where have you been?” He tells them that he was cleaning the latrine. His followers were both surprised and a little annoyed that a man of his “stature” would do such a thing. Ghandi’s response was that he would not expect anyone to do anything that he was not prepared to do himself. Ghandi practiced what he preached. Ghandi walked the talk.

So did Jesus. Remember that night long ago when Jesus and his disciples gathered together in an upper room for a meal. It was the custom in those days that as guests arrived a servant would greet them, sit them down and wash their sandy, smelly, sweaty feet. It was a menial task. Who better to do it than the servant of the house? But on that night it was different. When all the guests had gathered, the host took the basin of water and a towel and began to wash their feet. Some of the disciples were both surprised and a little annoyed that their leader would do such a thing. But Jesus said to them, “If I, your Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (Jn 13: 14 – 15) Jesus practiced what he preached. Jesus walked the talk.

That is why he can, with integrity, criticize the religious leaders of his day. It’s not that he is criticizing their teaching. On the contrary, he encourages his followers to follow the Torah and perform the religious observances that the Scribes and Pharisees teach. But what Jesus does call into question is their integrity as religious leaders. They do not walk the talk. Listen to Jesus’ words as found in Matthew 23: 1 – 12.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers; therefore, perform every observance they tell you to. But don’t follow their example; even they don’t do what they say. They tie up heavy loads and lay them on others’ shoulders, while they themselves will not lift a finger to help alleviate the burden.

“All their works are performed to be seen. They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them ‘Rabbi.’

“But as for you, avoid the title ‘Rabbi.’ For you have only one Teacher, and you are all students. And don’t call anyone on earth your ‘Mother’ or ‘Father.’ You have only one Parent – our loving God in heaven. Avoid being called leaders. You have only one leader – the Messiah.

“The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus affirms the authority of the Torah in his comments. “Do whatever they teach and follow it” says Jesus. But then he adds “Do what they say, not what they do for they do not practice what they preach.” He then goes on to describe the practices that are contrary to their teachings. Like most human beings these religious leaders like to be honored. They want respect – so much so that they wear exaggerated costumes that make a showy display of their piety. The fringes on their prayer shawls, which were used much as Catholics use the rosary, to count and keep track of prayers, were extra long. The phylacteries, small prayer boxes that contained scripture verses and were tied onto their foreheads and forearms, became public instead of private symbols of their piety. They expected to be called “Rabbi” a term that literally means “my great one.” To presume other titles that were reserved for God was a matter of pride, even idolatry.

Jesus criticizes these displays of piety because they represent “power over” rather than “power with” the people. Jesus compares their model of leadership with his understanding of God’s model of leadership which is servant ministry. While it is natural and human to seek honor, those who do so will be humbled, declares Jesus. And those who seek no honor than to serve will be exalted and raised up.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to serve rather than to be served.

How does this translate into our daily living? the way that we set priorities? What does it mean to walk the talk?

In Acts, chapter 2, those newly converted to Christianity apply all that Jesus and the apostles have taught them to their daily lives. They become a model for practicing, with humility, the great commandment – to love God and neighbor as they love themselves. Listen to how their community lives. Reading from verses 42 – 47 of Acts 2:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' instructions and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. A reverent fear overtook them all, for many wonders and signs were being performed by the apostles. Those who believed lived together, shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, sharing the proceeds with one another as each had need. They met in the Temple and they broke bread together in their homes every day. With joyful and sincere hearts they took their meals in common, praising God and winning the approval of all the people. Day by day, God added to their number those who were being saved.

“They will know we are Christians by our love” must have been their motto! Imagine loving one another so much that no one lacked food or clothing or shelter. *IMAGINE* how we as a church can grow into loving one another and all of God's children so much that we sacrifice what we have in order that others might have enough!!

As you've thought about your pledge to Holy Trinity for next year, I hope that you have thought about it and prayed about in the context of your relationship with God. That was and is the intention of this year's Stewardship Campaign. Because until we humble ourselves, and realize that we don't need the long tassels and fancy clothing and expensive gadgets and two, three and four TV's or computers or whatever...and that all that we have comes from God – we will never be ready or willing to share our blessings and bounty with others.

Years ago, I heard this true story about a family that lived on a steep hill right off the highway. When they were young, the children were fascinated by the cars that went slipping and sliding on the snowy dirt road next to their house. Neighbors driving home during a snowstorm would build up speed on the highway, turn right onto the dirt road, and race up the hill hoping to maintain the necessary momentum to reach the top. The children would cheer for those who succeeded and groan for those who landed in the ditch. Then they would run downstairs from their window seat to inform their dad that he had to get out the tractor and pull the neighbor out of the ditch. Mother pulled out more plates to set on the table.

When the snowy mishaps created the possibility of unexpected guests at the table, their mother would say “don't touch the chicken until we see if they are hungry.” Some families call this F.H.B. (Family Hold Back), but in this household it was simply called “Don't touch the chicken!” whether it was spaghetti or stew or chicken itself. Because of this, a meal for five often fed seven, eight, nine, even ten people and no one went hungry.

That's the picture that comes to mind when I read about the Christians in the early church, sharing things in common, even sacrificing something of their own in order that everyone might have enough. It was love in action! Loving God and neighbor (which you remember from last week's sermon is a single, inseparable commandment) as much as they loved themselves.

Have you ever been on the receiving end of such generosity? such hospitality? such sacrificial sharing? Last year Jay and I were members of the Lexington UMC delegation that visited our partner church community in LaBorgona, Nicaragua. On this particular trip, members of Dios es Amor Church in LaBorgona welcomed us into their homes to live with them for the 5 days of our visit. Our family spent six months preparing for our arrival. They cleaned out the shed which was adjacent to the house, poured a cement floor, built in an open-air window and made a bed out of boards and sheets out of used pieces of clothing. The pig that had been housed beside the shed was moved and the pigpen completely cleaned out. (It happened to be right outside of our open air window!!) To them it was a palace and oh! how they sacrificed to make it our home for those 5 days. Jay and I were humbled. We learned from them how to put today's lessons into practice.

Near the end of our visit, our delegation took our host families out to lunch at a nearby local restaurant. Everyone ordered a delicious plate of food – always beans and rice, and fried plantain and on that occasion, fried chicken! which was a luxury. I noticed that Antonio, our host, didn't eat his chicken but asked that it be wrapped. That night, as we broke bread together around his table, the chicken appeared, cut in many small pieces. And Antonio all but said “Don't

touch the chicken until we see if Jay and Susan are hungry.” We were served first. Only then did the children and some of the neighbors who had come to dinner have a small taste of the leftover fried chicken. It felt like a heavenly banquet.

As we prepare to make out our pledge cards this morning, what are we willing to sacrifice in our own lives? What “wants” can we choose to decline in order that the needs of Holy Trinity might be met? Can we humble ourselves and out of sheer gratitude for God’s generosity in our lives be extravagantly generous to our church, whose purpose it is to preach the practice of loving God and neighbor and then to practice what we preach?

Let’s “walk the talk” and with joyful hearts open our lives and our financial resources to God.

When I first planned this Stewardship Sermon Series I titled it “Getting Rich or Giving Richly.” As I prayed with the scriptures and got to know this congregation better and better these last few months, I changed the title to “Being Rich or Giving Richly” because I recognized that everyone here is already rich and blessed in so many ways. But as I prepared to write the sermons, the title changed one last time. “Being Rich AND Giving Richly” is really what it is all about. We who are so very rich are being challenged to respond to God’s love and Christ’s grace by giving richly. The gospel can only be read with such expectation.

May we all walk the talk with humility, gratitude, generosity and joy. So be it. Amen.