

We Are FOR God
(second in a three part Stewardship Series on *Gratitude Attitude*)
November 15, 2009 ~ Rev. Susan J. Morrison

Mark 12:38-44

As

Jesus taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.⁴³ Then Jesus called his disciples and said to them, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all."

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Last week, I challenged us all to live as if *gratitude* was the word that best defines who we are. I invited us to be summoned to a *Gratitude Attitude*, to become a living word of gratitude, to imagine that it is for this that we were created. Gratitude would become the touchstone of everything that we think and do and would be the very spirit that shapes us and folds us into our faith.

Using the incredible odds of our actually being alive, I suggested that becoming gratitude, incarnating gratitude, means living every day out of a sense of awe and humility. It means recognizing that our very existence is nothing short of a miracle. We have not been manufactured nor made: we have been created. We are FROM God and in this lies our identity.

How did living with a *Gratitude Attitude* affect your week? Did you find yourself living with your glass half full rather than half empty? Did your bright fluorescent colored card in your wallet or purse serve as a reminder to be grateful for what you have? Did it help to raise your own consciousness about the difference between your needs and your wants and how you choose to spend your money?

Once we recognize that we are origins are FROM God then it follows that we are with God, in God, and FOR God. In Jesus, we see the example of someone who lived his life totally and completely within this awareness. Jesus knew that he was FROM God. It was why his entire life was an act of gratitude. Again and again, he blessed God, and offered thanksgiving. Living in a sense of radical gratitude, he gave his life away so freely and so generously that others were astonished by his actions. (Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude*, p.98)

As Jesus' followers, we believe that we too have been created for a purpose. Our lives were not created to be thrown away or misused and abused. No, we were created to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the words of Rick Warren, we were created to have a purpose-driven life! We were created to glorify God, to seek justice, to do mercy. To be a Christian is to follow Jesus, to seek to do His will in our lives. It is to say, "Here I am, all of me! I'm yours. Put me to work, help me to serve, use me to accomplish your work."

Barbara Glanz is a motivational speaker who conducts workshops for large companies. One day she was speaking at an event for the employees of a grocery store chain. She talked to them about how they saw their life purpose, suggesting that their work was more than stocking shelves or ringing up customers' food purchases or delivering supplies. She told them that every person they met was an opportunity to bless someone, to live out a higher calling or mission. The employees were inspired by her words, including one 19 year old grocery bagger named Johnny.

Johnny, who has Down syndrome, took her words to heart. He went home and tried to think of ways he could be a blessing to others. Finally, he came up with a plan. Each night he would search the Internet for a positive saying that would encourage people. Then he would print out 300 copies and carefully cut the sayings into individual strips. The next day, he would put one of the sayings in the grocery bag of each of his customers while saying, "I put a saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming here."

A month later, the manager noticed that Johnny's line was much longer than the others. Even when he announced that there was no waiting in lines 2 and 3, no one budged. People wanted Johnny to be their bag boy. He touched them and filled them with hope. Johnny got it. He was pursuing a mission that was bigger than his personal satisfaction. (Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*, pp. 38-39. I have used material from this book throughout this sermon with gratitude to Adam Hamilton for his stories and clarity about tithing.)

What about each of us? Do we claim a purpose for our lives? Are we pursuing a mission that is bigger than our personal satisfaction? Can we articulate this mission and its relationship to our faith? Does the allocation of our time and money reflect that mission?

Answering these questions should cause us to reflect on the true role of money and possessions in our lives. Is money and the things that money can buy really an appropriate goal or focus for our lives? Is money an end in itself or is it a means to another end? Jesus asked these very questions in over 1/3 of his quoted words in scripture.

Money itself is not bad. It is not the root of all evil. According to the Bible it is "the *love* of money that is the root of all kinds of evil." (1 Timothy 6: 10b) The problem is in how we view or value money. Money is merely a tool to be used to accomplish the greater purposes God has for our lives.

If we are to be true to our life purpose, then we need to have a plan and a set of goals and we need to have a financial plan to meet those goals. For the past few years, I've preached a practical formula that Mike Slaughter has advocated for his parishioners at Gingham Church, one of the largest going churches in the United States. 10. 10. 80. is the formula. Give the first 10% away. Save the next 10% for emergencies. Live on 80% of your income. Shred your credit cards. Get out of debt for good. Develop a plan to get out of debt. Strive for the day when you can tithe 10%, save 10% and live on 80% of your income. No matter what your income, you can still use this formula. 10.10.80. It means living below your means so that you can be financially free and purposefully generous.

From ancient biblical times, God's people observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had to God. A gift offering to God was called the "first fruits" or the "tithe." Abraham was the first to give a tithe. In the time of Moses, the tithe was codified in the law. Before giving to the poor or taking care of themselves, God's people were to bring one-tenth of their first fruits to God.

This morning, I'd like to use the apple as a symbol of the "first fruits." Would the Stewardship and Finance Committee come forward and distribute an apple to everyone? As they do, what comes to mind theologically and biblically when you think of "the apple"? It was the "first fruit" in the Garden of Eden. It symbolizes temptation, etc.

So here's the deal. Let's imagine that God has given us ten apples, which represent our wealth or income. Everyone here receives the 10 apples, whether it is a meager pension, monthly Social Security checks, unemployment benefits, wages from work or money from investments. 10 apples. God tells us that nine of these apples are ours to enjoy. We are to use some to care for ourselves and our families, some to save for emergencies, and some to give away to others. But the 10th apple is holy to God. Giving this apple to God first, before we consume the other 9 apples, is a way for us to express praise, love, faithfulness and gratitude to God. This also serves to supply the resources for God's purposes to be accomplished through God's church. This is the very apple that you hold in your hands this morning.

Now the problem is, that 9 apples just are not enough. "How can I pay the bills and have all the stuff I want with just nine apples?" we think. So we decide that God won't mind if we take just a little bit of the apple. After all, we deserve that vacation or new laptop or that jacket we've been eyeing at the mall. So we take a bite out of God's apple, the one that is holy to God and meant to be used for God's purposes. "God will understand" we think. Then Christmas comes and we don't have enough money for all the presents we want to buy, so we take another bit out of God's apples. A medical emergency catches us by surprise. We haven't been putting money into that emergency fund and so we must take another bit from God's apples. Buying a new car, eating out, grabbing a coffee on our way to work, spending on this and on that – each expense takes a bit out of the apple that belongs to God. Soon all that is left is the core. Instead of the "first fruits" God gets the leftovers.

I wonder what God must think. “You would really bless me if you recognized that this apple is mine and gave it to me freely – not because someone made you feel guilty, but just because you love me and are FOR me.” You know, a strange thing happens when we give the first apple to God. We’re not tempted to eat it, because it’s not there. And with God’s help, we can somehow find a way to make the other 9 apples meet our needs.

I realize that it is challenging to tithe. It simply might not be possible for you to begin giving 10% to God right away. But I encourage you to take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can give 2% or 5% or 7% with the intention of working toward a tithe. With God’s help you can make the adjustments so that you can be more and more generous.

Jesus saw a widow who gave her last 2 copper coins and he said "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all."

God understands your situation. God wants you to find a way to get out of debt for good. God wants you to know financial freedom so that you can give freely with a grateful heart. God is ready to help you make the changes in your lifestyle that will enable you to tithe.

Remember, the amount of your income doesn’t matter. Tithing is possible at virtually any income level. Now, if you are blessed with a growing income, it’s easy to think, “Wow, 10%? That’s a lot of money to give to God.”

Adam Hamilton recalls a story told by Peter Marshall, who was chaplain of the US Senate for many years. There was a man who struggled to tithe even though he had a large income. The man came to Marshall one day and said, “I have a problem. I used to tithe regularly to my church but now, I am earning a half a million dollars a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give my church \$50,000.”

Marshall reflected on this wealthy man’s dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said, “I can certainly see your problem. Let’s pray about it.” The man agreed. So Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority, “God, I pray that you would reduce this man’s salary back to the place that he can afford to tithe.” (*Enough*, p. 84.)

I will pray for each of you as you reflect on your own personal financial situation and as you make your decision this coming week about how you will financially support Holy Trinity in the coming year. Ask yourself these questions:

- ❖ Do you believe that God desires for you to have a financial plan that will give you the freedom to give generously?
- ❖ Are you ready and willing to make a commitment to that plan or, if need be, seek out a financial advisor who can help you define your plan.
- ❖ Do you believe that God will encourage you and inspire you to do this?
- ❖ Are you committed to working toward tithing to your church?

I will pray for you as you discuss your finances this coming week. May you be bold and courageous and faithful in your decisions.

And I ask you to pray for your church. Is it possible for us to close the gap of our deficit budget? Can we raise the needed extra \$17 – 20,000 needed to begin 2010 with a balanced budget? It was pointed out at last week's Church Council meeting that with 170 anticipated pledges, if every household could increase their pledge by \$100. (and remember now, that's only \$2.00 a week extra) we would close the gap on our deficit spending. And if we can't, what can we do to be financially responsible? Does it mean reducing staff and programs by 10%? If so, maybe we would choose to close the church one Sunday a month? For several years now, we have not been able to pay 100% of our Mission Shares to the annual conference. In turn, that means that staff and programs in our NE conference as well as United Methodist missionaries and mission programs nationally and globally receive reduced monies. Remember, our Mission Shares support Rolling Ridge and Camp Aldersgate; they help to finance retired clergy benefits; they fund health clinics and colleges in Africa; they support UMCOR wherever there is a disaster. Maybe we need to sacrifice some of our own staff and programs for the good of others beyond our doors? Or what about some new and creative fundraisers. If you are someone who cannot give money to your church, maybe you'd be willing to tithe your time and be in charge of a fundraiser that would help deplete our deficit budget. Every one of us must own the reality of our financial situation and be part of the solution of meeting our financial obligations. So, pray for your church this week, even as you pray about your part in our financial situation.

Having just completed a 2 week Pumpkin Patch sale, I would hope that Holy Trinity could well be compared to one of those pumpkins. Like any pumpkin, we are not perfect. Yet, even with those imperfections, we have been carved into a creative, beautiful jack-o-lantern. The first step of our transformation was also the messiest. Opened up, we have scooped out all the nasty, slimy smelly stuff inside. We've done this by creating our own Relational Covenant with one another, committing to treating one another with respect, honoring our differences and refusing to get caught up in nasty, slimy, smelly rumors and assumptions. Then, we have drawn a face on our pumpkin. It is the face of the babies who have been baptized as well as the spirits of those who have been memorialized and buried from this church. The face has the life of our Sunday School children and youth; it is ageless; it is the face of every member and friend of Holy Trinity and it exudes a *Gratitude Attitude* in its broad smile. It has eyes that see and ears that listen. And finally, a candle is placed within the jack-o-lantern and light shines from within in a way that gives light to others. This little light of ours. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

We who are FROM God live always FOR God. May it be so for this church for years and years to come. Alleluia. Amen.