

September 27, 2015
2 Corinthians 9: 6-15
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Generosity: Making a Life

(Often attributed to Winston Churchill, but no evidence that he actually said it.)

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Fundraising is nothing new in the life of the church. Money makes mission possible. Money is one of the ways we share our resources with one another for the common good. Money given generously expands our hearts.

In the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, written in the first century, chapters 8 & 9 focus on a collection being taken to help the church in Jerusalem. Our reading today is the conclusion of Paul's comments about generosity.

SERMON

Giving is central to human life. Sometimes we give because we are required – like taxes. Sometimes we give because we feel coerced – like a company-wide giving plan. But at its deepest practice giving gives us joy and expands our hearts. Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver." Maybe it's because God recognizes that giving and love have become so intertwined in the giver that the joy is visible. That is a full and fulfilled life.

Maybe you've heard the saying,

*We make a living by what we get;
we make a life by what we give.*

Making decisions about what we give - in time, talent, and treasure is a spiritual practice. Soon we will be invited into that practice as we each receive a newsletter from the Stewardship Team inviting us to reflect on "making a life" by what we give to our congregation. Included in the mailing is a pledge card, which helps those responsible for managing the church's budget to make plans.

However, that is not the primary reason that my husband Ron and I fill out a pledge card. We fill out a pledge card because making a pledge helps us to "make a life" with intention. Those of you who practice yoga are familiar with "setting an intention." Pledging is a financial intention. Or maybe you participate in an exercise program where you set a goal for inspiration. Pledging is a financial goal. Pledging helps us to make the life we intend.

When we look at our own finances and we "follow the money" we learn a lot about ourselves. As it says in the Sermon on the Mount, "...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt. 6:21) We think we know where our hearts are, but when we follow the money sometimes we can be surprised. The spiritual journey invites us to "make a life" where

our hearts and our treasures are in the same place.

A dramatic example of a person who made great changes in his life, selling his business so that he could make a life with his heart and his treasures in the same place was Millard Fuller. He started Habitat for Humanity.

So, today I want to reflect on how we as a congregation make a life together by what we give. At the heart of our life together is paying attention to the presence of God. That's why we do what we're doing right now - gathering on the Sabbath - for prayer and praise, contemplation and confession, scripture and song, offering and openness to the Spirit.

Gathering for worship is the heartbeat of the congregation. It is regular and steady. We do this week in and week out, 52 weeks a year. At a recent gathering of leaders we were talking about positive things in the life of First Parish. No one mentioned worship. When I pointed that out, someone quickly responded, "We take that for granted." In other words, we assume worship. Just like a beating heart. But it's not a bad idea, now and then, to give thanks for that heartbeat and this worship, recognizing how it makes everything else possible. Trust me, when the staff gathers on Tuesday mornings we know the reality of the promise that there is another Sunday coming... in just a few days. Over the last three centuries the cloud of witnesses of this congregation has gathered for over 15,000 services of worship.

In reality, some days worship nurtures us more than other days. However, we don't just do this for ourselves. It is a gift we offer to our community, to the world, to God. Each time we gather we offer a sign of hope and we hold the world in prayer. Then as the worship ends, the service continues as we go about our lives. The giving continues all week long in ways seen and unseen. Thank you for these Sabbath gatherings we offer to one another and the community.

I am grateful for the many things we together offer to the world. It was a privilege to welcome the organizations who were with us last week that received grants determined by our Outreach Committee. Between those grants, the money given by Jane's Team, and the special offerings we do for local agencies, the money we give to the United Church of Christ and other national and international groups, we give away over \$100,000 a year.

However, the outreach of this congregation is much greater than shows up in the church budget. I'm pretty sure we could multiply what the congregation gives many times to come up with what we give away directly to many local, national, and international organizations. Years ago most charitable giving happened through the church. Today much more of it happens through direct giving between individuals and organizations. And that doesn't count all the hours you give volunteering and serving on boards and committees for numerous organizations.

Is it possible for us to be more generous?
Is it possible for us to be more cheerful?

To whom much has been given much will be asked. (Luke 12:48) At an event I went to this summer I attended a workshop on money. The person leading the workshop observed how challenging it is to talk about giving with someone who was born on 3rd base, yet thinks he hit a triple. I had to hear that again - someone who is born on 3rd base yet thinks he hit a triple.

A powerful image to remind us that none of us have what we have simply by our own efforts. Our lives are woven together by circumstance of birth, gender, race, and opportunity. *To whom much has been given, much will be asked.*

At that same money workshop the presenter also commented that churches have only been doing a weekly offering for about 100-150 years. I was surprised, but it got me thinking. It has to do with the fact that in the early life of our congregation for example - before there was a United States of America, before the separation of church and state - the sanctuary in which we worshipped during the 1700s belonged to the town. That building was further down Maine Street, not far past Parkview Medical Center. It was called The Meeting House because it was for all meetings in town including worship. It was paid for by taxes.

Our 2nd and 3rd sanctuaries (this is the 3rd) for the 1800s and the 1900s have been on this site at the request of Bowdoin College. In fact the construction of both these buildings was made possible by a group of private citizens and the college. For a long time we were known as the College Church. It is only in relatively recent times that we no

longer have any official connection to the college and the responsibility of this building rests with the congregation alone.

We are in the midst of congregational conversations about how our mission and our facilities align (or don't) as we make a life together. Although we alone are now responsible for this sanctuary, we have said to one another, time and time again, over the last 15 or so years that we have a mission in being present in downtown Brunswick and that we have a mission of connection to the wider community.

One of the questions before us at this time is how do we make a life intentionally woven together with the life of the wider community in the 21st century? I had an interesting and productive conversation with the Brunswick town manager about this question just this week. Thank you to those who are participating in the conversations with our consultants, Peter Heinrichs and Susan Lewis.

I am grateful for your generosity with your time and talents as well as your treasures.

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One of the most generous people I know is a woman who due to a serious mental illness has not had a job in her adult life. The way she acquires possessions is as gifts from other people. Those who know her all know that as soon as she receives something she is very likely to turn around and give it away. She is thankful for the gifts, but she is even more

cheerful as a giver. At times that has frustrated and/or annoyed the people who have given the gifts to her. We need to remember that once we have given a gift it is no longer ours. I have come to understand that this woman's giving comes from her deep need to be generous. The objects are not essential to her, but giving is. It comes from her heart. She makes a life, one of her own agency, through her giving.