

“Heart Giving”

October 29, 2017

First series – Stewardship – Faith Commitment Sunday

If you're a kid or teen, this week means Halloween - dressing up, school parties, and candy! If you're older, maybe you're thinking about Halloween, too. But if you're a pastor in the Christian church, this week is special because it's the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

It was October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther covered many issues, but one in particular was the practice of the church around indulgences - the idea that people would pay for their sins and then be offered forgiveness - as if human beings could buy their own salvation.

Luther argued that salvation was a gift of God given by grace through faith alone. That's a very basic account of what happened; it's deeper than that, but Luther's protests began a movement that led to a great schism in the church in the West. The Reformation reshaped and reformed the church forever. Thankfully, we've seen the Christian church come together in many ways and seek unity in Christ.

The Methodist movement came later in the 1700's, but it was a product of what Luther started. Again, Wesley didn't intend to separate from the Anglican Church, but wanted to bring revival. The Methodist movement certainly brought revival, and also took on a life of its own in England and then in America.

I was thinking about all of this as I thought about our focus today - “heart giving.” It's a big deal to talk about the state of our hearts. To open up and examine the deepest parts of who we are is difficult. We've been talking about how so many things can distract us and pull our hearts away from God. Our hearts can be divided and so distracted from putting God first in living and giving.

Ever since the beginning, even back in Genesis, God is calling those who want to be faithful into a relationship that requires our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Abraham and his descendants heard God say over and over “I am the Lord your God” and then invite them to listen.

Jesus' words echo the invitation to covenant relationship. Jesus also offers the Great Commandment: “Love God with everything...and love your neighbor as yourself.” That's the highest goal of the Christian life - the great commandment - not just to say we believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior - but also to let that belief inform and transform our lives. I pray that our giving would be done cheerfully, not with guilt or as an attempt to earn God's love and forgiveness, but as a response to the love we receive from God.

SHOW SLIDE: Take a look at these slides. First, something from Peanuts. Lucy, whom we know wasn't always the most generous or kind-hearted, is giving something to Linus. Sometimes the generosity of people surprises us. It seems to come from out of nowhere.

I still remember a time in my first year of college when my dad came to visit and brought me some of my favorite things. It was unannounced, and he had never done anything like that before. It was a wonderful act of love and generosity that has stayed with me. Even this week, I heard from someone who was blessed and grateful for another person's generosity in a difficult time – a home-cooked meal after the death of a loved one.

There are those whose giving is done "behind the scenes" without others noticing. As we offer our faith commitments today, it's not a time to compare ourselves to one another. We're asked to give based on what we have - and to give it freely and joyfully.

And each part of this is important and vital to our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. What we have isn't just our net worth. Wealth is all that God has given to us, and when we entrust our gifts to God, God uses them to change the world.

Prayer is our connection to God and to one another. We've seen the power of prayer in people's lives, and I hear witness to it constantly. Sometimes it's all we have to give, but we give it. I thought of that when someone called the office to lift up a neighbor who had been in a terrible accident, and this person knew that prayer was a gift. It was what he could offer.

Some of you have felt that power in times of great difficulty and great joy. And I know that prayer is the foundation of our ministry together. One other way we've experienced it is in the merger of two congregations coming together. Prayer was the firm foundation of God's work in us and our work together.

Our presence is vital. Maybe it's obvious, but being here matters. Presence is a gift we offer to each other, and one person said it best: someone needs me to be here. Even if I don't feel like it, I know it matters to someone because it's mattered to me when I've looked around. I've been cared for and helped by others in the Body of Christ. Showing up is important.

Gifts help us to do ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. Our budget is self-funded, and what we offer helps us to be realistic in building a budget that supports our staff, teams, and committees - and all that we do together as a church in this place and in this time.

How we serve within these walls and outside of them makes an enormous difference. I've heard the witness of parents and grandparents who talk about how Sunday School sticks with kids and helps them to know that Jesus loves them. Those who work in this building to make sure it's safe and welcoming for us and our community help us to make disciples. I've watched you help people to fill bags of groceries at MAP and serve meals to folks at Supper House. Some of you are welcoming families at Poppen House and reading with kids at school. Those are just a few ways that service shares God's love with others.

And witness matters, too. Wherever you are, your words and deeds tell the story of God's love in your life. What you say face-to-face and how you use social media to share honest faith, to be positive, to be thankful, to affirm others, to live the love of Christ alive in you - all of it matters. If you've ever wondered if it makes a difference, be assured that it does.

We don't share the individual information on these Faith Commitment cards, but I hope that it's not just another exercise for us. This is about being faithful with what we have. This is part of our personal relationship with God and our commitment to make disciples. This is an act of worship and a way that we entrust our gifts to God. **HOLD UP CARD**

SHOW SLIDE: The second slide I invite you to see is a powerful image for us. As we consider Jesus' command to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, perhaps this helps to drive his point home. Do we think about ourselves - can we see ourselves - in one another? It's hard to truly put ourselves in someone else's place. We can't possibly know everything about them or feel what they feel. But maybe we can open our hearts more widely and become more vulnerable to even consider what it might be like.

When Jesus tells those who hear to seek first the Kingdom of God, he's calling us to seek God first - to put God first. And it does cost us something because when we put God first, that means we can't put "me first." How many of us struggle against living with a "me first" mentality?

We're not meant to have it all, but to share what God has given us - time, money, resources. We're not meant to consume all that we have, but to use it for God's purposes in the world. I know that runs against a lot of what we hear and how we live - that *what's mine is mine and no one else's. I don't have to think about anyone else except for myself* - but our faith in God drives us to consider a different way - to seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness.

We are made in God's image. God knows what we need, and God gives us what we need. We're called to seek what God wants in response. It means that we sacrifice

and remember that God sacrificed for us when God offered Jesus to show us the ultimate in love and grace on the cross.

Jesus also says to seek God's righteousness. The root of that word "righteousness" comes from a term used in archery. If you've ever done archery or hunted with a bow, what's the most important thing? (Some would say safety, patience – and that's true – but AIM is vital! Righteousness is about having right aim - and being in right relationship with God.

God is asking us to make sacrifices and to trust God with what we have, and I invite us to hear from the apostle Paul in Romans 12:

SHOW SLIDE:

¹Dear friends, God is good. So I beg you to offer your bodies to him as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing. That's the most sensible way to serve God.

²Don't be like the people of this world, but let God change the way you think. Then you will know how to do everything that is good and pleasing to him.

Pastor Mike Slaughter offers a great illustration about living sacrifices. He says that we offer ourselves just as if we put ourselves on the altar before God. The problem is that a living sacrifice can be easily distracted. We can come down from the altar when we see something that gets our attention – and takes our attention off of God.

God is calling us to heart giving - and knowing that we are the church. Just like the song says – not the building, or the steeple, not a resting place, but the people! We exist to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We believe that we are a part of accomplishing God's purposes here and now with the gifts that we have to give.

It matters in this congregation, in Muskegon, in Michigan, in the U.S. and around the world. It matters that Lake Harbor exists, and it matters that we're here. God is saving people and transforming lives through faithfulness and generosity, and it changes us, too. We're transformed when we give from the heart.

In a few moments after we pray, we'll sing "Take My Life and Let It Be." We're invited to offer our Faith Commitments to God - bring them forward - but I invite us to renew our commitment to love God and love others.

Let us pray...PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Dear God,
Give us the perseverance and courage
to seek out and approach you
wherever you are to be found;
Grant us the vision and understanding
to see and recognize you
whenever we might meet you;
Gift us the grace and generosity
to respond freely and fully
whatever you might ask of us.

On my own
what I have to give
doesn't amount to much
in the light of all you have given to me
and in the face of so much need.
Put together as a congregation,
what we offer you here in love
becomes more,
not simply added together,
but somehow multiplied in its usefulness.
We ask you to bless our gifts
and with the addition of your blessing,
there is enough for all.