

“Sowing for the Harvest”

Stewardship '17, part 3

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

You are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. If you look around you, you will see people who are here to worship God and encourage each other. This is a good place to be, and I thank you for honoring God with your presence.

Would you please pray with me? O God of the Universe, you are powerful and mighty. You can literally do anything. Yet in your mercy and love, you choose to work through us to build your kingdom on this earth. So take this moment now, as we dwell on your Word, to open our hearts and minds to hear your voice calling to us. By the power of your Holy Spirit, challenge us and change us. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

In researching for today's message, I found this antidote on Abraham Lincoln. “After Lincoln became president, before the days of civil service, office seekers besieged him everywhere trying to get appointments to various jobs throughout the country. Once, confined to bed with typhoid fever, the exasperated Lincoln declared to his secretary, ‘Bring on the office seekers; I now have something I can give to everybody.’” *(from sermonsearch.com)*

The past two Sundays we have discussed giving and generosity. We drew conclusions from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, specifically chapter 8 and 9. The first Sunday, we all agreed that we need to keep our promises, especially when it comes to giving. Last week, we talked about how enthusiastic giving is contagious, and certainly has a better result than typhoid fever. Today I want to

put the final piece of the puzzle together. What kind of harvest are we expecting when we give?

Abraham Lincoln’s humor in the face of his illness is amusing, but it reveals a darker truth that applies to this world 150 years later. We spend a lot of time and money focusing on ourselves, trying to get things from other people for our own benefit. Generally speaking, it is rare to find someone who gives their wealth away without expecting something in return.

It is not necessarily bad to expect something in return for an investment. When I go shopping, I weigh the price of something against its benefits. For example, I’ll pay more for a good meal. When we give to charity, we consider the impact our gift will make. How will it make us feel? What will our investment do for others? Those are fair questions to ask.

The problem is, if we focus too much on ourselves, we become greedy. Miserly. The average person in America only gives away about 2% or 3% of their income to charity. (*from the National Center for Charitable Statistics, nccs.urban.org/data-statistics/charitable-giving-america-some-facts-and-figures)* And that is for all charities combined, not just churches. As Paul said, some sow sparingly and give reluctantly. (2 Cor 9:6-7)

God’s word can change our attitudes, though. Throughout this passage in 2nd Corinthians 9, Paul explains how God’s economy is based on generosity, and he expects Christians to understand this. He says, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” (2 Cor 9:6) Have you ever tried planting grass before? I have. I never seem to put enough seed on the ground. When you plant, you have to realize not every seed is going to germinate – you have to use lots of seed to get a good crop.

The question Paul is asking us is, Where does the seed come from in the first place? How is it that we are even able to give? The answer is found right in the center of our scripture. Let's read it one more time.

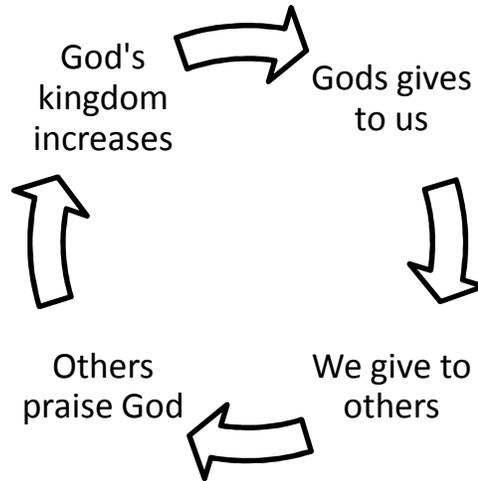
“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.”

“Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.” (2 Cor 9:8-9)

This is a fundamental truth of God, and it rankles the rest of the world. God is the source of all things. If you have the ability to bless someone else with your possessions, it is only because God gave them to you in the first place. Paul says the point is not to accumulate wealth and possessions for ourselves, it is to “enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.” Have you heard the expression, “There are some things money cannot buy”? This is exactly what Paul is saying.

God supplies all of our needs so that we can be generous. It's a cycle, like this picture.



When we give reluctantly, under compulsion, or simply refuse to give at all, it shuts down the cycle. Instead of abundance, there is scarcity. God intended his kingdom to overflow with blessings and grace. God works out of abundance, not scarcity.

Paul clearly says that generous giving results in thanksgiving and praise to God. (2 Cor 9:11). He tells the Corinthians (2 Cor 9:12-13), "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God..."

This is the mindset we must take as we approach our giving, whether it be to the church or any other charity. When we give, does God get the glory? To me, the answer should always be "Yes!" or I need to seriously reconsider what I am doing.

This is all well and good for the Corinthians, but so what? What about us, in the world today? What are we doing with our gifts? The answer is, we are supporting the Lord's work at Bellaire Community United Methodist Church. The Church, with a capital "C", all of us together who follow Jesus as Lord, are the

chosen instrument of God to change the world. When we talk about giving money to the church, that is our goal.

Let me be perfectly honest with you. I am asking you all, as your pastor and a leader in this church, to decide what you will give to support the ministries of this church in the following year. I am asking you, on behalf of your church council, finance team, Sunday School teachers, Steeple Stitches, staff, trustees...well, everyone...will you support this church with your prayers, your energy, and your finances? Will you help us achieve our goal?

The giving in this church ranges from \$1 a week to around \$200. People give what they have decided to do, and not everyone gives the same. I get that. But imagine for a moment that when it came time receive the offering, everyone asked their neighbor next to them to decide what they should give to support the needs of the church. Would that be hard? What struggles would that cause in all of us? If you really decided for someone else what they should give, what factors would you consider about them? What would you want your neighbor, who was deciding your offering, to know about your resources, finances, life, and needs? Would you tend to ask more or less of your neighbor than you would of yourself?

These are tough questions because this is a serious, life-changing issue. The truth is, there are currently 133 households in our church who have chosen to support this mission of this church with their money. That is an important decision. What we decide to give determines what ministries we can do as a church to change the world in Jesus' name.

I want to conclude with a story by Del Tarr, a missionary to West Africa for fourteen years. It is about the price some people pay to sow the seed of the

gospel in hard soil. It is based on Psalm 126:5, which says, "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy."

("The Seed Grain, Copyright Leadership, 1983. From sermonsearch.com)

I was always perplexed by Psalm 126 until I went to the Sahel, that vast stretch of savanna more than four thousand miles wide just under the Sahara Desert. In the Sahel, all the moisture comes in a four month period: May, June, July, and August. After that, not a drop of rain falls for eight months. The ground cracks from dryness, and so do your hands and feet. The winds of the Sahara pick up the dust and throw it thousands of feet into the air. It then comes slowly drifting across West Africa as a fine grit. It gets inside your mouth. It gets inside your watch and stops it. The year's food, of course, must all be grown in those four months. People grow sorghum or milo in small fields.

October and November...these are beautiful months. The granaries are full; the harvest has come. People sing and dance. They eat two meals a day. The sorghum is ground between two stones to make flour and then a mush with the consistency of yesterday's Cream of Wheat. The sticky mush is eaten hot; they roll it into little balls between their fingers, drop it into a bit of sauce and then pop it into their mouths. The meal lies heavy on their stomachs so they can sleep.

December comes, and the granaries start to recede. Many families omit the morning meal. Certainly by January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals a day.

By February, the evening meal diminishes. The meal shrinks even more during March and children succumb to sickness. You don't stay well on half a meal a day.

April is the month that haunts my memory. In it you hear the babies crying in the twilight. Most of the days are passed with only an evening cup of gruel. Then, inevitably, it happens. A six- or seven-year-old boy comes running to his father one day with sudden excitement. "Daddy! Daddy! We've got grain!" he shouts. "Son, you know we haven't had grain for weeks." "Yes, we have!" the boy insists. "Out in the hut where we keep the goats; there's a leather sack hanging up on the wall; I reached up and put my hand down in there; Daddy, there's grain in there! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!"

The father stands motionless. "Son, we can't do that," he softly explains. "That's next year's seed grain. It's the only thing between us and starvation. We're waiting for the rains, and then we must use it."

The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he goes to the field and with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and throws it away. He scatters it in the dirt! Why? Because he believes in the harvest.

The seed is his; he owns it. He can do anything with it he wants. The act of sowing it hurts so much that he cries. But as the African pastors say when they preach on Psalm 126, "Brother and sisters, this is God's law of the harvest. Don't expect to rejoice later on unless you have been willing to

sow in tears." And I want to ask you: How much would it cost you to sow in tears? I don't mean just giving God something from your abundance, but finding a way to say, "I believe in the harvest, and therefore I will give what makes no sense. The world would call me unreasonable to do this; but I must sow regardless, in order that I may someday celebrate with songs of joy."

(Ask the ushers to hand out the giving challenge cards, explain the tithe challenge, then continue with Renewal of the Baptismal Covenant.)

Memory verse

2 Corinthians 9:6

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

Reflection questions

1. Think on some of the investments you have made in your life. Which ones worked out? Which ones didn't?
2. When have you invested in someone else, and what was the result?
3. Why do you give what you give? Compulsion? Guilt? Joy?
4. How has God given gracefully to you? Do you use those gifts to give generously to others?
5. Do you expect your church to grow? Does your giving reflect your answer?
6. If you would like to take Pastor Eric up on his offer to "risk-free tithe," please send him an email at eric.bcumc@gmail.com