

Support & Sacrifice Sermon, Chapter 6 Giving to God, 10/19/08,
Pastor James E. Reents

Grace, mercy & peace from God our Father & our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

TEXT-Matthew 22:21b "...give to God the things that are God's."

PRAY-Dear God, guide us by your Holy Spirit so that our stewardship may be a duty and delight. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

A week ago I attended a week of continuing education at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. It was a very good, and I'll tell you about it at the end.

Each evening I called Karyl on my cell phone. That's unusual for me. I usually figure that "no news is good news." Karyl was surprised, so she asked about it.

I said, "Honey, there are 2 reasons I'm calling each evening. The main reason is that I love you, and I know that communication is very important in marriage."

"The second reason is less important. I have \$90 credit on my cell phone. If I don't use it, I'll lose it."

I'll let you decide which answer she believed. One answer is duty, and one is delight.

A better example is one of the professors who lectured to us. The students asked how what he said related to recent books and articles. He said, "I don't have an answer."

When the questions continued, he threw up his hands in frustration and said, "I'm spending all my time trying to meet a deadline in getting a book published. I haven't read anything other than what is necessary for the book. The deadline is December 31, 2005. So don't ask me any questions." If he completes it by the end of the year, he'll be 3 years late.

I said to myself, "He is one of us." It sounds like the completion of the book is more of duty than a delight.

Today we are considering chapter 6 in the Giving to God by Mark Allen Powell. It is entitled, "Support & Sacrifice." I prefer the title, "Duty & Delight." They mean the same.

We'll consider 2 questions: "Why we give & How we give?" The answer to both is duty and delight.

We'll begin with, "Why we give?"

The 1st answer is to support the church, ie to do our duty, to give what is reasonable.

Congregations have expenses like any organization: salaries, hymnals, Christian education materials, utility bills, mortgages, etc. These bills need to be paid. Each of us is to bear responsibility for them.

I suppose we could call these dues as any other organization. That is true but the church is different. The Bible says we are to give according to our means and never place anyone above another. The church is the body of Christ. Participation is free. Decisions are not only made on the basis of finances but also on the promises of God. Some members contribute very little and depend on the contributions of others. That is not fair, but it is in line with our belief that we are to bear the burdens of others called benevolence. We can't send bills, but we can educate people as to the cost.

Most of us probably are not aware of our portion. Powell suggests one way to do that is to divide the budget by the no. of giving units which is usually families. Then we can figure out if our income is above or below the average member @ St. John's and give accordingly.

The annual budget at St. John's is \$1,700,000 divided by 600 giving unites. That gives us an average of \$2,700/giving unit /year. Then we can adjust our giving depending on whether our income is above or below the average of the congregation.

I believe it is necessary to know these figures, but I also realize it is very dangerous to use them. They are not to lead to guilt or pride. Hopefully they are a reasonable way to be responsible.

Powell gives an example of a church member who gave \$5/week, like tipping at a restaurant. He was elected to the church council and his eyes were opened to the expenses of keeping a church open. He changed his giving pattern to \$200/month as his share. That was a good plan for him. On the other hand I know single parents who are doing all they can to contribute \$5/week.

The first answer to WHY we give is that it is our DUTY support SJLC in a reasonable way.

The 2nd answer is SACRIFICE or DELIGHT. This answer is more radical than duty. It is based on the spiritual discipline of renunciation. We give our money in God pleasing ways so that our money doesn't control us. We do this after we give our portion or what we ought to do. In the eyes of the world this is radical because we are giving without expecting a return.

One of the biggest misconception of stewardship in the church is people giving support to the church and thinking that it is sacrificial giving. Rather we are giving to support a program that benefits us. We give to the church, send our children to Thrive, and they get something out of it. That is good and reasonable, but it is not sacrificial giving. If we only go this far, we are depriving ourselves of the delight.

The richest spiritual blessing is found in sacrificial giving. We move from what is reasonable to what is radical, from duty to delight. Here are most likely to experience giving as an act of worship, an expression of faith, and as a spiritual discipline. We realize that we were created with a spiritual need to give.

I was a pastor in a congregation which built a beautiful worship center at the cost of 1 ¼ million \$. It was an easy sell to encourage members to exceed the payments and save interest money. That is attractive. One year we doubled our payments. That looks good on our annual report. It just plan makes good business sense.

But that is not sacrificial giving. We benefited from that giving. We had a beautiful place to worship. It only became sacrificial giving if we gave the interest money we saved to a cause such a foreign missions.

Now let us move from why we give to HOW we give. The answers are similar to why we give. This is one method and not the only or right method. If your method works for you, use it. I have changed by giving to this method. It begins with 1st mile giving.

The first answer is pledges. Powell recommends pledges for the 1st type of giving we just described as duty or support. A pledge is a promise. Promising to give is responsible.

Pledges are not dependent on being present for worship because of vacations or the ice storm we had on the first Sunday of January, or overspending for Christmas. Pledging is not based on liking the pastors, the congregation or the national church. We give because we want to belong to the fractured body of Christ called the church.

Automatic fund transfers is a recommended way to do this. The next best is to send/give a check whether we worship or not. Why? It is an act of worship. We are doing our duty.

The second answer after pledging is our offerings. I call this 2nd mile giving. It is pure worship from a deep faith, and it is a spiritual discipline. Offerings are often spontaneous, enthusiastic and spirit-led.

Our building expansion program falls under this category. It is above our regular giving. We give because we believe God is good. Powell says, "Life holds no greater thrill than this."

Our offerings are not limited to the church. For Karyl and I they include: Wartburg College, Wartburg Seminary, Lutheran Social Service of Illinois, ELCA Word hunger program (Hopedale), Bread for the World, Grace Matters and will include the Renovating Project.

Giving these offerings is to move from duty to delight. This is the fun and exciting part of giving. Thank you for all your gifts.

I will close with 2 examples of duty and delight.

The Chicago Marathon last Sunday reminded me of my first Chicago Marathon. I challenged the congregation to support me at the rate of \$26.20 per family. The money was to be given the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and collected at our Thanksgiving Worship Service. Although I didn't win the race, the effort was successful.

Powell says in his book, "Life holds no greater thrill than 2nd mile giving. I suppose that wasn't the most thrilling experience in my life, but I enjoyed that thanksgiving meal more than any other meal. I did something to share my gratitude.

I believe it is my duty to feed the hungry. Combining that with the marathon made it a delight.

The other example came from the continuing education experience at Luther Seminary. The subjects were the Gospels of Mark and John which are the main gospels for the next church year. We had a different professor for each season of the church year.

I was reminded of the importance of narrative criticism. Narrative criticism asks how a particular gospel fits into the over all theme of the Gospel. What impact is the author trying to make on the audience or readers?

That is exactly what we did that week. The context of a passage was as important as the passage.

Our Gospel for today is an example of that. The point isn't just church-state relations. That is a secondary point.

The point from the context is that we are approaching Holy Week. This is 1 of 3 attempts to trap Jesus, and it didn't work. Jesus asked, "Whose head and title is on the coin? They said the emperor's. He answered, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.

The mark on us isn't that of the emperor. Our mark comes from Genesis 1 which tells us we were created in the image of God. In baptism we were marked with the cross of Christ forever. Above all we belong to God and joyfully give to God the things that are God's.

The week of continuing education gave me many sermon ideas for next year. More importantly it became a deep spiritual journey. Life holds no greater thrill than diving deeply into the Gospel of Mark and considering the theology of the cross on a deeper level than ever before. It was more than duty. The week was an absolute delight.

Thank you for all your gifts of duty and delight. By the grace of God may we know the joy of Christian stewardship. Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.