

“The Genuineness of Our Love”

Paul certainly does not beat around the bush, does he? Jesus says we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves, and the apostle Paul says the genuineness of that love, the genuineness of our love for God and neighbor, can be measured by the amount of money we give to support the faith, life, and mission of the church. A bold and perhaps unsettling claim that might just make the Corinthians, and us right along with them, squirm a little in our seats. But Paul makes it nonetheless, doesn't he? The genuineness of our love for God and neighbor can be measured by the amount of money we give to support the faith, life, and mission of the church.

Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, “Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.”

The generous undertaking to which Paul refers is a special offering he has been collecting from the churches he founded in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, what we know today as Turkey and Greece. The purpose of this special collection is to support the faith, life, and mission of the churches in Jerusalem. The Corinthian churches to whom Paul is writing are among those that he founded and Paul expects them to contribute freely and liberally to this ministry of witness and grace.

By way of example Paul cites the support already provided by the Christians in Macedonia, who, he says, “have overflowed in a wealth of generosity” in spite of their severe poverty and extreme affliction, giving not only according to their means, but beyond their means. Paul clearly expects no less from the Corinthians. In fact, he expects far more, because the Corinthians are not similarly afflicted or impoverished.

Furthermore, Paul extols the Macedonians for rightly recognizing that this opportunity to give is for them a privilege and a blessing, for through it they are joined to God. Paul reports that the Macedonians earnestly begged for this opportunity, begged for this opportunity, to give not only according to their means, but beyond their means.

From his plea to the Corinthians, we gain valuable insight into Paul's understanding of the fundamental character of faithfully giving our money to the church.

First and foremost, as with the Macedonians, the faith-filled pledge and contribution of our money to the church will always be sparked by joyful response to the generosity and grace of God, especially, Paul says, as that generosity and grace are manifest in “the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich.” Jesus is both the reason and the standard for the joyful pledge and contribution we are called to make and inspired to make; called to make and inspired to make by the love of God: the love of God that is God's love for us; and the love of God that is our love for God.

Faithful giving flows directly and gratefully from our experience of God as the one who creates us, the one who sustains us, the one who redeems us. Which is to say that faithful giving flows directly and gratefully from our experience of God's love for us. Genuine and authentic, deep and abiding personal relationship with that God in turn erupts with irrepressible generosity to the church through whom that God is known and proclaimed, glorified and served. In other words, the experience of God's love for us in turn erupts with our love for God.

If there is no eruption of irrepressible generosity to the church through whom that God is known and proclaimed, glorified and served, then one has to question whether or not a genuine and authentic, deep and abiding personal relationship with the God of Jesus Christ really exists at all. I believe that is what Paul means when he claims that the genuineness of our love can be measured by the amount of money we give to support the faith, life, and mission of the church.

Paul then goes on to say that to give out of a genuine and authentic, deep and abiding personal relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, to give out a genuine and authentic, deep and abiding love of God, is to give according to what we have, and not according to what we do not have.

Twenty years ago, in a Bible study I was leading, my good friend Peyton Elliott deeply lamented what he characterized as our pervasive contemporary inclination, including his own, to measure our lives and thereby prejudice our happiness by what we do not have. Ten years or so later, at or near the peak of the internet boom and bubble, a blatant example of Peyton's perceptive concern appeared in a feature article in the *New York*

Times. The subject of the article was the super wealth, the mega-wealth suddenly being accumulated by a significant number of people in those heady days of unbridled technological expansion.

In the article, a well established investment banker by the name of Nelson Peltz was asked for his reaction to these Johnny-come-latelys who had struck it rich in this latter day gold rush. Peltz answered, "You see these young guys worth three or four billion dollars, and you think to yourself, 'What have I done wrong?' I feel like the guy who has to say to his kids, 'Go to work, because we can't make ends meet anymore.'" At that time, Peltz was worth \$890 million dollars. \$890 million dollars, yet Peltz wondered what he had done wrong, and he felt like the guy who has to tell his kids they have to go to work because they can't make ends meet, with \$890 million dollars. Apparently there is no end to our inclination to measure our lives and thereby prejudice our happiness by what we do not have.

Perhaps it is no wonder. Our consumer culture constantly bombards us with cleverly composed if not cynically conceived messages designed to convince us that there are so many more products and services we must have, and things we must do, and places we must go, new and newer, better and best, if we are ever to have any self-esteem or enjoy any happiness.

But according to Paul, those who are in a genuine and authentic, deep and abiding personal relationship with the God of Jesus Christ have already found the true source of their self-esteem and the eternal wellspring of their happiness. Liberated from the pernicious inclination to measure their lives and thereby prejudice their happiness by what they do not have, they are freed: freed to give generously to the church according to what they do have, rather than parsimoniously according to what they do not have; freed to give God the first fruits, rather than the leftovers.

As you have heard me say before, the traditional biblical standard for the first fruits that we are all called to give to the faith, life, and mission of the church is ten percent of our total income, a standard established in a time and place of scarcity that surely still holds in this time and place of abundance. I am convinced that the God of Jesus Christ continues to call us to tithe, that still today God is calling all of us to give a full ten percent of our total household income to our local church in an unrestricted pledge for distribution and deployment according to the Spirit guided collective wisdom of the congregation and its leadership.

We can all easily and joyfully contribute ten percent of our income to our local church if, like the Macedonians, we give out of a genuine and authentic, deep and abiding personal relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, if we give inspired by the love of God, if we give according to what we have and not according to what we do not have.

As God would have it, faithful Christian stewardship is never about supporting a church budget. Instead, it is always about responding faithfully to God's claim on our resources for the sake of advancing God's present and coming kingdom, a universal commonwealth of good and abundant life. We are to think not of a budget that needs to be funded, but rather of a pool of resources that first needs to be faithfully gathered and then faithfully deployed.

Two weeks ago I shared with you the news that if everyone here at First Presbyterian was tithing to this church, those annual contributions would come to well over 2 million dollars: well over 2 million dollars each and every year that would come not from numerical growth, but from Spiritual growth; well over 2 million dollars, each and every year, faithfully gathered and faithfully deployed for love of God and neighbor; faithfully gathered and faithfully deployed for worship, life-long learning, mission, and fellowship that praise God and promote human flourishing, so that God might glorified, and the Body of Christ built up, and all families of the earth blessed, and God's present and coming kingdom advanced.

This year, in response both to God's call to tithe as well as God's promise to open the windows of heaven and pour down an overflowing blessing, the leadership of this church has set this congregation on a journey toward becoming a tithing church. There are some among you who will no doubt be able to take that journey in one step, by immediately increasing your pledge to ten percent of your total income. Many more of you will probably need to take up that journey like my wife and I did, one step at a time, by increasing your pledge twenty percent or more every year until you are tithing to this church.

Remembering that the faith-filled pledge and contribution of our money to the church will always be sparked by joyful response to the generosity and grace of God, we have asked you to turn in your pledges during the four week period between Thanksgiving, a day of gratefully remembering the cornucopia of God's immeasurable generosity, and Christmas, a day of gratefully remembering the gospel of God's amazing grace. Between those two dates, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, in the midst of God's generosity and grace, we

are asking all of you to signal your commitment to this congregation's journey toward becoming a tithing church by turning in your pledge with an increase of twenty percent or more.

Those pledges have started to come in. So far, 76% of the pledges turned in have shown an increase. Those increases range from a low of 3.8% to a high of 400%. The average increase has been 32.2%, and the median increase has been precisely 20%.

Surely these results are not only a fitting response to, but also a faithful manifestation of, the hope and promise of this season of Advent, a season when we joyfully look not only back to the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but also eagerly forward toward fulfillment of the kingdom of God Jesus announced with his words and inaugurated with his deeds. However, these results are also just a beginning. There are still many many more pledges yet to come in. If you are among those who have not turned in your pledge, I hope you have already noticed that blank pledge cards have been conveniently included in your Order of Worship. We urge you to fill them out, fold them up, and place them in this morning's offering plate.

As more and more of you join with your brothers and sisters here at First Presbyterian in increasing your pledges by twenty percent or more every year on your way toward becoming a tithing congregation, you will indeed see that by the power at work within you and among you God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all you could ever ask or imagine; you will indeed see the windows of heaven opening up and an overflowing blessing pouring down. And the genuineness of your love will have been both tested and proven, to the glory of God. Amen.