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2 Corinthians 8:1-7, 9:6-12
November 4, 2018

A Matter of the Heart

By now, I trust you all know that my favorite comic strip of all time is *Calvin and Hobbes!*

Calvin is a little boy with an overactive imagination. Calvin's stuffed tiger, Hobbes, comes to life in Calvin's mind more often than not.

In a classic strip, Calvin turns to his friend Hobbes and says, "I feel bad I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did that."

Hobbes replies, "Maybe you should apologize to her."

Calvin thinks about it for a moment and then responds, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."

When it comes to stewardship . . . when it comes to money . . . when it comes to generous giving to the church . . . we often find ourselves wanting to be more like Calvin than like the Macedonians in today's scripture lesson!

Today is *I Love My Church Sunday*. We've called it *Celebration Sunday*. Some churches call it *Stewardship Sunday*, some even call it *Show Me the Money Sunday* – but I was afraid if I called it that, no one would show up ☺.

It's too bad Stewardship gets a "bum rap," for in the final analysis it's simply about putting into practice one of the first lessons you and I learned

early in life (at least I hope we learned it). And that is to say “thanks” when someone has given us a gift.

If we truly believe that everything we are and everything we have comes to us from God, then all we are really doing this morning is deciding how best to say “thank you” by giving back to God a portion of the blessings that we received and then consecrating them to him..

That doesn't make you uneasy, does it?

It should actually make you go ... WOW!!!

Don't you just love the word WOW? It's one of the best words in the English language. Spell it forwards or backwards, it comes out the same. WOW.

As Anne Lamott writes in her book, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, “Wow is about having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing or the miraculous.”

Who knew three letters could express so much? And that's how I feel about this church. I am constantly amazed at the “wow” people in and out of this church.

We had one WOW person leave us over \$350,000 in her will that got us out of debt shortly after I first arrived.

We had a NONMEMBER of the church donate a significant amount of money that allowed us to create a real courtyard.

Check out the dedication plaque on the post adjacent to the breezeway.

Another faithful member gave us \$150,000 to reduce the debt on the

Fellowship Hall.

Still other WOW people have given tirelessly of their time, talents and treasures, without which we would not be the generous church that we are known to be.

There is one WOW person (also a nonmember) who has donated in excess of one ton (2000 pounds) of canned food each year to the food pantry.

And just as important, are those who gave \$5 a week ... because even \$5 can be a stretch for some!

And I don't think any of them gave of themselves, of their talents, or of their resources because they felt they had to. At least I hope not! They gave out of the depths of their hearts in gratitude.

Unfortunately, in many churches, they would be the exceptions, rather than the rule.

Did you know that Christians give only 1.5-3.5% of their income to church and religious causes? I think Presbyterians give roughly 3%.

17% of Christians say they "tithe" (give 10% or more – the biblical standard).

Of course research shows that only 3% of Christians actually do.

30 - 50% of active church goers give only sparingly, or not at all.

70% of Christians leave nothing to their church or God's work when they die.

I have often wondered why we Presbyterians only give 3% of our income to the church, when Mormons and many Evangelical Christians give 10% or more?

I don't think it is because they have more money to give. I don't think it is because they are necessarily more spiritual or more generous.

I don't even think it is because they are more committed to their particular church.

Well, maybe. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure why ... What do you think???

John Wesley, the father of the Methodist Church, is said to have preached a sermon once which had three good thoughts, "Get all you can," was the first one.

An old fellow in the crowd is said to have replied, "Amen."

"Keep all you can," said Wesley.

The same old fellow said, "Amen."

Then Wesley added, "Give all you can."

The old fellow is reported to have mumbled, "What a shame to spoil a good sermon."

Wesley was talking about generosity, not the calculating, hair-splitting process by which we figure how to give the very least and still pay our dues.

He was talking about how we can reach beyond the level of obligation in a generous act of love.

The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians, when asking them to make an offering to aid the church in Jerusalem,

“Let each man give according as he has determined in his heart; not grudgingly, or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

Let’s be clear: There’s no charge for membership in the church of Jesus Christ. We don’t pay dues. We’re not assessed for our share of the expenses. We’re not taxed in any way.

We don’t even take up a collection. Did you know that?

We receive an offering.

There’s a big difference: A collection is a means of passing the hat to raise money; an offering is a means of praising God to show our appreciation for God’s countless blessings.

In our text for this morning, it is interesting that Paul never mentions the situation in Jerusalem, for whom they are raising money.

Paul does not explain in his letter to the Corinthians why they need the help.

Paul does not tell them how desperately hungry the Jerusalem saints are or how badly oppressed they are or how deeply in debt they may be.

There is no effort here to create sympathy in their hearts for the poor victims. No tender pictures of children begging in the streets being passed around.

As a matter-of-fact, nothing in Paul's discussion about the act of giving is related to the condition of the recipients.

You see, our giving is supposed to be a matter of our hearts. Our giving should be the response of our heart to our discovery of how blessed we are by the love and goodness of God.

We give as an act of praise and thanksgiving. We give as our testimony of our faith that God has blessed us in the past and God will continue to bless us in the future.

To that end, we each get to make up our own mind what we give. It's not up to me what you give, or up to our Stewardship committee, or up to the Session ... it is up to you.

It seems the only thing God is asking, according to Paul is that you be a "cheerful giver."

The original Greek word for "cheerful" is *hilaros*, which is the root of our word *hilarious*. In other words, we are to be hilarious over the prospect of giving.

We are to be hilarious as we share from our bounty, our many blessings, and our indescribable gifts.

I like the idea of hilarious giving. I think that fits who we are. And yes, we should smile when we give! Even if it stretches us a bit. Maybe especially if it stretches us.

And so we celebrate today ... because God has placed it on our hearts to be cheerful givers, right?

And there is good reason to be so excited. Giving = joy.

I have to say, in my almost twenty years of ministry, I've discovered that in every church I have served (*okay, there's only two*), in both churches I've served, the happiest people are the giving people.

And the grumpiest people are the greedy people.

The most joyful people are generous people ... and ... the stuffiest people are the stingiest people.

Isn't that true?

When Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver", I wonder if it doesn't work the other way ... they are cheerful because they are givers. It's the giving which brings the joy to their lives.

An article in PSYCHOLOGY TODAY disclosed that there is a remarkable difference in the health and quality of life among those who volunteer in community service and display loving concern for others compared with the general population.

The stress level, which increases cholesterol, raises blood sugar, and depresses immune functions, is much higher among those who share little of themselves.

Giving ourselves to others is a great way to attain a wonderful and healthy glow.

I have never known a cheerful giver who was not better off for it in every way. Have you?

Paul reminds us today in 2 Corinthians that true happiness and joy are only found when we devote our entire lives to God — not just an hour on Sunday, not just in our monetary offering, not just on *I Love My Church Sunday*, not just on some once-a-year or once-a-month service project, not just using our talents, but *everything*, in every tiny aspect of our daily lives.

God is even in the small stuff, and we are called to see and put God first ... even in all the small stuff.

So, as we take the offering this morning and turn in our pledge cards, I want to encourage you to do so with a cheerful heart, knowing that God does not coerce you to give, but leaves it up to you.

Your offering of your presence, your gifts, your service and even your witness is between you and God. But know, these pledge cards and offerings are not merely symbolic.

Our offerings are meant to come from the very substance or core of our lives: our time and energies, money from our work, our lived-out

values, priorities and commitments, all given in gratitude and thanksgiving for God's love and grace already given to us.

And you need to know that our offerings—whether money, talents, time, witness or service—makes a difference in the lives of people all around us.

Our offerings are a response to God's grace and God uses our cheerful and joyful offering of ourselves to transform the world for the glory of God.

You matter to the kingdom of God. Your talents and gifts of all kinds make a difference for God in the here and now.

And that is cause to celebrate. It is an opportunity to live into the joy that God wills for you.

Today is I LOVE MY CHURCH SUNDAY when we receive and dedicate (and certainly give thanks for) our pledges for 2019.

Now obviously, you've had a chance to think about what you intend to do with that Pledge Envelope we sent you.

You've received letters, emails, there've been stewardship moments during the past several worship services.

I hope you also are aware of the possibilities for this church. The opportunities and hopes and dreams for next year. Dreams you shared with us last week. Dreams that are listed on the back of your bulletin.

And they can happen, but we need all of you to catch the vision and pitch in to make them realities!

But let me ask you: Did you come to church today already having confronted your Calvin attitude about giving to the church?

Did you come to church with the attitude of the Macedonians whom Paul praised for their generosity?

The truth is, this morning is not really about raising funds, it's about raising our spirits in response to God's love.

It is not just trying to meet the church budget, we are trying to live out of the abundance of God's grace offered to us in Jesus.

It's not just asking for pledges from your checkbook, but from the commitment of your heart.

God is not just calling us to be donors, but calling us to be disciples, giving out of a bountiful faith in a bountiful God who gives blessings in abundance.

Thank you all for your dedication to God's work here at Santa Teresa Hills. It is one of the things that sets us apart. Because here at Santa Teresa Hills – there is joy. There is laughter. There is generosity.

How can any pastor looking for a church, not want to be here?

What else can I say but ... WOW!

Amen.