

*Defined by Generosity—Now?*

I Timothy 6:17-19; Proverbs 11:24-25

Whitefish UMC

Consecration Sunday, November 13, 2011

- † Love him or hate him, James Carville (who served as Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign manager in 1992) is known even to his opponents as a political genius. He posted a handwritten sign in the Little Rock campaign headquarters, which read—“**It’s the economy, stupid!**”
- † The phrase became the mantra of the campaign and a byword of our culture. Now, of course, the phrase has been captured by the Republican party and its candidates in our time, the autumn of 2011. It’s payback time, because everywhere, the economy comes foremost in our minds and hearts.
- † The financial crisis leads all other stories on the radio, internet, and TV. Each day brings more distressing news about the economic crisis in Europe, foreclosures, and though there are some signs of hope, they become overshadowed by bad news. The stock market, according to CNBC’s Jim Cramer, has gone mad.
- † The national financial crisis is also a personal financial crisis. It has hit home for every person here. We are each challenged by the cost of gas, groceries, and utilities—let alone anything seen as “extra” or nonessential. Interest income has tanked, retirement accounts seesaw as if a pair of wild children were in control. Individuals and businesses alike are looking for ways to cut costs and save money.

- † The economy, silly—it’s on everyone’s mind. So what time is it in the church year—you already know it—the time when we consider what we want to commit of our financial resources to God’s work. We have mailed out information, and you have heard me preach for two weeks now about extravagant generosity, which is our theme this year.
- † Today is our Consecration Sunday, and on the surface, today I could feel as if I am trying to sell ice cream in the midst of a blizzard. Someone recently said to me, “The fall stewardship program couldn’t occur at a WORSE time.”
- † And I have thought about that statement. At the risk of sounding like a cockeyed optimist, I beg to disagree. It couldn’t occur at a BETTER time. With the economy on everyone’s mind, now more than ever we need to learn and practice God’s principles of financial faithfulness.
- † Interestingly enough, some of these same principles can be applied to financial success, as evidenced by a book that my friend Marianne Niesen told me about. She writes: “A couple years ago, I was browsing through an airport bookstore when the title of a book caught my eye. The Go-Giver by Bob Burg and John David Mann. It was in the business book section but the title intrigued me enough to read the inside flap. “The Go-Giver tells the story of an ambitious young man named Joe who yearns for success. Joe is a true go-getter, though sometimes he feels as if the harder and faster he works, the further away his goals seem to be.” (Sound familiar?)
- † “Joe learns that changing his focus from getting to giving - putting others’ interests first and continually adding value to their lives - ultimately leads to unexpected returns.” I bought the book. The story is told as a kind of parable. Joe meets up with a legendary consultant known as ‘the Chairman’ who agrees to impart his ‘secret to stratospheric success.’ Joe learns that

secret the first time he meets with the ‘Chairman.’ It was a Saturday morning. Joe is amazed that such an important man would meet with him on a Saturday but he is in for even more amazement.

† “There’s nothing wrong with making money. Lots of it, in fact. It’s just not a goal that will make you successful,” the Chairman says . . .”You want to understand success, yes?” Joe nodded.“All right. I’m going to share my Trade Secret with you now. . . (He leaned forward and stated simply.) . . . giving.”

† Joe waited for more, but apparently that was it. “I beg your pardon?. . . Giving?. . . That’s the secret to your success? Your Trade Secret? Giving?. . . “Indeed,” said the Chairman. “That’s too simple . . . is that what you’re thinking?” “Something like that,” Joe admitted sheepishly.

† . . . “Most people have that reaction. In fact, most people just laugh when they hear that the secret to success is giving.” He paused. “Then again, most people are nowhere near as successful as they wish they were.” (There is more conversation and then the Chairman continues . . . ) “Most of us have grown up seeing the world as a place of limitation rather than as a place of inexhaustible treasures. A world of competition rather than one of co-creation.” He saw that Joe was puzzled again. “Dog eat dog. . . that about sum it up?” Joe admitted that it did.

† “Well, it’s simply not true.” And then he goes on to explain that what is true is that you get what you expect in life . . . “Go looking for conflict and you’ll find it. Go looking for people to take advantage of you, and they generally will. See the world as a dog-eat-dog place and you’ll always find a bigger dog looking at you as if you’re his next meal. Go looking for the best in people, and you’ll be amazed at how much talent, ingenuity, empathy and good will you’ll find.

- † Following the initial exchange with Joe, the Chairman agrees that he'll do something more to help him grasp this trade secret - in other words, how giving can change life for him. He'll teach him the 'Five Laws of Stratospheric Success' as long as Joe agrees that, as he learns each of the 'laws' he will put them into practice immediately - before he goes to bed that night. Joe agrees . . . and here are the laws he learned over the course of a week - complete with my shorthand translation for us.
- † 1. The Law of Value: your true worth is determined by how much more you give in value than you take in payment. (That is, worry more about how much you give than what you get.)
- † 2. The Law of Compensation: your income is determined by how many people you serve and how well you serve them. (Wesley said it like this . . . do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, by all the means you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.)
- † 3. The Law of Influence: Your influence is determined by how abundantly you place other people's interest first. (As Wesley said . . . earn all you can, save all you can so you can give all you can away.)
- † 4. The Law of Authenticity: The most valuable gift you have to offer is yourself. (Genuineness and generosity go hand in hand.)
- † 5. The Law of Receptivity: The key to effective giving is to stay open to receiving. (Admit there are things we don't know. Be open to learn, to grow, to move beyond the negative.)
- † Ostensibly, this is a business book. But, if you think about it, its 'trade secret' is a way of life for followers of Jesus since we're actually in the 'giving' business. We're in the business of generosity - not so much because we like it but because that's what Jesus' business was fundamentally about. In other words, the secret of a successful church is not measured by how beautiful our

building is or how excellent our music sounds or even how many people are here.

- † How do we measure our success? We talked about it last week—in how lives are changed and people are healed—in how our children are taught about Jesus, in how we give ourselves away in response to the extravagant generosity of God.
- † How important is this church to you? The church needs you now more than ever. Take out your estimate of giving cards and hold them in your hands. Consider the gifts you can give, both for the operating fund and to pay our mortgage and expand into the future.
- † For Tom and me, filling out this card and placing it on the altar is a powerful act of worship. It may not be so for you. You may want to place your card in the basket by the door on your way out.
- † Statistics show that about 26 % of people think this whole giving to the church business is for the birds. If you are in that percentage, you are loved still.
- † I know from my own experience that there are times in life, because of family issues or medical bills, that we simply can't make a realistic commitment. I understand that, but more importantly, God does. Pray more for us, and use your money for what you need.
- † All that said, remember that we give because Jesus gave to us—everything, even life itself—eternal life in Him. His love for us is perfect. And perfect love casts out fear.
- † In the meantime, Jesus says, don't rely on stuff for your security. There is so much more to life than that. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be, your life be, also.

- † God’s joy is for you to live an abundant life. And what does that life look like? It is a life characterized by faithfulness, by generosity, by forgiveness, by sacrificial love. By joy, friends, compassion, and hope.
- † Jesus teaches us that our security emerges as a by-product of seeking God and living the way of the kingdom. Security cannot be our primary goal. Being safe cannot take priority over being faithful.
- † So what will you give—even in a time of fear in our world? May today be the greatest harvest of blessings for you and for our church. Amen.

Sources:

Marianne Niesen, [www.stpaulshelena.org](http://www.stpaulshelena.org)

“Defined by Generosity,” 10/12/08, Sam Jones Memorial UMC