Extravagantly Giving Saints

Ephesians 1:15-23

Whitefish United Methodist Church

October 30, 2011

- This week the active United Methodist clergy from the Flathead valley gathered to share our lives and stories and ministries. One of our group, Brett, is a new pastor serving in Bigfork, and it so happens he has had more than his share of difficult pastoral situations to deal with in the last few weeks. So we old-timers offered our sage advice, for what it was worth. Which reminds me of a joke.
- A minister, a priest, and a rabbi went fishing together in a small boat. But when they got out in the middle of the lake, the rabbi remembered that he had left his fishing rod on the dock, so he got out of the boat and walked on the water back to the shore.
- A couple of minutes later, the priest's pager went off, and so he needed to get to shore to retrieve his I-Phone as quickly as possible. He, too, got out of the boat and walked on the water back to the shore.
- Finally, the minister said: "I know that my faith is at least as strong as theirs is. So if they can walk on water, surely I also must be able to." But as soon as the minister got out of the boat, he began to sink. And so he pulled himself back into the boat, and tried again.
- But once again, he sank under the water. So back on shore, the priest said to the rabbi, "We'd better tell him where the rocks are before he drowns."

- Today we celebrate All Saints' Day here in the church. Why? Because the saints are people who have shown us where the rocks are. Of course there are fancier definitions for saints than that—official saints, that is. But today I'm not so interested in the big, official saints as I am in the off-the-record saints, the little saints, the every day saints.
- Who are the people whose lives have blessed us and who have shown us where the rocks are? Because our call is to be saints for each other, too. Jesus calls us to get out of the boat and walk on the troubled and treasured waters of our lives.
- And it helps to know where the rocks are! Our saints are the people who help us on that journey, who inspire us and haunt us with their faithfulness. They remind us what is at stake, and what is possible.
- This celebration of All Saints Day just happens to coincide with the first week of our stewardship program, and it's a Sunday when the pastor is supposed to preach on money and giving in anticipation of Consecration Sunday November 13th. It's a sermon that makes me squirm, and I can only imagine how you feel about it.
- This is the sermon that keeps me awake at night. Because talking about money and giving makes me uncomfortable, even though I know it shouldn't—even though Jesus talked about money and possessions and how we use them more than he talked about anything else.
- And then one night, when I was lying awake wondering what I would say this Sunday, a parade of people, living and dead, marched through my head. Now that I think of it, it was as if they were skimming over the water, skipping from rock to rock.

- And there they were, my giving saints. The people who have helped me figure out how to grow in commitment and trust with God—the people who have taught me how to give to God and to God's kingdom.
- "Give, give, give…I knew you would get to that. That's all I ever hear in this church…give, give, give." That's what one parishioner wrote to his pastor, and the pastor's letter came back: Thank you for the best definition of Christianity I ever heard."
- But really, when you think about it, All Saints Day and stewardship do go together like apple pie and ice cream, like mashed potatoes and gravy—can you tell I am looking forward to our marvelous harvest dinner in two weeks?
- Because to my thinking, saints are people who help you know God, grow closer to God. And what better way to trust God than to do it with your treasure? For as the scriptures say, where your treasure is, so is your heart.
- So who are my giving saints? Unlike many of you, I didn't learn good giving habits from my parents. Money, along with religion, was a huge source of conflict in my family. So you can imagine the arguments that swirled around giving to one or the other churches my parents attended.
- There was never enough money to go around, and so giving to the other spouse's church was a horrible source of resentment. Because in our family, there never seemed to be enough of anything—money, status, or trust.
- In my family, we lived with a sense of scarcity, not abundance. And in these financial times, it's tempting for each of us to live that way,

too. A few years ago, that's how I would have reacted to scary periods of financial uncertainty. Of course it's good to be careful and cautious, to figure out what's really important in tough times, but now I am even more committed to giving first to our church—not just because it's where my salary comes from—but because it's where so much important ministry for those who are truly struggling comes from.

- Because I learned about giving from my grandfather, who gave money and time not just to his family, but to help others, especially, during the Great Depression. Thank you, Saint Grandpa.
- And when I started going to church again regularly in Helena, at St. Paul's United Methodist Church, as a young working mother, I first heard about the idea of tithing as something some people in our church actually did for real.
- One young couple, Pat and Rusty Harper, stood up and talked about how they tithed 10 percent of their income off the top, every month. I was impressed, but I rationalized that it was easier for them—they were preachers' kids, after all. They came from professional givers.
- But I remember one day when another young couple in the church shared their faith story in an Emmaus gathering. Carly and Dave Smith had two little girls, and Dave had just been laid off from his job. Carly was having health problems, and they didn't know if they would be able to keep the house that they had just built.
- Their previously safe world was crumbling around them, and they didn't know where to turn, so they turned to God. As a way of clinging to hope and trusting that God would lead them through this

tough time, they decided to tithe ten percent of what little money they had to the church.

- They had a wonderfully supportive community of faith around them in our church, and they wanted to give in gratitude for that. Now I wish I could say that by tithing to the church, Dave got his job back, Carly got better, and everything was hunky dory.
- But it didn't work out that way. They lost the house they had built together—it had to be sold to pay the bills. Carly still struggled with her health. But a funny thing happened. Their faith and commitment to God grew anyway, because they realized how important their church family was to them in that time.
- I remember thinking at that moment of hearing Carly and Dave's story that they were nuts. I admired them, but I thought they had lost the sense God gave them. But how wrong I was. Oh, by the way, fifteen years later, Dave was the lead volunteer contractor in the building of St. Paul's new church, one of the most generous givers of time, skill, and money to the ministries of compassion and mission that come out of that building, that church. Thank you, Saints Dave and Carly.
- You taught me about the riches of God for the saints, as Paul talks about in the scripture reading from Ephesians. "I pray," Paul says, that they eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and God's incomparable power for us who believe."
- The riches of God. When you tithe to your church, or when you give deliberately based on a percentage of your income, you do so with

hope in your wallet. With compassion in your purse. With mission and ministry and trust in your heart.

- Tithing. That is the biblical standard for giving. To tithe is to do two things that go together. First, to decide to give a percentage of your income to God. The Bible talks about giving sheep and goats and wheat, but most of us are paid by cash or check, and our counters might have trouble with a goat—but if that works for you, we'll deal with it!
- Ten percent is the traditional tithe. But that is a guide, a goal—not a directive. The point is the percentage. For some, given your stage in life or your other obligations, ten percent may be too much. For others, it is not nearly enough.
- I love the story about the young couple whose Sunday school class was studying the story of Abraham and Sarah, who in their 90's were blessed with a child, Isaac. "What lesson," the teacher asked, "do we learn from this story?
- The young mother blurted out, "They waited until they could afford it!"
- We laugh because we know that a child changes everything, and that if we waited until everything was in order, and we could afford it—from diapers through college—there would be very few children born in the world.
- Having a child responsibly is a combination of thoughtful planning, selfless loving, and generous faith. And the same is true with giving. If we wait to give—whether that be time, money, ourselves—until the world tells us we have enough, we'll never do it.

- But when we acknowledge that all good things come from God, and that we are wealthy with blessing, the best response is to give in return. Generosity becomes a spiritual discipline, a way to grow in relationship to God.
- The second thing about tithing is that it is something we decide to do ahead of time. In the Bible, the tithe was something that was the best off the top. It doesn't mean giving out of what is left over at the end of the pay period. It means giving first to God, so that it sets the pattern for the rest of your spending.
- You've heard the story about how Tom and I sold our house in Helena that we loved eleven years ago and left behind a great job with a good salary to go to seminary. Even though I got great scholarships, living in Evanston was expensive, and I left seminary $35,000 in debt. I paid off my student loans of almost $400/month when I turned sixty.
- Nuts, you think. Lost the good sense God gave her. I remember being filled with wonder and awe, when the realtor who sold our house for us, a member of our church in Helena, gave the whole commission to the St. Paul's building fund in gratitude for the church's raising up a new pastor. In part, that realtor's witness of giving gave me the strength to go on through really tough financial times. Thank you, Saint Dennis.
- Oh, and by the way, Dennis' daughter Kristen, who lost her mother, a friend of mine, to cancer when Kristen was 8, is now youth group leader in Great Falls Christ UMC, a dean at Flathead Camp, and is heading to Angola with two young pastors in a couple of months to give to the churches there. Generosity seems to beget generosity.

- I wish I could say I had been a tither for a long time, but I haven't. It's only been in the last few years that we have tithed. A few years ago, Tom and I celebrated giving ten percent of our income to God for the first time. It felt really good.
- I wish I could say that as a result of that, our income grew, but it didn't. It declined this year. So even though the amount of our giving is less this year than last, it is a greater percentage of our income. Don't get me wrong, you, the church didn't decrease our income—in fact you gave me a raise—thank you, Saint Church!
- But life happens—we know that. Some years our income—your income—is better than others. Take that into consideration when you prayerfully decide if you can grow this year in your percentage of your income that you give to God.
- Whatever you decide to give at Consecration Sunday in two weeks, or anytime, really, make it a decision between you and God, not you and the treasurer or our financial secretary.
- In a few minutes we will remember the extravagantly giving saints of our lives. And when we do, we are reminded that we share the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in our worship not just with those who are here, but with the saints who have gone before us and who are a part of that great cloud of witnesses that make up the body of Christ.
- Who are the saints that have taught you how to give, how to love, how to grow closer to God? Take the candle you have been given and come down the center aisle, and if you wish, light it from the Christ candle in the sand table. Say the name of the saint or saints you want to remember today in your giving, in your loving.

- Then share with them in prayer with the One who gives us hope, and the riches of the glorious inheritance of eternal life, who give us faith.
- As Paul says, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him….”
- Let us gather with the saints of God, and let us be one too. Amen.