

Whose Apple?

Proverbs 11:24-25; Luke 6:38, The Message

Whitefish UMC

Consecration Sunday

October 25, 2009

- † You may be surprised to hear this fact: most pastors would much rather officiate at a funeral than a wedding. Of course it matters if the person who has died has lived a long and good life—that’s a lot more graceful experience than if someone has died before their time.
- † Why funerals over weddings—at least most of the time? The sad truth is that most weddings revolve around the stuff of the occasion—the dress, the flowers, the food, the gifts, the PHOTOGRAPHS! Everyone is exhausted from dealing with all the details of the stuff.
- † Not so with funerals or memorial services--at least most of the time. When I meet with families to plan a funeral or memorial service for a loved one, I always ask—“Tell me about your loved one? What’s your best memory of them? What defined them as a person?”
- † Even if I knew the individual well, there are wonderful stories that I hear that I never would have expected. Then I ask, “What would your loved one have wanted to be remembered for?” The responses are always interesting and usually beautiful.
- † But sometimes there is an uncomfortable silence. It’s usually because there is a disconnect between how the person would have wanted to be remembered and the reality of their life. It’s a sad and painful moment.

- † Each of these occasions of sitting with the family of someone who has just died reminds me that someday, someone will sit with my family and friends and ask the same questions. What will the answers be? How will I be remembered? How will YOU be remembered?
- † Without being morbid or narcissistic, it can be helpful to consider these questions as you think about your life. One of the defining characteristics I hope you and I will be remembered for is generosity. My hope is that we would learn the truth of Winston Churchill's famous words, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."
- † God created us in God's own image—male and female—and God created us to give, just as God gives abundantly to us. But there are two voices that war against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep or hoard what we have.
- † As Adam Hamilton writes in Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity, the first voice is the voice of fear, which tells us, *If you give, there may not be enough left over for you*. We are afraid to be generous because we are afraid of what might happen to us.
- † *What if we don't have enough to fill the gas tank or buy groceries or pay the bills?* Fear, along with a misplaced idea about the true source of our security, keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have. But the truth is that hoarding offers us no real security in this world.
- † When we came to Whitefish almost nine years ago, our new church building was in the midst of construction. Although the congregation was small at the time, nearly everyone in it gave "more than they

could afford,” to see that there would be a church for the future families who grace our fellowship now.

- † In 2001, Tom had received an inheritance from his family in Ohio. We had more money than we had ever had, so we wanted to contribute to the church’s future. We paid for the fireplace to be built and installed in the Fireside Room.
- † Guess what? All of that inheritance money is gone now—Tom lent significant amounts to people in need, yet a lot of it just slowly disappeared without our really keeping track—but the fireplace is still there! Had we not given for the fireplace, that money would be gone, too! But now every time I turn it on and youth or knitters or Bible studiers enjoy it, I am thankful.
- † All the people who gave sacrificially to build this church knew that we were created to give, not to hoard. They knew that hoarding their money not only would have been futile, it would have been fruitless.
- † The second voice is the voice of self-gratification, which tells us, *If you give, you won’t have enough money to buy the stuff you need to make you happy.* Our culture tells us that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions and pleasurable experiences.
- † So we find ourselves thinking, If I give, there won’t be enough left for me. We do the math and realize that 10 percent of our income could buy a new car or a bigger or remodeled house—or whatever else we have our eyes set on. Before long we have convinced ourselves that we need those things to make us truly happy.
- † But as we learned last week, there comes a point where an increasing amount of stuff produces a diminishing return of happiness and satisfaction. We feel unfulfilled, so we buy more stuff, but when

we're still not content, it continues what one writer calls "the wheel of death."

- † So, how do we defeat the voices of fear and self-gratification? In one important sense, they are defeated the moment we really put our faith in Jesus. When we give our lives to Christ, invite him to be Lord of our life, and allow the Holy Spirit to begin changing us from the inside out, we find that our fears begin to diminish and our desires shift from pleasing ourselves to pleasing God and serving others.
- † Of course that doesn't mean we aren't tempted to focus on ourselves—heaven knows our culture does that every day—it just means that another voice begins to speak in our heart and head. Because, remember, one of the fruits of the Spirit growing in us, Paul says, is generosity.
- † So our giving—both to God and to others—is actually a measure of our spiritual growth, because giving requires that we trust God to supply our needs. And as the Holy Spirit changes our focus from ourselves to others, we begin to see the needs of others and wonder, *If I don't do something, who will?*
- † And when this starts to happen, we experience real joy. Let me tell you about our best friends. When I was in seminary and our son was in college and we were really struggling financially, it seemed that whenever things were really hard, some kind of generous gift would come from these friends just in the nick of time. It was as if they knew when we needed them—not just their money, but their care and support—the most.
- † Lately, through a series of bad economic coincidences, they are suffering without sufficient funds to get by. Their son, one of our

son's closest friends and a musician and student living in New York, wouldn't be able to come home for the holidays because there just isn't any money.

- † So as a surprise for our friends, *our* son and Tom and I are getting a ticket so their son can come home. Can you imagine how much joy it gives us just thinking about the holidays now? This is what Jesus meant when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."
- † In the very act of giving ourselves away, we find life, just as Jesus said. Because life is a gift, and everything belongs to God.
- † As Adam Hamilton says, even your capacity to acquire wealth is a gift from God. You didn't bring any of it with you when you came into this world, and you won't take any of it with you when you leave.
- † In his wonderful book *When the Game is Over it All Goes Back in the Box*, John Ortberg says that at the end of our lives, everything goes back in the box—a box about six and a half feet long and three feet wide, to be exact. Or in these times of cremains—a little urn-shaped box. (You Can't Take It With You!)
- † Last week Abby spoke so eloquently of giving the first fruits of her time and attention to God. What does that mean? From the early days of the Old Testament, God's people observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had to God.
- † A gift offered to God was called the *first fruits* or the *tithe*, and it equaled one tenth of one's flocks or crops or income. Abraham was the first of our biblical ancestors to give a tithe, and at the time of Moses, the tithe was codified into law.
- † As Christians who live under the new covenant, we know that we are not bound by the law of Moses but instead look to it as a guide. For

most of us, a gift of 10 percent, or first fruits, to God is our goal. Some of us are there, most of us aren't.

- † Tithing can be challenging for many of us. It can be a stretch, especially when those voices of fear and self-gratification are loud. One pastor, David Slagle, uses apples to illustrate this struggle. He invites us to imagine that God has given us ten apples, which represent our wealth or income.
- † God tells us that nine apples are ours to enjoy. We are to use some to care for our families and for ourselves, some to save for retirement, and some to give away to others. But the tenth apple is holy to God.
- † Giving this apple to God first, before we consume the other nine apples, is a way to express praise, love, obedience, faithfulness, worship, and devotion to God. This also serves to supply the resources for God's purposes to be accomplished in the world through God's church.
- † Pastor Slagle then says that our lifestyles are such that, for many of us, nine apples are not enough anymore. We think, *How can I pay the bills and have all the stuff I want with just nine apples?* So we decide the Lord will not mind if we take just a little bit of God's apple.
- † After all, there's that trip we want to take, and it's really important. So we take a bite out of God's apple—the one that is holy to God and meant to be used for God's purposes.
- † "The Lord will understand," we think. Then Christmas comes and we don't have enough money for presents, so we take another bite out of God's apple. One day a medical emergency comes up, and because we didn't save enough in an emergency fund, we must take another bite from God's apple—God will understand.

- † Stuff happens. And each one takes a bite out of God's apple. Soon all that is left is the core. So we give the core to God and say, "Here's your portion, Lord." God gets not our first fruits or our best gifts, but the leftovers.
- † That's the way I lived for a long time. I didn't like it, and it made me feel guilty. Then I started wondering if God must think, "You could really bless me if you recognized that this apple is mine and gave it to me freely—not because somebody made you feel guilty, but just because you love me."
- † And a strange thing happened. I tried tithing—having my check to the church be the first one I wrote when I got paid. And you know, I wasn't tempted to eat God's apple, because it wasn't there. And with God's help, I found a way to make the other nine apples meet our needs.
- † From my own experience, I know it is challenging to tithe. It's scary. Risky. Crazy in these times? Maybe it is just not possible for you to begin giving ten percent to God right now. But I pray that you will take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can give 2 percent or 5 percent or 7 percent. God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more generous.
- † That's what happened to me. When I first got here—actually until just two years ago—I had \$400 a month in seminary loans to pay off. I figured at first that I couldn't give ten percent of my income to the church AND pay \$400 a month in seminary loans.
- † But gradually each year we increased our pledge and giving to more than 10 percent of our gross income. And guess what, there were still

- enough apples left for us. I am embarrassed to say that we just did our income taxes for 2008. But in a way it's helpful for me to see where we are in our giving just as the fall stewardship campaign kicks in.
- † For a variety of reasons, my salary has not increased since 2007, largely because of increased health insurance costs. Although I am taking home less money, we have increased our pledge every year. We also give about 4 percent of our income to other charitable organizations. I know that there are lots of ways to give to others.
 - † Why do I tell you these uncomfortable facts? Believe me, it is hard. But I do it so that you know that we do practice what I preach. And it is important that you know that.
 - † For all that we give, we have received so much more, just as this morning's scripture says. Not in economic prosperity, but in joy and gratitude. On October 4th, when you surprised me with notes of appreciation, I was speechless.
 - † But now I want to share a quotation that Bill and Jeannie Marcure sent me in a sweet card: *We are taught that winning and achieving are about getting and keeping, when the truth is that winning is about giving. Winners are go-givers, not go-getters...*
 - † *While it is hard to fathom living a life of giving when everyone else is on the take, there is an ancient law which ensures that if we did, we would never go without.*
 - † That ancient law is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Won't you choose a life as a "go-giver?" Begin today, with God's help.
 - † (People come forward with their pledges, to music.)
 - † Close with song and benediction.