

ONE PURE GIFT
Consecration Sunday –November 16, 2014 –Romans 5: 6-11 &15-17
The Church of the Covenant

I was a member of a civic group many years ago that had a 50-50 raffle as part of each meeting. Each member was expected to take a turn taking the spittoon and the oogah-oogah horn around and selling 50-50 raffles tickets. It came time for me to do it and everyone in the club was holding their breath – would the preacher do it? --or would he go all righteous and holy on it? I did sell the tickets to an audible sigh of relief. One evening I was in particularly fine form and went up to the head table to sell a 50-50 raffle ticket to the speaker, who happened to be some grand high poobah of the organization, only I didn't know it, and not only did I sell him a ticket but I also put my hand over it and prayed over it that it would win. Well, much to my embarrassment he won. And as he got up to speak he said, "Preacher, I don't know what church you serve but I want to go to your church!"

My topic for today is what's the difference between fund-raising and Christian Stewardship? I have no beef with fundraising, indeed it often is fun and engaging, but I don't think, as I have thought about it over the years, that it is the same thing as Christian, Biblical Stewardship. Christian Biblical Stewardship is about giving ONE PURE GIFT to God. Fundraising is about giving to get something.

Secular fundraising is like a 50-50 raffle; you participate in something to get something in return. Maybe you will the raffle. All of which is fine. There's nothing wrong with it. Its just not Christian Biblical Stewardship. I'm not criticizing it; I'm just distinguishing it. You will not find the disciples conducting a 50-50 raffle in the Book of Acts.

Secular fundraising invariably recognizes the donor. There are plaques with names on them lining the walls of hospitals. The United Way publishes its lists of significant donors. There are special events that honor specific donors. We don't do all that much in the church. Because fundraising is about giving in order to get something and public recognition is receiving something for your gift. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, discussing exactly this says, "*They have their reward.*" (Matthew 6: 2) He says: "*Your charitable deed may be in secret and your father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.*" (v. 4) We get our reward here on earth or we get our reward in heaven –why would we publish your name on a list and take away your blessing?

Secular fundraising cultivates high end donors and pretty much forgets the rest of us. It befriends people of means in order to encourage them to give large gifts. Is the cultivation and the befriending sincere? I would hope so. Or is it in order to promote giving a large gift? Its being nice in order to obtain a nice gift. In the church I don't know what people give and I don't want to know what people give. I want to treat everyone the same. So when I'm nice to you its because I'm really nice to you; I'm not trying to get something out of you. I'm not trying to give something to you to get something out of you. By accident over the years (and generally this is because someone tells me what they give) I have discovered that sometimes the person who lives in the big house gives next to nothing and the little widow lady who drives the old beat up Plymouth is your largest church contributor. But I'm not hawking a 50-50 raffle here; I'm telling you about new life in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the Good News of the Gospel, in something that has eternal benefits, in something that will give your life meaning and significance, in a new way of being that is unlike the world.

So I have told you some of the things that Christian Biblical Stewardship is NOT, so now may I tell you some of the things that it IS. First, it is a *spiritual discipline*, just like prayer or study or service. It is

about being a disciple of Jesus, not about raising funds for the church. Second, it asks that it be the first *priority* of how we spend our money. The Bible speaks of “*first fruits*”; we give first and then spend the rest on ourselves; we do not spend everything on ourselves and then give to God the crumbs left on our table. We give a pure gift to God. Third, it entails *sacrifice*. In the Old Testament the sacrifice was to be a “*lamb without blemish*”, something that cost someone something; it entailed sacrifice on the giver’s part. Lastly, the Bible speaks of *proportionality*, thinking in terms of percentage gifts, a tithe being the Old Testament standard, a tithe being 10% of what we have received. But the point was to think in terms of priority and proportionality and sacrifice. These are hallmarks of Christian Biblical Stewardship.

I love our scripture for today. It says, “*While we were yet helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.*” (Romans 5: 6) We don’t give something to God and because we do then God has to give us salvation and eternal life in return. Nope. Long before we had ever done even one good thing, or given any gift, God has His only begotten Son hang and die on a cross for us. He gave a gift to us, long before we ever knew we needed to give gifts to Him. And what a gift it was! It was the pure, spotless, without sin, Lamb of God, sacrificed for us at Calvary. There was no guarantee that anyone would give their life to God because God gave His Son’s life to us. No giving to get. It was the first fruit of God’s heart. It was a percentage, but it was 100% of God’s heart given to us. Just one pure gift. And then our scripture goes on to say, that the one free gift of God given to us through Jesus Christ allows us to receive the “*abundance of grace*” and the “*free gift of righteousness*” reigning in us through the gift we have received through “*the ONE MAN Jesus Christ.*” (Romans 5: 17) The one pure gift has come through the one man, Jesus Christ. We have an abundant life, we have the gift of righteousness, we have the free gift of heaven and of eternal life. We have life, new life, abundant life and eternal life through the ONE FREE AND PURE GIFT WE HAVE RECIVED THROUGH JESUS CHRIST. The gift we have been given tells us the gift we are to give.

I like to envision it this way. There is a great confab going on in heaven between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the Trinity. God has despaired of His plan to win the hearts of humankind through the law alone. “I have sent prophets whom they have not listened to and stoned to death.” “I have sent the law to guide, but it has been ignored.” But the heart of man has not changed; it is still self-centered, selfish, about wanting what it wants above all else. It can even take something like giving and turn it into something like giving to get; it can take what might be a selfless act and turn it selfish and about its own ego. What shall we do? And the Trinity agrees that the Son will go and bestow one more gift upon the people of the earth. This gift is not the law, nor the Word of God, nor the prophets. He will give His own life as a pure gift. But then they discuss together –but will anyone get it? Will it finally break through humanity’s heart of stone? Will they understand that the gift has been given expecting nothing in return? Maybe Jesus dies and no one sees and no one cares and no one gives a gift to God for the gift God has modeled to them. Maybe no one will love God because God has loved them. Maybe the human spirit just cannot understand a gift where there is nothing expected in return. We have tried the law, says God, let us now try grace. We have tried the prophets, says Jesus, let us now try the Son of God. We have tried to change the human heart from outside, says the Spirit, we will now change the human heart from within. One pure gift given in love at Calvary –the highest and best expression of Christian Biblical Stewardship ever.

It’s not about money; it’s about love.

It is true that all giving is confidential in the church. There will be no plaques commemorating the 25 top givers this year at The Church of the Covenant. It is true, I do not know what you give and I do not want to know what you give. But it is also true that there is a day coming when, as the Bible says, the books

are opened, our heart is weighed in the balance, the ledger of our life is laid bare in the presence of Jesus Christ, and we must look HIM directly in the eye and give an accounting. What is done in secret, one day shall be proclaimed from the rooftops of heaven. And not only what we give, but the very intentions of our heart in our giving will be known by all. Give to get or give purely to express our love?

Beloved, don't give to a church budget. Don't give to fund the Christian Ed program or to put a new roof on the bell tower or to sponsor worship, as important as all this is. Don't be a blessing in order to get a blessing. Don't even give to one day get into heaven. Expecting nothing in return, just give ONE PURE GIFT of your life as Jesus has given ONE PURE GIFT of His. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*

I dedicate this sermon to the glory of God and to the clear, precise, unwavering, Biblical principles of Christian Stewardship I have learned through my friend and church member, Mr. John Williamson. He has been to me, one pure gift.