

2 Corinthians 8:1-7, 9:6-7

This Grace of Giving

October 16, 2011

Maple Grove UMC

Well, you've probably all received your 2012 pledge cards by now, and in this worship series we've already covered the membership vows about prayers and presence, which means it's time to talk about participating in the ministries of the church by our *gifts*. That means this must be the annual stewardship sermon, which most people look forward to about as much as a trip to the dentist. In fact, I'm surprised so many of you are actually here this morning. You probably didn't read the newsletter, so you didn't know what the topic was this morning, and once you got here you didn't know how to make your exit politely.

I've always gotten the idea that I'm supposed to try soften you up with this sermon, so that when you fill out your pledge card, you'll write down a bigger number. Which means that most people are actually expecting this sermon to be less about stewardship—which is a theological, spiritual and long-term matter—than about fundraising—which is practical, financial and short-term.

Now let me say right up front that while I intend to preach a *stewardship* sermon this morning, I see nothing wrong with

fundraising on behalf of the church. I do it unashamedly, if perhaps not very well. And right here in the short term, as a practical and financial matter, I believe there are two very good reasons to give, in fact to increase our giving to Maple Grove Church, which is what fundraising is about, right? Getting more money.

1. First, it is important to increase our giving in order to overcome what I think can rightly be called a financial crisis in the church. Maple Grove's operating budget has declined each year since 2008. The associate pastor position has been eliminated, the hours of the youth director have been cut, the remaining staff have had minimal pay increases, and at the end of last year for the first time in recent memory Maple Grove was unable to meet our apportionments, the money we pay to support mission and ministry in West Ohio and around the world. We're more or less on track to meet our reduced budget for this year, but I know that Maple Grove would like to get out of crisis mode.

2. But second and more important, more money will make possible more ministry and a bigger vision. The Church Council and I haven't had time yet to map out priorities for new ministries. But here are a few things I've heard people talk about:

- People want new ministries for children, youth and families—maybe an intergenerational retreat or mission trip, an after-school tutoring or mentoring program, more music opportunities for children and youth, more programs about parenting. And none of that's in the budget.
- When a ministry team wants to do something, like helping with the secret Santa program at Indian Springs school, or sending flowers to our members in nursing homes, or providing underwear and socks for homeless folks in the Short North, or when the staff wants to help a church member at risk of foreclosure, wouldn't it be great if we didn't have to bang the drum and pass the hat, but there was money in the budget for the things God calls us to do? Wouldn't that be great?
- Just one more: food. I've heard people say attendance is always higher at Sunday school when there's breakfast (especially bacon!). So why not serve breakfast? I've heard families say it's easier to come to evening events if they don't have to make dinner at home first. It's just

some food, maybe a little something for the cook once in a while. Probably not a lot. But it's not in the budget.

If we collectively increase our giving, our ministries can increase too. When it comes right down to it, we are deciding when we fill out our pledge cards how much ministry Maple Grove can do. And for our part, despite the uncertain economy and still paying for a home on the East side, Carolyn and I have decided to increase our pledge over what we are giving this year. We will give 10% and then some. We have decided. What will you decide?

Now that was a fundraising speech. Again, I am not ashamed to ask for money so Maple Grove can be the hands and feet of Christ.

But my real interest this morning is not in fundraising but in stewardship. The point of stewardship is not just to raise more money for the church, though stewardship does have that effect over the long term. The point of stewardship is to learn to use the money God has entrusted to us ever more faithfully, to develop the attitude and habit of generosity in all of life.

Now being a spiritual genius, the apostle Paul managed to do fundraising and teach stewardship all at the same time. Several

years into his ministry, Paul found himself in charge of a giant international fundraising campaign to help poor Christians in Jerusalem. (He was probably out of the room when the committee picked a chairperson.) It was a huge operation. Paul mentions it in several of his letters. The Christians in Corinth apparently were early and enthusiastic pledgers to this campaign. The only problem was that early and enthusiastic as their pledge was . . . they hadn't paid yet. So Paul writes to, uh, remind them.

But unlike the church, which usually responds to unmet pledges by mailing a financial statement, Paul wrote to the Corinthians and, well, buttered them up. "I rejoice," he writes in chapter 7, "because I have complete confidence in you." Again in chapter 9 he writes, "I know I don't even need to write to you about this offering, because I know how eager you are." Always be positive, right?

And rather than putting the Corinthians down for not paying up, he instead tells them about the Macedonians. Paul had asked everyone, I mean everyone, to make a contribution to this cause. Everyone, that is, except for the believers in Macedonia. The Macedonians, he knew, were pretty strapped themselves. They'd been badly treated by the Romans and taxed even more than others.

The economy there was terrible. “Let’s don’t even ask the Macedonians for anything,” he said. “They don’t have much to give; it might just embarrass them to be asked.”

But here’s what happened, he tells the Corinthians: the Macedonians “begged us earnestly for the privilege of taking part in this offering.” Despite the Macedonians’ poverty, Paul tells the Corinthians, they overflowed in a wealth of generosity. They gave not only according to their means, he wrote, but beyond their means. And here’s how Paul sums it up to the Corinthians: we want you too to excel in what one translation calls “this generous undertaking,” but another translation calls it “this grace of giving.” We just want you to have the privilege, he tells them, of making an offering; we want you to have a chance to participate in the grace of giving.

Oh, Paul mentions the reason for giving, as I did earlier—in that case, the needs of their brother sisters in Jerusalem. He does remind them that giving is an obligation, not an option, for God’s people. If you read all of 2 Corinthians 8-9, you’ll see that Paul isn’t above emotional pleas and even a little manipulating for the cause of Christ. But mostly, more than anything else, Paul just wants to make sure

the Corinthians know the joy, the goodness, the grace of giving to God and God's people.

Most children, while they can also be downright selfish at times, also know the grace of giving instinctively. Think about Christmas. For us parents, we certainly want to give good gifts to our children, and many of us in fact give gifts that are too good (or at least too expensive) to our children. We spend too much, and then have conflicted feelings about the gifts—"You kids better enjoy those toys. They don't grow on trees, you know!"

But have you ever watched as parents open gifts from their children? The child jumps up and down, full of excitement, shouting, "Open mine! Open mine!" And when you pull out the ornament they made at school or the melted candy bar they bought with their very own money, you get to exclaim, "Oh honey, I love it! What exactly is it? I mean, it's just what I wanted!" And they jump up and down again and give you a great big hug. As much as kids love getting presents, kids also know the excitement of giving to someone else.

So next time we pass the offering plates, maybe there should be a little tussle over the ushers—"Take my envelope! No let me put

my offering in next!” And we’ll open them up and say, “Look \$100! It’s just what we wanted!” And you can jump up and down in your pews and we’ll give each other great big hugs. We can learn from our children—it is exciting to get to give to others.

Years ago as fall came around the church I was serving was running short on meeting the budget. (You know, of course, that Maple Grove is not the first church to encounter that problem, nor will it be the last.) One of the things we decided to do was to send out letters asking for money. But we didn’t send them to the members. We sent them to people who didn’t attend that church, but to people who knew about the church and appreciated the ministry there, and might be willing to support it with a gift. We sent out about 60 or 70 letters, and got 8 or 10 checks back in the mail—not a bad percentage. It totaled over \$2000, and it helped that year.

One check was from my friends in Atlanta, Karen and Susie. They’d visited my church a handful of times, but of course, being out of state they would never really be part of that church. In fact, Karen and Susie aren’t really church-goers at all. But they sent a check for \$1000—as much, actually, as some members gave. And they’ve

given to whatever church I serve every year since. Karen sent a note with her check that first year, and I still remember what it said, word for word. Karen wrote: “We love your church, Glenn. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to make a contribution.”

Thank you, she said, for the opportunity to give. Now I suspect Karen hadn't read the eighth chapter of 2 Corinthians in a long time. But it was in her heart, wasn't it? The Macedonians begged for the privilege of sharing in the offering for Jerusalem. And Karen thanked me for giving them the opportunity to give my church \$1000. Giving, you see, is not so much a responsibility as a privilege, not a burden but an opportunity.

Once again, there is nothing wrong with fundraising on behalf of the church. I do it unashamedly. But this sermon is not about how much money you should give to the church—a little, a lot, or in between. This is a sermon on how you think and feel about giving it. It is a privilege to give to our church, an opportunity to participate in its ministries. This is a sermon about what Paul called this grace, this grace, this grace of giving.