

The Blessedness of Giving
Acts 20:32-35

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In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Acts 20:35

During the weeks of August we are thinking about what a church needs if it is to recover well from this enduring time of separation. So far we have said that in order to recover well a church and its people need to be unashamed of the faith, willing to draw from both the old and the new, and ready to share with one another personal testimony of how God has touched life. Today I enter the pulpit to make the point that a church that recovers is a church in which its people practice good stewardship and live by the words of Jesus quoted by the Apostle Paul: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Shortly after the beginning of the quarantine someone from my hometown started a Facebook group designed for those of us who grew up in the fifties and sixties to share memories of living there when we were a population of 1100 and everyone pretty much knew everyone. A number of Roman Catholics joined in a long string of comments about the local priest, Father Dudley Day, who served in our town for decades. Many of my immediate classmates and those older and younger complained that Father Day's sermons, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, were diatribes telling the people to dig deeper into their pockets and give more to the church.

I have tried over the decades not to do that to you, though I haven't been ashamed to teach about money or to appeal for funds when necessary. And I am happy to say that whenever I approached the subject of giving, whether in the pulpit or through a letter, I could know I was addressing people who believe in the maxim Paul says comes from the lips of Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

A church that is in a position to recover well from this long period of separation is a church that is composed of spiritually healthy people. People who are spiritually healthy love to give to the best of their ability.

You love to give and I believe you prove it by your gifts. Your gifts to the church, whether sent electronically or through the mail, have been steady and true all through the pandemic. So I sense I am preaching to the choir, as it were, when I remind you "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

You know that the blessedness of giving to the church is that it makes the gospel known.

Supporting the church financially helps make the gospel known through the preaching of the word. The founding families of Salem made it plain in the new church's Articles of Incorporation that the first aim of this congregation was to provide for the preaching of the word.

That aim continues in the stated purpose of the congregation as given in our current Constitution, and the Bylaws of our church name pulpit leadership as the first requirement of its pastor. And so you provide for me so that I am free to give my time to study and to prayer toward discerning the word the Still Speaking God has for today. And then you come, as a king once came to the prophet Jeremiah of old, and you ask, “Is there any word from the Lord?” (Jer. 37:17) And you hope I have for you some lesson from scripture that interprets life today in a way that will help you imagine the presence of the goodness and greatness of God in your life. That is the preaching of the word and, in practical terms, your financial gifts to the church make it possible.

Supporting the church financially helps make the gospel known through the singing of the faith. The people of Salem appreciate the prose of the spoken and the written word yet relish the beauty of the word when it is set to music, whether the music is that of instrumentals or that of the human voice. Way back in the book of 2 Chronicles there is the story of a worship service when the glory of the Lord appeared the moment trumpets sounded and the choir began its anthem. (2 Chr. 5:13-14) Johann Sebastian Bach read that story in Chronicles and wrote in the margin of his Bible right next to it, “Where there is devotional music, God is always at hand with his gracious presence.”¹ You people know that and feel it and believe it to be true, and so you give of your means gladly to provide for the work of singers and musicians and their directors, for singing the faith, like the preaching of the word, makes the gospel known.

Supporting the church financially helps make the gospel known through the teaching of the Bible. You wish to provide for classrooms as well as for the pulpit and the choir loft. Since the days of the Old Testament the people of God have been under the command to teach. You remember the command, I am sure: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The command goes on to say, “Keep these words . . . Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” (Dt. 6:5-7) You are a people who own that responsibility of making the gospel known through teaching, and so you provide for a Sunday School, staffed with a Director of Christian Education, where lessons from the Bible can be shared, applied, and where people of all ages can engage in life-long learning under God.

You know the blessedness of giving to the church: it makes the gospel known through the preaching of the word, the singing of the faith, and the teaching of the Bible.

You know that the blessedness of giving to the church is that it helps justice to be done.

With many in our denomination and others, you hold in reverence the teaching of Micah 6:8: God “has told you . . . what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Believing that to be true, Salem is a church that engages in mission, both in hands-on labor and through the giving of gifts to aid the work of others.

Through your gifts to the mission of our church, you are at work well below the southern border of our country. The economy is shattered down in Honduras, and that is breaking the hope and the peace and the safety of the people there, causing many to make the dangerous trek north in search of a better life. Our mission partners in Honduras see that one way to safeguard life and

¹ Quoted in Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers* (Nashville: Sparrow Press, 1992), p. 15.

promote a culture of peace is to strengthen the Honduran economy. So they are teaching the trades in vocational education. But there is a shortage of teachers. Starting in Lent, you began collecting coins to provide scholarships to sustain students learning to be vocational education teachers who in turn can strengthen the economy of the country they love and promote its peace. That is the work of God, and you are doing it in the name of God through your Coins for CEVER.

Here at home, through your gifts to the mission of our church, and through your hands-on labor, you are addressing the issue of food security through Salem's support of the food pantry and all the efforts of the Badger Prairie Needs Network we helped start. More recently, a number of you are working to supply masks, particularly for children here in Dane County. And our Women's Guild regularly goes to jail! Sometime last year they heard of how their gifts helped build a sweat lodge at a prison here in Wisconsin which Native American inmates could use to connect with their faith and strengthen their spirits.

More broadly, through an item in Salem's budget called "Our Church's Wider Mission" (OCWM), you are joining with partners throughout the United Church of Christ across our nation and throughout the world in addressing every major issue now affecting men and women, boys and girls.

This work of doing justice is the work of God, and you are doing it through your financial gifts to the mission of our church. The blessedness of giving to the church is that it makes the gospel known and helps justice be done.

You know that the blessedness of giving to the church is that it brings people together in Christian fellowship.

These days we state that the mission of our church is to
Witness to the word and work of Jesus so all people may
know the welcome of God
worship with joy
grow as disciples
live as servants,
and know the strength of Christian fellowship
all to the glory of God.

Particularly during the pandemic, we have been laying special stress on helping people know the strength of Christian fellowship.

Your generous gifts to the church have made it technologically possible for Salem to host Zoom and other Internet meetings bringing together fellowship groups of women, men, children, youth, and keeping our classes going and our choirs connected.

Meanwhile, your generous gifts have also provided additional much-needed postage so our church can continue to reach our members without the Internet in their lives.

I have said all this to affirm you, and to help you grow in your appreciation of the blessedness of giving, all for the sake of the ongoing strength of our church, helping Salem to

recover well from our time of separation. The blessedness of giving, at least your giving to the church, is the joy of knowing all that your gifts accomplish. Your financial gifts to the work of the church make the gospel known, do the work of justice, and bring to others the strength of Christian fellowship. Thank you for all that you give. And may you continue to practice and enjoy the blessedness of giving.