

"A SERMON ON THE AMOUNT"

Stewardship Sermon by the Rev. Richard G. Leavitt.
October 24, 2010
The Congregational Church of Amherst, NH (UCC)
Texts: 2 Cor. 8:1-7; 9:6-8, 11-12.

My wallet is too thick! That's right; I've got too much money in it. Besides the money, I've got too many credit cards and debit cards, my Shaws Rewards card, my Rite Aid Wellness Benefits card, my Petco Pals card, My Best Buy Reward Zone card, my WGBH membership card, my CVS and Best of Bob's and D'Angelos cards that earn me points, my UCC prescription card, and my AMC mountain club card. I've got my library card, my driver's license, and several pictures of my wife and kids. My wallet is so thick in fact that my chiropractor has warned me about keeping it in my back pocket because it tilts my hips when I sit down and it throws my spine and pelvis all out of joint. My wallet is too thick because I'm rich. But you want to know something, so are you! Some of us forget that occasionally, because we can always point to someone who has more than we do. But I'm here to remind you today that you and I are incredibly rich and blessed beyond belief.

The world will try to remind you how poor you are. All around you there are messages that you don't have enough. You don't have enough in the bank, you could lose your job next week, your clothes aren't stylish enough, your house needs work, you don't have enough saved for your kids' education, and you're kidding if you think you have enough for your retirement. You're sure to need a new I-pad or a Smarter Phone or a better car just to keep up. And what if you fall on the ice this winter and suddenly have huge medical bills, are you prepared? How about if your roof starts leaking or the transmission in your car gives out in the middle of Manchester? Do you have enough?

I believe the question of the day for us, but also for our world, is this: How much is enough? Is there ever a point in our lives where we say, what we have is enough? "Enough" is a value word. It only has meaning in relation to something else. Enough, compared to what? When it comes to how much money we earn or how much we save or how much we contribute to support our church, we must compare it to something. If we earn enough to pay the mortgage and the bills and little else, is that enough? If we earn enough to pay every cent of our kid's college tuition at MIT without financial aid, is that enough? How about if we earn enough to do all that plus drive a comfortable car and own a second home in the mountains or at the shore? What is enough? \$50,000 a year? \$100,000? \$200,000? And when we think about supporting the ministries of our church, what is enough? Giving more than we did last year? Ranking among the top 10 givers of the church? Giving more than we do to any other charity that we believe is important? How do we determine what God wants us to give? How do we define "enough"?

I've always been moved by Paul's description of the Christians in Macedonia when he wrote to the church in Corinth. "During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity.... They voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints." Can't you just picture this poor, weary bunch of Macedonians begging Paul to let them contribute an offering! "Oh, please, please, let us help out. No, it won't be a hardship. We WANT to be a part of this effort. We're eager to share what we have. It pleases God and it gives us great joy! We're begging you; let us send an offering, please!" The amazing thing about these Macedonians is their ability to perceive poverty as abundance. What they had was so little, yet they understood it as so much.

--A one year old gleefully shares his plastic rings, grinning as he hands them willingly to his mother or father.

--A room full of delegates at the NH Conference annual meeting yesterday (around 300 people) pass the plate for flood relief in Pakistan and immediately raise \$4000.

--A host of volunteers from our church go over to Anne Marie house about every six weeks to help at the shelter for homeless families in transition.

That, my friends, is what it's truly all about!

When we think and act and doubt and hoard out of a sense of scarcity we have missed the abundance of God's blessings. We are truly so rich! And out of those riches, we're invited to share with those who have less, not so we will fall into hardship, but so all of us will experience a taste of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our call to generosity is as much for our sake as it is for those who will receive our gifts. Generosity heals the world's spiritual blindness. We live in an age where most of our pursuits involve building up our assets and protecting our possessions, gathering more in order to guarantee our security in the future. How terribly short-sighted! How tragically empty! How pitifully far from the Kingdom of Heaven!

As I said earlier, "enough" is a value word, and how we respond to it speaks more loudly about what we really believe to be important than anything we might say. I once heard a wise preacher say that if you look at someone's appointment book (or Blackberry scheduler) it will tell you how that person values time. But it's also true that looking at someone's checkbook (or credit card statement) will tell you how that person values money and possessions.

Sometimes new members in the congregation ask me how much they should give to the church. How much are the dues, they want to know. They're happy to contribute their fair share, but they'd feel a lot more comfortable if someone would tell them how much that is. I never give them an easy answer. I tell them about the Biblical teaching with regards to tithing—a tithe is 10% of a person's income. I can see them swallow hard as they quickly start doing the mental math. Then I talk to them about percentage giving, even if it might not be a full 10% that they're able to give. They relax a little, but the mental gears are still whirring. I'm honest with them about the expenses and good works and mission opportunities of this congregation, and I explain that it's the members alone who are financially responsible for what this church brings in and what we're able to spend on God's work. But I also tell them this is all really beside the point. You see, in a way that runs counter to almost every other financial transaction in your daily life, your covenant membership here is not about getting the best deal. It's not about getting the most from your church and paying as little as you can for it. It's about sharing your abundance because you're so grateful to have so much. Every time Andrea sends out a financial statement from the church office there's a disclaimer at the bottom which is there for the IRS, I know. But it always makes me smile just the same. "Unless otherwise noted," it says, "the only goods or services provided are intangible religious benefits." Intangible religious benefits?! What kind of a deal is that? You mean I can't even measure what I'm getting for my money? At the supermarket I know value when I see it. At the car dealership and the theatre and the clothing store I know when I'm getting a good deal. But at my church all I get is intangible religious benefits? Sounds like chasing wind to me!

Whether you give 2% of your income or 5% or 10% is really your decision; it's a matter between you and God. I can't tell you or anyone else when enough is enough. Some of you may be thinking, "I know when enough is enough. And *you* talking about *my* money is enough! I've already made up my mind what I'm going to pledge--same as last year--so save your breath." I'm not going to let you off the hook that easily! We're not

going to send you the complete Chancel Choir CD- set if you give an extra thousand dollars this year. We're not going to put your name on the Golden Angel Honor Roll if you're one of the top 10 givers in the church. All you get is "intangible religious benefits," and that's it! But the subject is really much more important than any dollar amount you or I can quickly decide and scribble down on a card for the Stewardship Committee. At stake here is not just our hard earned cash, but our faith and our values. You see, you and I need to give-- and not just because we're trying to meet a budget either. We need to give because that's the way God made us. God made us to be incredibly generous, just like God is, and we can't help it. To be our fullest selves we simply have to be generous. If we aren't, we will wither out of stinginess, or burst from what I like to call "acquisitivitis."

Frederick Buechner points out a great irony about the way many of us live today: "There are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up." He goes on: "Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Maybe the reason is not that the rich are so wicked they're kept out of the place but that they're so out of touch with reality they can't see it's a place worth getting into."

Over the next few Sundays the Stewardship Committee has arranged for a stewardship moment from several different folks in this congregation. They'll be telling you about what God is doing in their lives and what this church means to them. They'll be sharing some of their "intangible religious benefits". The Steeple Chase Campaign will send a race packet to your door delivered by a nearby neighbor from our church, or you will receive a letter in the mail. I want to be very clear that what we're asking of you is not fundraising but faith raising. God doesn't want your money, God wants your heart. And once God has your heart, the Trustees won't worry one nickel about your money. We will have everything we need—and more. But let me be clear: Until you recognize your many incredible blessings as a gift from God; until you also make the connection that this congregation is here to nurture your relationship with God—to praise and to serve and to love others as God loves us; we will *always* have money problems and people will *always* be squabbling about the budget.

Between now and when the pledge packet arrives at your door, I want to encourage you to think about what blessings God has given to you and what makes you feel truly thankful. How can you show God your gratitude? How can you celebrate the generosity God has called forth in you? What amount will you share with your church for the work of Jesus Christ?

If we can't get all of our members to "sow bountifully" and "give cheerfully" this year, I'm afraid we may need to resort to other means to finance the work of the church! Hit it, Bruce!

(Here Bruce K. plays "Money, Money, Money" theme song from *Celebrity Apprentice*; Dick dons stole and ball cap heavily decorated with corporate logos, while sporting money symbol "bling" and sun glasses, dancing across the chancel).

Hear the Apostle Paul as he speaks to our church: "Now as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you--so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking."

Thanks be to God! AMEN.

2 Corinthians 8: 1-7

We want you to know, brothers and sisters,^{*} about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege^{*} of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking^{*} among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you^{*}—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 11-12

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.