

Give and Get

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
First Sunday of Stewardship 2011
October 9, 2011

Ecclesiastes 10:16-19; 2 Corinthians 4:2-7; Luke 6:33-38

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” -- Luke 6:38

I wonder if any of you raised a skeptical inward eyebrow when Jim read from the book of Ecclesiastes, “and money meets every need.” Or when I read from the Gospel of Luke, “for the measure that you give will be the measure that you get back.”

If you did, good for you. I hope, when you heard those words, that you at least wondered to yourself, “Does money meet every need? Do you get in return what you give? I wonder about that.”

I hope you do wonder about such statements in the Bible and many more like them, because if you do, it shows that initial level of engagement with Scripture that leads to action. It means you’re starting to take the Bible seriously, which most people do not. You’re beginning to consider the outrageous possibility that this dusty old collection of stories and truisms might, in fact, be true. And more than true, it might be helpful.

And if that mental eyebrow of yours went up this morning at those words from Luke and those words from Ecclesiastes, then I want to congratulate you for being on the right track. You’re moving in the right direction in your relationship with God’s written word.

And to those of you whose mental eyebrows didn’t flicker, that’s okay; come back next week and listen carefully to the lessons we’ll read then.

I chose two of the three lessons this morning – the Old Testament lesson and the Epistle – but the gospel reading came as part of our stewardship campaign. It’s the theme of our annual appeal for money.

Now I know that in some churches, money is like sex: it’s a tricky subject to discuss. Asking for money seems to clash with that pillar of Christian theology that says that God will provide. Sensible people, as all of you are, know that those two facts – that God provides and that your church needs your financial support – are not contradictory; in fact, in most churches throughout most of Christian history, those two ideas have coexisted happily side by side.

God does indeed provide. God provided the sunshine this morning. No one paid for that. God provided the soil that grew the pumpkins that are sprouting on front porches and along driveways; no one paid for the earth. God is providing that miniscule electric spark that is keep your heart beating during this service, even if your implant from the Cleveland Clinic helps to keep things ticking regularly. Your insurer may have

paid for the implant, but God provides the spark.

Did money buy the person who came into your life twenty or thirty or fifty years ago, and has been your companion through the journey? Did money bring your children into the world and teach you how to raise them? Will money keep the disease or accident or old age from eventually leading all of us from this life to the next?

No, of course not, so we know that there is a great deal in life that money simply cannot touch. So when the Preacher – and that’s what Ecclesiastes means in Greek – when the Preacher says that money meets every need, we know that what he’s saying is true up to a point. If you need a house, money will buy it. If you need to heat it, money will buy that, too. And if a storm blows the roof off and you need another, money will get that job done, too.

And what is true of your house is true of this one, also. The work we do here, as well as the place and the people who help us do it – money provides for them. God doesn’t pay our light bills, we do. God doesn’t pay for Mary or Joan or Karen or Dave or James or me; we do. God doesn’t provide the dollars we send to Our Church’s Wider Mission or Bread for the World or the Cleveland Food Bank, we do. God doesn’t stock our food pantry or buy the meals we serve at Loaves and Fishes, we do.

Our children and adults are taught the Bible and the Christian faith, the hungry are fed, and God’s creation is tended because of the support we provide this church. That’s pretty much what I wrote in the stewardship letter you received this past week. At one level, everything that happens at Faith happens because you support it, and much of what you support requires money. So those of us whom you have put in leadership positions are not coy about asking you for it. God’s help, your support, and our leadership – those are the three legs that keep the stool of Faith Church upright and sturdy.

But there’s always more to the story when the gospel of Jesus Christ is involved, because the gospel is about the depth of reality as well as its appearances. The fact of the matter is that any number of eleemosynary – that is, mercy-giving – institutions can feed people or clothe them or house them or provide them with clean drinking water. Habitat for Humanity, United Way, Meals on Wheels, the Cleveland Foundation, the Benjamin Rose Institute, the National Wildlife Federation, Petfix – they’re all involved, in one way or another, with trying to make the world a little better place, not only for people but for all living things.

And that’s a good thing, as Martha would say. It’s a wonderful thing. It’s a fantastic thing, and those of us in the Christian church should feel a sense of profound gratitude that we have lived long enough to see some of our work bear this kind of fruit, because many of those eleemosynary institutions – there’s that word again – that you and I take for granted as part of the fabric of ordinary life were Christian inventions. Hospitals, for example. Orphanages. Public schools. Colleges. The oldest universities in the world – the University of Bologna, the University of Paris, the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge – they all began as collections of monks working in cathedral schools. They were institutions of the medieval church. The church valued learning and regarded the development of the life of the mind as one of its chief responsibilities, a far cry from the anti-intellectualism that has characterized much of contemporary Christianity, especially in America.

So we have a track record in Christianity that includes many accomplishments we can be proud of, and many of those accomplishments needed money and they received it. Benefactors, great and small, provided the financial support that places like Oxford and Cambridge and Harvard and Yale needed to go and keep going. People gave to support such places not because the people or the institutions were perfect but rather

because they believed in the ideals those institutions and people represented. And when they gave, they received more than they could possibly have imagined.

And that's what Jesus's words in Luke's Gospel remind us. "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

When you give, you not only receive, you receive in abundance. That's the new math. That's the economics of generosity. And there's nothing mysterious about it. It works like this.

God has promised us that when we give our lives away in God's service, we get back much more than we could ever have imagined. Why? Because when we give ourselves to God, we give ourselves to love itself, and love is always generous. Love never calculates or holds back; love is never stingy or grudging; love always overflows. That's why, when you take up that cross that Christ calls us to, and give your life to God's realm, you get back not just life, but eternal life. That's the promise of the gospel.

In a few months, those of us who will be going to New England to trace the history of our denomination will be standing in Harvard Yard before the statue of the University's namesake. John Harvard was a young English clergyman who died when he was almost thirty-one, and he had lived in this new and wild country called the Massachusetts Bay Colony only eighteen months before tuberculosis killed him. In those eighteen months, however, he resolved to support the tiny college which had been founded two years before his death across the Charles River in what was then called Newtowne. He gave half of his estate and all of his books, and in gratitude, the Great and General Court of the Colony named the fledgling college after him. In 1884, as part of the 250th anniversary celebration of that College, a statue of John Harvard was presented to the University. When President Charles W. Eliot accepted the statue, he did so with these words, with which I would like to close this morning's sermon. They are a reminder that we can never fully know the impact of what we give in a spirit of love and generosity.

Here's part of what President Eliot said:

"The University counts of inestimable worth the lessons which this pure, gentle, resolute youth will teach, as he sits in bronze looking wistfully into the western sky. He will teach that one disinterested deed of hope and faith may crown a brief and broken life with deathless fame. He will teach that the good which men do lives after them, fructified and multiplied beyond all power of measurement or computation. He will teach that from the seed which he planted in loneliness, weakness, and sorrow, have sprung joy, strength, and energy ever fresh, blooming year after year in this garden of learning, and flourishing more and more, as time goes on, in all fields of human activity."

"Give, and it will be given to you. . . ."