Book 2

Sunday November 19, 1972

"PLAIN TALK ABOUT MONEY" 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, 9:6-15

Preaching a sermon to you on pledging money for the work of the church sometimes puts the preacher in a rather strange situation for his salary comes out of the budget which he is talking about, that budget to which he is urging people to give generously. However I find comfort in the fact that I am not the first or the last preacher to be in this position.

When Reinhold Niebuhr, a world famous theologian was a young preacher in a small church in Detroit, he wrote in his diary:

"Next week we are going to hold our first Every member Canvass. They expect me to preach a sermon which will prepare the good people to give generously. I don't mind that. Most people give little enough for the church or for anything else not connected with their own pleasures. But I don't see how you can preach a sermon adequate to the needs of the moment without identifying the church with the Kingdom of God too unqualifiedly. And meanwhile you are drawing your salary from the church and remembering that if the canvass is a success there may be an increase in salary next year. It isn't easy to mix the business of preaching with the business of making a living . . . of course every laborer is worthy of his hire. But let's not be too squeamish. There is old J.Q. It would do his soul good if he loosened up a bit."

Martin Luther was certainly not squeamish when it came to talking about money in the pulpit. In one of his sermons he said -- "I understand that many of you do not want to give money. You ungrateful people should be ashamed of your-selves. . . What does it mean if not that you do not want the gospel preached, the children taught, and the poor helped? I am sorry that I ever freed you from the tyrants and the papists. You ungrateful beasts. You are not worthy of the treasure of the gospel. If you don't improve I will stop preaching rather than cast pearls before swine."

Well, like Niebuhr and Luther, I'm not going to be too squeamish this morning in talking about money. Undoubtedly there are some J.Q.'s in this congregation whose souls would be helped if they loosened up a bit.

So this morning I'm going to speak to you very frankly, and plainly about money and the church. Perhaps too often in the past, we preachers have made the mistake of defining stewardship in a confused way. In an effort to make certain that giving to the church is set forth on an appropiately exalted spiritual level, we have often broadened the definition so much that stewardship has become just another word for discipleship or the Christian life. The trouble is that when we get right down to it, we are still talking about raising money for the church. You know it! And no one is fooling anyone!

In other words, sometimes we bumble along trying to cloak a perfectly legitimate material concern and objective in a spiritual garment which does not fit it. We may be secretly uneasy about what we are doing, that is, financing the program of the church.

Well, let's get over this uneasiness this morning. And to begin with let's clear away a few mistaken ideas about money and the church as we prepare to make our financial pledges today.

1. In the first place, abandon from your mind the traditional invidious distinction between the spiritual and the material. There really is no such difference. God has made both the physical and the spiritual and both are good. Our Christian faith is centered in a unique historical physical event in which the God who is spirit, put on matter, became material, became flesh and blood. Our faith is both a material and a spiritual faith.

Thus we need not be ashamed or uneasy about pursuing mundane concerns in God's name provided we pursue them in obedience to his will. We need not use weasel words like possessions, means, or resources, when we really mean dollars. Let's be quite honest and practical about it. There's nothing wrong with the sound and sight of dollars. In fact they are as pleasing to God as to us, provided the dollars are responsibly used, not only in church but in all of our living.

Your money and my money can be as holy and spiritual as anything we have or do and even more so. In a very real sense your money is a part of you. You earn it by your labor. It is an extension of your personality. How you use your money, what you spend it for, tells a lot about you, about what you really believe, about what you think is important. Your check stubs tell a story. Your money talks!

Money is an extension of our power. This is what we mean many times when we say -- "money talks!" And we can make our money talk for good or for ill. So let's put aside the mistaken idea that asking for money for the church is somehow not really spiritual or as spiritual as some other things.

Maybe in the past we have been too timid in talking about money for the church. If this congregation is going to continue to be a dynamic vital place; if it is going to continue to be a presence for the good in this community, then that takes your money and mine.

2. Secondly, one indicator of Christian commitment is the willingness to give one's money as an act of faith. It is something the Christian does because that's what Christians do. In the Christian faith we begin with doing. We do it, we feel it and then we know it. Not the other way around. Belief to a large degree follows behavior.

In a sermon a few weeks ago, we dealt with the theme -- "The Power of Positive Acting." The point was that we can "act" ourselves into a new way of thinking. We learn to love what we give and work for. If we begin to give more money for the work of the church, we will begin to love the church more and our own faith will grow.

3. Thirdly, all of this is to say we as Christians we are to take risks. All of us love to watch circus acts. And isn't part of the perennial lure of the circus the thrill of watching people take risks? Follow the rush of acts from start to finish and each one seems to involve greater risks than the one before--from acrobats taking minor risks on the mat, to the greater risk of entering a cage of wild animals, to the split-second timing of the high wire and the flying trapeze.

We pay to see daring risks taken--by someone else. But what of ourselves? How good are we at risking, at adventuring--in short at faith. Is faith not taking risks? And can we claim to live by faith if all we do is "play it safe," do things the way they've always been done, and fail to dare to do more?

Jesus cautioned against looking back, against tying up God's gifts to us in a napkin and burying them, against storing up treasures for ourselves.

First-Plymouth church has a great history. Members in the past have taken great risks. It was a great act of faith to build this magnificent building in the early 1930's and another act of faith to remodel it in the 1960's. The building is being put to good and full use now. The risk is paying off.

At the stewardship dinners this past week, I spoke briefly on the "ministry which this building itself carries on" in addition to the ministry of the paid staff and all of you who are members and friends. The building is fully used for the good of the community seven days and nights each week. It's a thrilling sight to see!

First-Plymouth is still on the move and we in our time are called also to take risks. Our church attendance is climbing. Our membership is beginning to increase. New programs and activities are being started and still more are in the planning stage. But all of this takes money!

How much then are we to pledge and give to the church? Here the Bible gives the answer in a straight-forward manner. It points out three ways we are to give. We are to give (1) regularly (2) proportionately and (3) cheerfully.

Last week in the sermon entitled --"We had better feel like it!" we dealt in part with the need to give money not just when we happen to feel like it, but on some kind of systematic basis--that's why we use the pledging system.

2. Secondly, we are to give proportionately. The Bible teaches us to give a proportionate share of our income. Each one of us is to decide what that proportion will be. Don't average, that is, don't look at the church budget, the number of members and then try to average what your giving should be. If your income is higher, than you are to give more, if it goes down, then the amount is less.

In order to help you judge what proportion you are giving, it sometimes helps to compare it with what you spend for other things. For example, if you smoke a pack of cigarettes a day, that amounts to about $4.00 per week or more. If you are giving $4.00 per week for the work of the church, then we might say your giving is on the cigarette level, and if you can afford to spend that much for cigarettes, you can probably afford to give much more for the work of the church.

Or how much do you spend for recreation? per week? per month? How much pocket money do you spend? Some of us probably fritter away more money per week than we regularly give to the church.

On what level is your giving? How does it compare with money you spend for other things? If we are seriously concerned about the moral conditions of our country and the future of the church, then we've also got to be serious about our giving.

First-Plymouth's proposed budget for 1973, is about 9,000 higher than our present budget for 1972. And we need even more than that if we are to really expand our work in 1973.

So don't take the easy way out this morning and just pledge what you are presently giving in 1972. If you do that you are in effect saying, we don't want this church to move ahead. Let's be honest about it, most of us here could raise our pledges without inconveniencing ourselves, much less really sacrificing anything.

3. Thirdly, the Bible tells us that we are to give cheerfully. You will discover that the people who complain most about their giving are those who are not giving enough. I have never known a big giver who was not a cheerful giver. The cheerful giveris always the one who is giving generously.

First-Plymouth Church has a dynamic history--it's our job to keep this church strong and vital as a force for the good in this community and through our benevelences help strengthen the Christian witness around the world..

That's the end of the sermon! But this morning you can respond to the sermon in more than words.

As an act of dedication, commitment and worship, we are now going to make our pledges of money for 1973. The ushers will distribute the pledge cards. You will find pencils in the card holders on the back of the pews.

You do not have to be a member of the church to make a pledge.

For those listening on the radio, you too can pledge to First-Plymouth even if you are not a member. We encourage your support also. Send your contribution to First-Plymouth Church, 20th & D street, Lincoln, Nebraska.

(once persons have the pledge cards in hand)

You will notice on the pledge cards that you can pledge for "Our mission in Lincoln" and for "Our Christian World Mission" or benevolence.

You can also pledge an amount per week, per month, or however you plan to give, and you can request envelopes if desired.

We encourage young people who have been confirmed to make pledges on their own.

In a little while the ushers will pass the offering plates and you may drop your cards on the plates.