Sunday November 9, 1975

"WHY GIVE MONEY TO THE CHURCH?" II Corinthians 9:6-11
(A Letter to Yourself)

In a small book of short essays by Halford Luccock, entitled, "LIKE A MIGHTY ARMY," the author has one piece called "Take A Letter to Yourself." "Most of us," he says, "write letters to ourselves, even though we do not mail them and so save a lot of postage." The trouble is that most of our inter-self letters carry too much comfort, when often a well-placed kick would be more in order and contribute more to our salvation. Too many of our letters to ourselves run something like this:

> You Poor Dear: It was a dirty shame you were not elected President of the Village Improvement Association last night. You deserved it a thousands times more than the complete moron who was elected. It was all due to spite and jealously. But remember the greatest minds were never recognized and your defeat proves you are a great mind. Think of Keats and Galileo. Your unfailing admirer. (signed) Yourself.

That can grow into a 20 year correspondence. Here's another letter some people send to themselves:

> You Poor Soul: You can't carry the world around on your shoulders any longer. You do almost everything and all those other lazy people do nothing. You have lost weight and are down to a mere 255 pounds. If only everyone else would give as much money and work as much as you do, the world would be a fine place. Your Constant Well-Wisher. (signed) Me!

Why not try a different sort of letter to yourself, for variety at least? It might counteract the glut of too much soothing syrup. How about something like this?

> You Big Bluff: I have been looking over your checkbook stubs and your pledge card to the church for last year. The figures ought to make you hide your head in a rain barrel. Your contributions to your church did not even equal your entertainment expenses. You spent more for cigarettes than you gave to your church. Your sense of values is all out of whack! Not very cordially, (signed) Your Anemic Conscience

What kind of letters do you write to yourself? What do you tell yourself? Suppose you were to write a letter to yourself on "Why give money to the church?" What would you say?

You might begin by writing: Dear Me: It's that time of year when the church to which I belong will be asking me to make my annual pledge for the work of the church. If your in the 21 to 30 age bracket, maybe you say to yourself, "I can't give much to the church now. I'm just getting started in life--and don't make much money. I will give more later on. You can count on me then.

Or if you're in the 30 to 45 age bracket, you might find yourself saying: "I can't give much to the church now. I've got a growing family on my hands--and you know how expenses are these days! When my children are older things should ease up a bit. You can count on me then."

Or if you're in the 45-55 age bracket, some people write a letter to themselves that goes like this: "I can't give much to the church now. Two children are in college and that takes every penny. Sure my income is the highest ever, but so are my expenses--and my taxes! I may have to cut my giving. Only temporarily of course.

In the 55 to 65 age bracket, letters often read: "I can't give the much to the church now. I need to put aside something for old-age. Retirement is just around the corner you know. I'll give the same as last year.

And over age 65, some letters read: "I can't give much to the church now. Since retirement I have to watch every penny. Yet the younger ones support the church--like I always did. Don't they remember--they could always count on me?

But maybe there's yet another kind of letter you can write to yourself and I can write to myself. It could go something like this:

Dear Me: Here's that pledge card from my church--First-Plymouth. I like to think I give a lot, but if I'm honest with myself, it's not very much compared to what I spend for many other things, many of which I do not need. So this time, I'm going to look at the whole matter in a

fresh way and ask myself--"Why give money to the Church?" and "How much should I give?"

To begin with, I can think of some very practical reasons for giving money to the Church. I live in a free society and some of the most important institutions in that society are the voluntary organizations called churches. These churches like the one to which I belong carry on some quite vital work. The church is a kind of conscience for our society. Sometimes it says things to me that I don't like, but I wouldn't want to live in a community or society where there were no churches.

I also have to admit to myself that like all other institutions the church needs money to continue to do its work. No where does the Bible say that doing good is cheap or non-monetary. Large factories can stand idle in the absence of sufficient energy. So too, many potentially great churches can be stale and lethargic due to lack of money.

First-Plymouth Church is continuing to expand its ministry. The church building itself is used every day and night of the week, not only by groups related to the church but by other groups in the community who need a place to meet and who do good for our community.

When I think about it, I'm proud of the fact that my church sees itself not as some sort of private or exclusive club, but as a community of persons that has a concern for all kinds of people. Even though I sometimes complain that the church is always asking for money, if my church didn't ask for money, it couldn't be doing the job its doing. It has to have money and lots of it to carry on its work.

In your letter to yourself, there would also be some other reasons for giving money to the church. You might say to yourself:

I know deep down that it is unhealthy to be a taker and not a giver. The life of the spirit is deepened and enriched by giving. As the Bible says: (it always helps to quote scripture to yourself) "the person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." Giving, and giving generously is good for me as well as good for the church.

While the church is a philanthropic agency, it is also much more than that. At its deepest level it is the representative of God's grace to us. It is a community of persons who regularly celebrate in public worship the presence of God in the world and among his people. The church reminds me of life with all of its possibilities, its joys and its sorrows. The church reminds me that there is more to life than meets the eye or the other senses, and I need to be reminded of that frequently.

I give to the church because I know that one of its main tasks is to help persons like me and others and groups find the meaning of life as we experience it in all kinds of events. There is the miracle and mystery of birth, then growing up, maturing, the choice of vocation and the change of vocation, for some marriage, for all of us -- middle age, adjusting to old age, facing retirement and finally death. The church as a community of Christians meets me and others at each of these points. I know of no other institution in our society for helping me and others in this way.

In all that happens to me and others, the church is the one community that keeps announcing and reminding me that there is a God in the world and beyond this world, creating, judging, redeeming--a God who wills the best for me and for all of the creation.

And not only does my church carry on a ministry here in this community through its staff and members and building, but it helps provide money for other church groups so that the work of the church is extended into areas where I as an individual Christian and the congregation to which I belong is not able to go personally. This includes the ministry of the church at large through world ministries, church world service, the Nebraska Conference, the Peoples City Mission in Lincoln, and many more.

If one word characterizes our contemporary world and our moral life, that word is "confused." I know that moral choices are often complex; visions of the good life are misty. There are no easy or simple answers and Christians often disagree on vital questions---what to do about world hunger; about disarmament; what's the best approach to welfare? There is often no one right answer.

But my gift of money to the church is less ambiguous, less complicated, clearer than many other choices. I may wonder how much to give, and out of what motivations and with what expectations--these matters come in and out of focus. But the act of giving itself is clear. It is the good and right thing to do. It's part of being a Christian and a part of being a responsible member of the Church.

Certainly, it is easy to find fault with churches, local congregations and denominations. But whatever the criticism of a church, the category is one of performance, not of intention. I believe our church tries to do what is right. Whenever our church spends money, it spends it because someone or some group thinks it is right to spend money in such a way. Individual members may differ on what is the right use of the church's money. But the giver of money to a church knows that his or her gift will be used after there has been an attempt to know what is the right use of it.

Why give money to the church? Because it is the right and good thing to do.

Also in your letter to yourself, ask yourself--"How am I to give and how much?" Those of you who have joined First-Plymouth within the last several years and have gone through one of the "Orientation Meetings" for new members will already know what to write in your letter to yourself.

First, tell yourself in your letter that you are to give proportionately. Those who have more are to give more. You have to decide yourself what the correct dollar amount is for you.

Secondly, we are to give regularly! Not just when we happen to feel like it. Very few people would take a job if the employer told them, "I will pay you when and if I feel like it or if I have some money left over that I don't know what to do with.

And equally important, we are to give cheerfully. Smile when you write in that letter to yourself about giving and smile when you fill out your pledge card and smile when you write out your check or put your cash in the offering plate. None of us likes to receive a personal gift from a person who is unhappy about giving the gift to us. There's nothing worse than a grouchy giver, because giving and

happiness go together. If you're not happy and cheerful in the act of giving, there's something wrong. So in your letter to yourself, ask yourself, "Am I a grouchy giver because I'm not giving enough?" Have you ever met a generous, giving person who was not happy? Never!

Why are giving people happy? Because as St. Paul said in his letter to the Church in Corinth--God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity which through the church will produce thanksgiving to God."

So, write a letter to yourself. Tell yourself how much and why you are going to give generously to the church. Then fill our your pledge card at home this week, and bring it back to the church next Sunday. We want this church to be filled with cheerful people!