Sunday, November 15, 1981
GIVERS AND TAKERS
Mark 8:34-37

This morning I want to talk with you simply and briefly about the joy of being a “giving” person. It is the heart of the Christian message that God is above all a “giving” God. God’s love is freely given to each one of us and to the world at large. Since it is a basic part of God’s nature to be giving, we begin to experience the transforming power of God’s love by becoming giving persons. In fact, we are closest to God when we discover ourselves as givers and not just takers.

But why is it so difficult for us to become truly giving persons? Why do we fear becoming a giving person so much? Why do we hold back in our giving?

Much has been written from a sociological, psychological, and theological perspective as to why people give and do not give. People give for a variety of reasons — religious commitment, guilt, personal recognition, tax benefits, need, obligation, gratitude, and pressure. These reasons for giving are not right or wrong necessarily. And people hold back from giving for another variety of reasons.

What are some of these reasons that people hold back in their giving? First of all, and fundamentally, people hold back in their giving for fear that they will not be able to survive without what they are being asked to give away. Thus, people do not even want to give up their sins and their burdens or their bad habits.

That’s why so many problems which are brought to counselors are related to giving in one form or another. People are frustrated and confused because they cannot give up neurotic guilt, fear, a poor self-image, illusions, rigidity, inflexibility, hate, envy, anger, dependence on tobacco, al-cohol, drugs, or food. People cannot give up their fail-ures but hold onto them and let them poison their lives from then on. We hang onto these things as if they were priceless treasures, things that we could not do without. All the time I meet people who nurse their grudges, their hatreds, and resentments, and who wouldn’t let them go for almost anything. They even hold onto their bad memories. They seem to enjoy them in a curious way.

Have you ever noticed that some people even collect grievances and hurts like others collect stamps or rocks? They go through life looking for people to hurt them and remembering every time they’ve been hurt for the past 20 years. They add new hurts to their collection and delight in telling others how badly off they are, how persecuted and unlucky and unloved. They are takers and not givers.

And when they finally do give up something, a little bit of love or a little bit of money, they do so with strings attached, which is not really giving at all. When we have too many strings attached to our giving, it means that we really haven’t let go of what we have given. We want to hang onto it and have some control over it.

And when it comes to giving money, many people are even more afraid that they cannot do without the money, so they give very little money away for anything. This problem affects those who have lots of money as well as those who don’t have very much.

This fear of not being able to let go of anything that we have — the fear of giving oneself to God and to others, is one that must be passed through if we are to become joyful giving persons. All giving is preceded by ambiguity and uncertainty, but not to give and to only take and try to hold onto as much as possible is far worse. Then we literally become shriveled up, unhappy individuals.

Becoming a giving person is becoming an individual who is not afraid to take a risk. Jesus said, “Lose your life if you want to find it.”

Recently, I saw a cartoon which showed two caterpillars crawling across the lawn. They look up and see a butterfly soaring above them. One caterpillar says to the other, “You’ll never catch me in one of those contraptions.” Metamorphosis just happens to the caterpillar, there’s no choice involved. But for us to evolve to a higher form of freedom, we need to exercise our will. We have a choice. It means taking the risk of becoming a truly giving person.

2. A second reason for our not wanting to give up anything, in addition to the fact that we are afraid that we cannot survive without it, is that through most of our life we are taught to be takers and not givers. Most of what we are taught is how to acquire things, how to give things away. We are taught how to get friends, how to influence people, how to make money, how to invest so that we make more money, how to hold onto things. Thus, it is natural that many of us are more skillful in acquisition, in taking, than we are in giving. I wonder how many of us who have children teach our children from little on up to be givers and not just takers?

This morning, resolve to become a giver and not just a taker.

In today’s world much of our giving to the church is done in the form of money. And that shouldn’t surprise us. In our modern world, money is one of the important humanly created media through which the love of God can be ex-pressed. Money is like a language and other cultural ex-pressions. It is a human creation that makes possible a form of communication between individuals or groups. Through money, relationships can be established, human needs met, values and purposes realized. Maybe that’s why we say, “money talks.”

And like other humanly created cultural expressions, money can be used either to build up or tear down, to serve or to dominate, to liberate or to oppress. The potential of money as a medium for injustice and oppression is greater than that of other cultural inventions. But that does not mean that money is “filthy” or the “root of all evil.” The Bible says that it is “the love of money which is the root of all evil.” Money, when treated and used properly, can become the vehicle of caring, serving, liberating, and redeeming.

When you give money to the church, that money is changed into life. Perhaps it is money changed into the beauty of a piece of music or translated into heat and light in a building where boys and girls can come for a scout meeting, a recreation group, church school classes, youth groups, where facilities are provided for support groups community activities, special forums and where literally hundreds and hundreds of people come each week for inspir-ation and help. The church is in the business of changing money into life. Your giving is multiplied. It helps change you into a giving person.

Furthermore, your giving to the church will actually help turn you into a different and better person. You cannot be a loving person unless you are also a giving person. The two go together.

This morning, resolve to become a more giving person and not just a taking person.

I still remember the wonder that came over me years ago in a high school biology class when the incredible balance that characterizes our universe first dawned on me. As you know, we human beings are the kind of creatures who breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, and plant life is structured to do just the opposite; namely to breathe in the carbon dioxide and breathe out the oxy-gen. In this way, each form of life receives from the other what it needs, and in turn gives back to the other what it must have, and thus the whole universe is sustained by a harmonious balance of giving and receiving.

Here on a physical level is a manifestation of a principle that is fundamental to all reality, namely the principle of reciprocity. If we are healthy human beings, this giving and receiving in breathing takes place involuntarily, but the higher one goes up in the scale of human capacities, such a way of doing life has to be learned and then willed deliberately; and part of what it means to mature, I think, is to come to terms with this fact and live more and more in harmony with the principle of giving and receiving. Early in life, it is easy to ignore this fact and to be essentially a taker rather than a giver, but whenever this happens, the whole balance of existence is thrown out of whack. In our personal life, we become less than we were meant to be.

On a physical level, of course, you cannot hold your breath forever and survive. If you take in oxygen and refuse to give back the gift of carbon dioxide, in a matter of minutes you will die. And on the human level, that is exactly what Jesus meant when he said, “The o.ne who would have his or her life, that is the one who thinks only of oneself, is going to lose it. It is only the person who is willing to lose his or her life, that is give it away creatively in the on-going process of life, who has any hope of saving it.

So become a giver, a willing, cheerful, loving, giving person.

The next question then is, how much should I give? That’s a question which each individual or family unit has to answer for itself. Those who have more are to give more. That’s what proportionate giving means. Decide to give a certain percentage of your income — that’s the best way to know how much to give.

Be a giver and not just a taker. Unfortunately, our con-gregation like every other congregation in the country has a number of people who are only takers and not givers. They give little or nothing for the support of the church and it’s not because they have less money than others.

They are on church welfare, but not because they need to be. They take all the time but give very little or nothing. Probably they also complain about individuals in society who are on welfare.

Be a giver and not just a taker. Let me warn you about another danger as you fill out your pledge card. Do not take the easy way out and simply put down what you pledged last year. As a guide to your thinking, begin your con-sideration by asking what it would be like for you if you gave one dollar per week for every on thousand dollars of annual income, as the chart on the insert illustrates. Thus, if your annual income is $15,000 per year, that would be a gift to the church of $15 per week, or $780 per year.

This· morning become a giving person! The late Dr. Halford Luccock was one of Christendom’s most witty and perceptive teachers. In one of his books, he tells that among the

Franks, whole armies were sometimes given baptism at one stroke and many warriors went into the water with their right hands held high so that they did not get wet. Then they could say, “This land has never been baptized,” and they could swing their battle axes as freely as ever. The modern counterpart of this partial baptism, says Dr. Luccock is seen in many who have been baptized in the church today, all except their pocketbooks. These are held high out of the water. Today, let your money also be baptized and thereby consecrated.