Sunday November 21, 1982

"GIVING CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE" Luke 18:18-30

The surest indication of what kind of person you are is to be found--hold your breath--among the stubs of your old checkbooks. A man who has written many biographies made that discovery. He noted that it was easy to find out what a person said and had done, but when it came to finding out what kind of person he or she really was, he discovered that the surest way to get the truth was to look at the stubs of old checkbooks. What a person gives money for--that tells the tale.

The story we just read this morning from Luke's Gospel touches on this point. "What must I do," asks a young man of Jesus, "to inherit eternal life?" In other words, "What must I do to find meaning in my life? What must I do to change?" What must I do to be truly happy?"

Wise teacher that he was, Jesus did not at first give the young man a direct answer. Rather he asked, "What does your religious faith tell you?" The young man noted that he had already followed the teachings of his faith as he knew them, but that was not enough.

Jesus knew there was a block, an obstacle in this man's life that he had not honestly faced. It was as if he had see the man's checkbook and its stubs. The block was his love of money and possessions. So he said to the young man, "One think you still lack, sell all you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful for he had many possessions.

Jesus is not here advocating poverty for poverty's sake. What he is suggesting is this: "beware of what your money or your possessions are doing to you, instead of for you." This man wanted to change his life, but not through giving. He wanted to change, but not that much. He's probably the kind of person who would drink "lite beer," with the slogan "Everything you always wanted in a beer and less." His slogan was, "Everything you always wanted in a religion and less." He wanted the taste of religion, but not much more.

IN ANOTHER PLACE, Jesus said, "An individual's life does not consist in the abundance of his or her possessions."

In other words, the acquisition of things, contrary to popular belief then and now, is not where life's true values are. At issue is not the abundance or scarcity of things, but rather the importance one attaches to things, many or few.

I suspect that for most of us, poor as well as rich, Christian as well as not, things are what our lives are mostly about. To the extent that this is so, we do not possess things, but are possessed by them.

Jesus knew that this young man could be changed but only by becoming a giving person and the same is true for us. Giving can change our lives for the better.

1. First of all, becoming a giving person will change our attitude toward things, toward possessions. In the act of becoming a giving person, we learn to let go, to relinquish the grasping and the grabbing which is so much a part of our lives. As we become more giving persons, we also learn that all things go away, nothing is eternal except God and God's love. Then we become changed persons for the better. But we like to grab and hold on.

Sometime ago there was a television program which showed a method for trapping monkeys. The natives made a hole in a log and put bait inside. The monkey reached his hand in to get the bait, but when his fingers closed on it, he couldn't get his fist back through the hole. Determined to hang on to what he had, he was still hanging on when captured. All he needed to do to be free was let go. That's exactly what Jesus was telling the young man to do. But to let go was to him and to the monkey incomprehensible--his priorities would not permit it. So he is destroyed by what he thinks he possesses. We think, "silly monkey," but we do the same.

In his story of Russian prison camp experiences, Solzhenitsyn tells of inmates who suffer incredible hardships and have nothing but the barest of essentials, yet learn to be at peace. Then a rare gift parcel arrives with a few simple things. Immediately, the recipient becomes protective and withdrawn, jealously guarding each small item--an ugly mood, Solzhenitsyn says, worse than prison itself.

But when we become giving people, our lives change. We are no longer afraid. We are no longer greedy and jealous. ~~Our lives change~~. A giving person is a free person. A person who tries to hold onto everything becomes a slave to his or her possessions. Giving can help us to learn to let go. Giving helps us change our attitude toward things, and therefore changes us.

2. Secondly, giving can change your life because it makes you into a stronger person, spiritually. Here's how it works. We've all heard the phrase, "Use it or lose it." It's a principle that applies to all of life and particularly to our giving.

If I stop using the muscles in my body, they will atrophy, shrink and become useless. The more regularly I use them, the stronger and more effective they become. The same is true of my mind. The more I use my thinking processes, the more improved and useful they are.

Use it or lose it. That's why Jesus said, "Those who seek to save their lives will lose them and those who give their lives away will save them." That part of us which is never invested in human life, what we hold onto most tightly is what we will lose. However that which we use and give away, always multiplies and grows stronger. The more we give, the stronger we become spiritually. The less we give the smaller we feel and the smaller we are, & the weaker we are.

I told this story a few years ago, but it's worth repeating. A man went hunting with his companions. In the search for game, he became separated from his friends and could not find his way back to camp. Night fell. A severe storm began. To protect himself, he crawled into a hollow log. The rain poured down all night long. In the morning when the man awoke, he found that the log had swollen and he was hopelessly stuck inside. He thought he would die trapped in the log. Like a dying man, his whole life began to pass before his eyes. He thought of his wife and children. He thought of his colleagues at work. He thought of his friends. He thought of his friends at the local church. As his thought lingered on the church, he remembered the size of his pledge to this year's stewardship campaign and when he rmembered the size of his pledge, he felt so small that he slipped right out of the log.

Giving can change your life. It will make you into a better and stronger person.

3. Thirdly, Giving can change your life by making you into a happier person. The happiest people I know are those who are giving, generous individuals. The saddest people I know are those who are stingy.

There'a a most significant phrase the the story read earlier from the Gospel of Luke. The young man who came to JEsus went away sorrowful. If he had become a giving person as Jesus asked him, he would've gone away happy. Think of what he missed because he was a slave to his possessions.

A miser is always unhappy. If you become a miser with your love, you will be a most unhappy person and you will find the boundaries of your affection shrinking. Love, sympathy, appreciation, joy, giving, do not exhaust themselves by use. They are expanded. You will never find a generous person who is unhappy.

Giving makes you a happier person because in the act of giving you are made more aware of your connection with other people and with God. You are not alone. As last Sunday's sermon pointed out, we are all related to God and through God to each other and all of creation. Giving is an acknowledgement of that fact. What I do affects you. What you do affects me. When we are giving people, we all affect each other for the good. When we are stingy people, we deny our connection with God and with each other and we affect others for the worse.

The scientists tell us that even a pebble tossed into the ocean affects every one of the seven seas that girdle the earth. That's how connected we are to each other. Your act of giving effects everything everywhere for the good. And that makes you happier and everyone happier.

Too often we deny ourselves this happiness by the use of "poor talk." Because taxes, unemployment, recession, are so much on our minds these days and in the news, we easily become afflicted with the disease of "poor talk." It's highly contagious. Some of the symptoms of the disease are continual complaints that one cannot make ends meet. Another symptom is bemoaning the cost of trivial items while continuing to spend on large luxury items.

What has happened of course is that our expectations have changed dramatically, not our needs. We want more and more. And because we can't have everything we want, we talk as if we are very poor.

"Poor talk" is debilitating. It makes us feel worse than any facts warrant. It focuses on ourselves, making for self-pity and forgetfulness of those who are in genuine need and it leads us to fantasize about the good old days.

Worst of all, poor talk is dishonest. There are very few here this morning or listening on the radio who could not raise their pledge significantly without changing their standard of living. The way to overcome "poor talk" and the bad feelings that go with it is to become a generous giving person. Then you will be happy.

So this morning I'm asking you so significantly increase your pledge because of what it will do for you. The Christian faith makes the incredible promise in this whole business of letting go and giving that if you do become a generous giving person you will change your life. You will not only be a happier person, but you will also change your attitude toward things and you will become a stronger person spiritually. Your whole outlook on life will be different and improved.

In the dark ages when Christianity was making its first impact on northern Europe, large numbers of savage tribes were baptized by immersion. But they were not sure they wanted to give up their savage battle, so many would go into the water holding their battleaxes out of the water. They would say, "This hand has never been baptized," so they could swing it again in slaughter.

We do not carry battleaxes today; they are rather inconvenient. But if we baptized people by immersion, many Christian people would lift their wallets on high and then proclaim this pocketbook has never been baptized, in order to justify their meager contributions and pledges.

Giving can change your life. Do not be afraid to be a generous and loving giver.

WILL THE USHERS NOW BEGIN TO DISTRIBUTE THE PLEDGE CARDS AMONG YOU.

As the pledge cards are being passed out and as you prepare to make your pledge this morning, here are some brief do's and don'ts in regard to pledging and giving. First, the don'ts!

1. Don't average. Don't say the church budget is $475,000 for 1983, therefore I'll divide that by the 1800 members we have and that will be my share.

2. Don't take the easy way out and simply pledge the same amount as last year. In going over the church financial records, it's been discovered that some of our members have not changed their pledge in the last ten years even though their income has increased. That's not taking giving very seriously.

3. Don't just raise your pledge by the amount the church budget has increased for next year which is about 12%. Some should increase their pledge much more than that, others less.

HERE ARE SOME "DO'S" ABOUT PLEDGING AND GIVING!

1. Do pledge a certain amount of your income. One rule to follow is to pledge one dollar per week for each $1000 of annual income. So if your income is $25,000, then pledge $25 per week. (that's about 5%) Or if you are now pledging about 2% which is the average for most people, then this year grow in your giving and increase your pledge by 1% of your annual income. So if your income is $25,000, then increase your pledge by $250 over last year. This is an ideal way to grow in your giving.

2. Do pledge cheerfully and joyfully. Giving will not make you happier if you give grudgingly. I want to see everyone leaving this place with smiles of joy on their faces this morning.

God bless you as you place your pledge on the offering plate this morning for the 1983 year. Your gift will go out in ever widening circles to meet human need both far away and near at hand.