Sunday, November 20, 1983
PLAY YOUR PART
Acts 5:1-11; Matthew 6:19-21

In some ways, the sermon on Every Member Canvass Sunday is the easiest to prepare and preach, because I am speaking about something very practical and concrete: the need of each one of us to be a giving individual, and in this case, we are talking very specifically about the need to give money for the support of the church regularly and proportionately.

In other ways, however, the sermon on Every Member Canvass Sunday is the most difficult to prepare and preach because it is the goal of the sermon to stretch your thinking and to motivate you in the proper way so that your giving will enable this church to carry on its ministry in the most effective way. And motivation is a very complex issue. We can never be sure what will cause one person to stay an extra hour, walk an extra mile, or give an extra dollar.

Two blind men stationed themselves at opposite ends of a park. One had a sign which simply said, “Blind.” The other, whose collections each day were much larger, had a sign which read, “It is spring, and I am blind.”

This morning I want to be like that second blind man. I hope this sermon will inspire you to become generous, open, and giving people.

The title of the sermon and the theme for our Every Member Canvass are, “Play Your Part!” To understand this title or theme, one can use any one of several metaphors.

In some ways a church congregation is like a musical group, and each individual has a part to play. Only when everyone is playing his or her part can beautiful music be made. Each part is different, yet each one is necessary if the desired harmony is to be achieved.

Or we can use an athletic metaphor. A church congregation is like an athletic team. Each person on the team has a part to play, and each part is important. It takes everyone playing his or her part if the team is to be a winning team. When anyone lets down, it affects the outcome of the whole team.

In terms of our Christian faith, we need to expand the metaphor and note that God is also a part of the team or music group. As John Smeltzer mentioned two weeks ago in his sermon entitled, “God and Us Together,” we are partners with God in this world.

This morning, then, I want to give you some guidelines on playing your part as far as your financial support of the church is concerned.

1. First of all and most obvious, play your part by paying your part. I say this because, as always, we have a number of church members or households who do not support the church financially at all. When the music begins, they don’t even pick up their instrument or join in the singing. Or when the team takes the field, they sit on the sidelines, even though the coach has asked them to be in the game.

To carry on this ministry, we need the support of each member or family in this congregation.

2. Secondly, once you have decided to play your part, be honest about your giving. Frequently I meet people who say, “I’m giving all that I can afford.” But that’s not really the truth. What they mean is, “I’m giving what is left over after I’ve taken care of everything else I wanted to do. Other things are more important to me in my life right now.”

In the story from the book of Acts read as part of our Scripture reading this morning, Ananias and Sapphira were condemned by the Apostle Peter because of their attempted deception. They claimed they had sold some land and had given all the proceeds to the church, when in reality they had sold some land and had given only part of the proceeds to the church. Peter learned of their deception and confronted them with the facts.

Ananias and Sapphira were not compelled to give anything at all to the church, just as none of us is compelled to make a pledge. But let’s at least be honest about what we do or don’t do.

You’ve heard me tell this story before about a man in Las Vegas who kept asking people for money for food. Finally, one potential giver said to him, “How do I know that if I give you money for food, you won’t use it for gambling?” “Oh, don’t worry,” said the man. “I have gambling money. What I need now is food money.”

Many times, that’s the way people treat the church: they have money for everything else, but nothing left over for the church.

I talked to a man this week who couldn’t be here today, so he gave me his pledge card in advance. As he did so, he told me this brief story as to why he had increased his pledge over last year by a substantial amount. He said, “I asked myself what would happen if my income for 1984 would be cut for some reason by $300. What would happen to the way I lived? Would I play any less golf? Would I eat out with my family any less? Where would I cut down? Probably a little here and a little there, and over all I wouldn’t miss it if I paid it gradually. That’s only $5.75 per week, or 82¢ per day — hardly the cost of a package of cigarettes” (although he didn’t smoke). He told me then to use this story this morning.

So, let’s be honest about how we play our part. If you honestly cannot increase your pledge because it’s going to cause an extreme hardship for you or your family, don’t do so — but that’s not the case for most of us.

3. Thirdly, pledge thoughtfully! As you consider playing your part as a member of this church, be careful of what I call “habit pledging or giving.” What this means is that we tend to pledge or give the same amount as last year. We don’t take the time to reassess our giving. “Put me down for the same as last year,” is the comment I hear the most. That’s taking the easy way out. We haven’t even thought about it.

An analysis of our pledge records shows that several hundred households have not changed their pledge at all during the last six or seven years. And most of these are not individuals or families who are on a fixed income. Their income has gone up dramatically, but the habit pattern of their giving has not changed. This morning, pledge thoughtfully. Decide how much you are going to increase your pledge because you believe in the work that the church is doing, and increase your pledge enough to make up for the lack of increases in years past.

Here’s a suggestion to help you. Try giving off the top instead of giving off the bottom. Giving off the bottom is the process of giving or pledging to the church after you’ve purchased everything else you want. Giving off the top means giving or pledging to the church before your

other spending. You'll discover that there will be enough money left for all your needs to be met.

4. The most important guideline for your giving is to pledge thankfully, which also means to pledge or give joyfully! Give thankfully and joyfully because the church is the most important institution in the world. The Bible calls the church the "body of Christ."

The church is that company of God's people which provides the moral leadership among us. It reminds us of our connection with one another and our connection with God. Nothing else is more important than this in our time. In giving to the church, you are making an investment in something eternal.

Jesus Christ put it in these words: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumer and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

The late Loren Eiseley, author, scientist, naturalist, and native Nebraskan, was an individual who learned many profound and practical lessons from the observations he made in the deserts, mountains, and seashores of the world.

In one of his essays, he told of visiting the beaches at a balmy resort. While walking along the beach at the height of the tourist season, he noticed the shoreline was littered with a variety of sea animals, tossed there by the incoming tide — sea animals awaiting their fate. They cannot find their way home through the surf, which casts them repeatedly back upon the shore. The tiny breathing pores of the starfish are stuffed with sand. The rising sun can shrivel their bodies. But he noticed another threat to these stranded sea creatures: the shell collectors, particularly after a storm, engaged in a kind of greedy madness to out collect their less aggressive neighbors. He watched them scrambling along the beach at dawn with bundles of gathered starfish, hermit crabs, sea urchins, and other living shells. Arguing, toppling over each other, overburdened, they rush in a kind of frenzy to outdo each other for these fine specimens.

The shell collectors would then boil the shell "houses," occupants included, in outdoor kettles provided by the resort hotels as a service to guests who will show off their proud collections to envious relatives and friends back home.

I have met and continue to meet many people with the collector's morality. They are not unique to the seashore. They are in every country, every city, and every home. They are the people who are trying to collect life and own happiness. They want to collect and consume, collect and consume. They actually believe that they can take what they think they own with them.

But then, says Eiseley, one day on the beach after a storm, he met a man he called the "star thrower." Off in the distance, farther down the shoreline from the bands of beachcombing tourists, he saw a man staring at something in the sand. Then the figure stooped over, picked something up, and, standing again, threw an object beyond the breaking surf.

Eiseley said that he walked toward the man, and as he walked, he noticed that the figure again stooped over and picked up an object and threw it beyond the surf into the sea. As Eiseley got close to the man, he asked him what he was doing, and the old man replied, "I'm a star thrower."

Expecting to see a sand dollar or perhaps a flat rock like the ones we used to sail across the water for fun, Eiseley wanted a closer look. There he saw, in a pool of sand and silt, a starfish which was still alive. And again, with a quick, gentle movement, the old man picked up the starfish and flung it far out into the sea. “It may live,” he said, “If the off-shore pull is strong enough.” Here was a human being who was not a collector. “The stars,” he said, “throw well. One can help them.” Then Eiseley reached down, picked up a starfish, and threw it out into the sea toward freedom. He felt like a gardener sowing - sowing the seeds of life.

After a sleepless night, Eiseley said he returned to the beach — to join forces not only with the man he had watched earlier, but to join forces with the One who in hope had hurled the first star into the vastness of our universe.

Jesus Christ was a star thrower. The church is to be a star thrower. You are to be star throwers. Jesus kept flinging people back into life, hoping that the deep pull of God - the true life force — would capture their allegiance and loyalty.

The Star Thrower’s secret is for all of us to know and live by. Life cannot be collected. Happiness cannot be traveled to, owned, earned, worn, or consumed.

Jesus said, “Those who seek so save their lives will lose them, and those who give their lives away, give themselves away, will truly find and understand the meaning of life.”

Don’t be a tourist on the beach of this age.

Be a star thrower; join forces with God and life!