Sunday, April 20, 1986
OUR HIGHEST NEED
Mark 12:41-44

Last September 1985, the members of this church, in a special congregational meeting, voted enthusiastically to keep this church moving forward in its ministries by adopting the Project Renew, Restore, Reach Out. The congregation further instructed the church council to carry out a development fund campaign in this year 1986, with a goal of 1.5 million dollars to be pledged and paid over a three-year period. This money will be used to underwrite the overall project.

In November of 1986, the church council appointed a development fund planning committee with Warren “Bud” Johnson as chairman. This committee has been working since then to plan and carry out the mandate of the congregation.

Early on, the committee divided the campaign to raise the funds into three parts—(1) a large advance gifts section; (2) a second level advance gifts section; and, (3) the plan to contact every member of the congregation for a three-year commitment to the development fund.

Although the first two parts of the advance gifts campaign are not yet complete, the committee feels confident in estimating that these two together will produce half the goal, or $750,000. This means that beginning today, with our congregation-wide campaign, we need to raise in pledges over a three-year period, $750,000.

By now, every member or family in the congregation should’ve received the booklet which describes in detail the development fund and what the Project Renew, Restore, Reach Out will accomplish. This booklet tells the needs of this congregation if we are to remain a strong, vital church. The needs are in six categories and all are related to each other. They are: (1) the repair and restoration of the carillon, (2) the renovation and completion of the main pipe organ, (3) the redecoration of the main worship area, including additional air-conditioning, (4) east courtyard wall replacement, which includes additional landscaping for the entire church property and additional parking, (5) renovation of the large kitchen, and (6) the extension of the ministry of this congregation through the use of television.

This morning in this sermon, I do not intend to repeat to you why all these six items are crucial for the future of this congregation. That is already well documented in the booklet which you have already received, and furthermore, the congregation has already voted to accomplish them as the funds become available.

This morning I want to speak to you about your spiritual life and about your own needs. I am going to speak to you as your pastor about your highest need, and that is your need and my need to become an ever more giving person. Martin Luther said, “There are three conversions necessary for the Christian: the conversion of the heart, mind, and purse.” Of these three, it may well be that we moderns find the conversion of the purse the most difficult. It is even hard for us to talk about money, especially in church.

And yet, Jesus in the Gospels spoke about money more frequently than any other subject except the kingdom of God. He gave an unusual amount of time to the money question. In the moving story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark, about the widow’s offering, we are told that Jesus intentionally sat in front of the treasury and watched people putting in their offerings.

Think of Jesus watching you fill out your pledge card or put in your offering in church. By design, He saw what people gave and, more importantly, the spirit in which they gave it. For Jesus, giving was not a private matter. As Jesus watched people give and noticed how generous some were and how stingy others were, He has these things to teach us about money and giving.

First, Jesus teaches us that our highest need is to be a giving person. To give is to live; to not give is to die. Giving connects us with one another. Giving acts out our connection with God. Jesus gave all sorts of warnings about not being a giving person. “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth” (Matthew 6:19). “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). “Take heed and beware of all covetousness” (Luke 12:15). I believe one of the major spiritual problems of our time, if not the main one, is greed and covetousness. Compulsive extravagance is a modern mania, the contemporary lust for more, more, more, for ourselves is almost out of control.

I have to bite my tongue so many times when people tell me they cannot afford to give more, and then I see what they are spending their money for. I wish they would at least be honest and say, “I don’t believe in being a more giving person.”

The fact is the more one becomes a giving, generous person, the more one enhances his or her relationship to God. That’s why Jesus emphasized giving so much. Someone put it this way: “If your spiritual vitality seems low, if Bible study produces only dusty words, if prayer seems hollow and empty, then perhaps a prescription of lavish and joyful giving is just what you need. Giving brings authenticity and vitality to your devotional experience.”

Money is an effective way of showing our love for God because it is so much a part of us. One economist put it this way: “Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self.”

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked one wealthy patient, “What on earth are you going to do with all that money?” The patient replied, “Just worry about it, I suppose.” Dr. Menninger went on, “Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?” “No,” responded the patient, “but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it away.”

This terror is real. I see it everywhere — people afraid to be more giving. When we let go of money, we are letting go of a part of ourselves and part of our security, but this is precisely why it is so important to do. When we give money, we are releasing a little more of our ego-centric selves and a little more of our false security. Giving frees us to care. It produces an air of expectancy as we anticipate what God will lead us to give. It makes life with God an adventure of discovery.

Secondly, if our highest need as a human being is to be a giving person, how can we tell if we are giving enough? We are not truly a giving person until we give so that we feel it. The widow that Jesus watched put her offering in gave all that she had — so she felt it. The rich people that Jesus watched put their money in gave more than the widow, but proportionately much less. In fact, so little that they didn’t miss it. So they didn’t feel it. Some people say, “Give until it hurts.” I think what they really mean is what Jesus meant— “Give until you feel it.” Otherwise, it’s not truly giving. Give enough so that it makes a difference in your life. Give until it begins to feel good! If you give enough, then you are going to feel it and feel good about it.

This is what the Bible means when it says, “God loves a cheerful giver.” You are going to be cheerful when you have given enough. Giving so that we feel it has a way of routing out the tough old miser within us.

Thirdly, if we are going to give enough to be a cheerful giver and so that we meet our highest need to be a giver, then we have to be honest about our giving — honest with ourselves, honest with others, and honest with God.
For most of us to give $5.00 per week, or even $10 per week to the church does not affect us very much — we don’t feel it. And if we don’t feel it, the gift has no significance for us. Five dollars a week or even ten dollars a week doesn’t make most of us put off buying a new car or even a less expensive model. It doesn’t keep us from going out to eat or from purchasing the many little luxuries which we all purchase. Most of us give from left-overs. To give enough means that our giving will begin to make us re-arrange our priorities in life.

If we’re going to be honest about our giving, then we also have to get in touch with our feelings about money. For most of us, the biggest obstacle to overcome is not that of understanding what the Bible teaches us about money, but that of coming to terms with our fears, insecurity, and guilt about money. We are threatened by the subject of money. We are afraid that we have too little, or some are afraid that they have too much.

The fact is — giving can change your life for the better. It always has a positive effect. That’s why Jesus saw giving as our highest need.

How much then should you give? In our kind of church, there is no minimum and no maximum. We are to give proportionately. Some here this morning should pledge $50 per week, and some higher than that. Some should pledge $30 per week, and some $25 per week. What Rowena and I are going to give.

As I said before, give enough so that you feel it — so that it makes a difference in your life.

Will the ushers please now pass out the pledge cards to everyone present?

In the top left-hand corner of the pledge card, just above the picture of the bell tower or a little bit to the right of it, please print your name — don’t worry about the address at this point.

Now try to determine how much you are going to give each week — do this even though in your case you might be going to pay by the by the month or once each year for the three-year period.

Near the bottom of the pledge card, you will see the statement, “I/We will try to give $____ per week for 150 weeks for a total of $____ beginning on,” and then fill in the date you plan to begin. Maybe May 1, 1986, or June 1 — it’s up to you.

What you do this morning can change your life for the better and it will also keep this church moving in a forward direction for carrying out its vital ministries in this community and the world. Amen.