Sunday, November 23, 1986
**FAREWLL TO ALMS**
II Corinthians 9:6-8, 11-12; Mark 12:41-44

The scripture lesson just read from the Gospel of Mark has in it this amazing sentence: “And Jesus watched the people as they put their money into the offering plates.” That’s a slight paraphrase — but the point is — “Jesus is watching.”

Every time I hear this story read and think of Jesus watching, I remember a story which a minister friend of mine told me last spring. He is the senior minister of Plymouth Church in Miami, Florida, where the crime rate is rather high. Thus, many people are taking all kinds of measures to make their property more secure. One elderly woman who lived alone in a large house filled with expensive objects had her house secured with iron bars on all the windows. Then she added an elaborate electronic security system. However, she still didn’t feel safe. A friend suggested that she get a large watchdog — the meaner, the better. So, she went to a place where such dogs could be purchased. However, the man in charge said that he only had a dog and a parrot and that they worked together as a team; one could not be had without the other. The woman said that she did not want both and insisted on having only the watchdog. The man was even more insistent and said they could only be purchased together. Finally, the woman agreed and took them both home. Now she felt secure.

A few weeks later, a burglar slipped into her home. He got past the barred windows and disarmed the security system. He began to gather the valuables in the house and was putting them into a large bag. All of a sudden, he heard a voice say, “Jesus is watching.” Startled, he turned to see where the voice came from. Then he noticed the parrot. He went back to his task of gathering all the valuable objects he could find. Again, the voice spoke: “Jesus is watching!” He turned and looked at the parrot once more and said, “Shut up, you dumb parrot.” And then the parrot said, “Sic’em, Jesus!”

This morning, as Jesus watches, 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 as we become giving, generous people.

Jesus said in so many ways that those among us who emphasize only taking and owning and keeping will lose our lives and our souls. However, those among us who become giving human beings will find our lives and save our lives. We are closest to God when we are givers and not takers.

The sermon is entitled, “Farewell to Alms,” because too many church members and churchgoers still think of their giving to the church as giving alms, or giving for charity. The Oxford Dictionary defines “alms” as money, food, or other donations given to the poor or needy — anything given as charity. Sometimes, for example, we think of giving alms to a beggar. The church is not a charity. It is the body of Christ alive in the world. The church is not an institution that begs for money; it is a community of faith whose members give money for its support so that together we can carry on a ministry on behalf of Christ in this world. So when you give to the church, you are saying “farewell to alms,” and hello to the joy of giving.

But now let's back up and look at a prior question. Why is it so difficult for most of us to say "farewell to alms?" Or to put it another way — why is it so difficult for us to become truly giving individuals, to make giving a regular part of our lives rather than an impulse now and then? What makes us hold back in our giving?

There's been a lot of research from sociological, psychological, and theological perspectives as to why people give and do not give. People give for a variety of reasons — out of a sense of duty; sometimes out of guilt; at other times for personal recognition; maybe for tax benefits; sometimes because of pressure from someone ( "I'll give to your cause if you will give to mine" ); and sometimes out of joy and gratitude. Usually, we have several of these reasons for our giving.

People also hold back from giving for a variety of different reasons. Mostly, people hold back in their giving for fear that they will not be able to survive without keeping what they are being asked to give. Most of us have a built-in desire to hold onto what we have. Now, I don't mean by that that we all save our money — but we hold onto it in the sense that when we spend it, we usually spend it on things for ourselves. Thus, we are still holding onto it.

More and more, this is the case in our society. We are educated from little on up to be consumers. I was reading an article the other day that pointed out that young people in their teens are some of the biggest consumers in today's world. But for all of us — day after day, we are bombarded with suggestions to buy! buy! buy! and spend! spend! spend! We are told that we deserve it. Buy this item for yourself. You need no longer be without it. Where, however, in our culture are we being led to know the joy of regular and systematic giving? Mostly in the church, and we don't do a very good job of it. If there's anything in my job that keeps me awake at night, it's wondering how to do a better job of helping people become generous giving people.

Some of us, fortunately, were taught to be givers in our families. Our parents set the example for us. In last Sunday's sermon, John Smeltzer talked about the young boy who generously offered all he had to one of Jesus'disciples in an attempt to help feed the crowd of 5,000. Where did this young boy learn about giving? Probably from his parents.

John also mentioned that one thing his parents taught him from little on up was to be a giver and not only a taker. He specifically remembers how his parents were willing to give, not leftovers, but off the top, to church and community. I've mentioned it before, but it bears repeating again, that one thing all of us children learned in the family in which I was raised was to be a giving person. Whatever money we earned by our work or that which was given to us as an allowance, we were encouraged to first give 10% of that to the church. I wonder how many of us are teaching our children and young people today to be generous givers in the same way.

A few weeks ago, an article on the Wall Street Journal's editorial page was concerned about the same issue. The writer wondered: "Will today's young give as well as they get?" Here are some of the questions he raised: "Will this, the'me generation,' be as generous in its support of not-for-profit service organizations as its parents and grandparents have been? Will the new generation of getters turn into givers?" The writer went on to say, "I've spent my entire working life in the world of the young. I like their energy, their skills, their keen young minds, but I find something lacking in them. For want of a better word, call it heart. Their energy seems to be directed wholly toward self-improvement for self's sake. The skills they exhibit seem to be employed primarily on behalf of acquisition."

I don't know if this writer is correct in his assessment or not, but I do worry about it. Churches like this one were built because of the generosity of past generations, many of whom had to sacrifice to see it come into being. My hope is that we will follow their good example. Jesus reminds us to not be afraid to let go — to become a joyful giving person. I find that people not only want to hold onto their money so that they can use it for themselves, but we want to hold on tightly to other things as well. We hang onto our bad habits, our grudges and resentments, and our fears. Some even hold onto their failures, their guilt, and their anger. We hang onto these things as if they were priceless treasures, things that we cannot do without. Some people not only hang onto such things but actually try to collect more to add to their treasury.

This fear of not being able to let go of anything — the fear of giving oneself to God and to others — the fear of becoming too much of a generous, giving individual is one that must be passed through if we are to become joyful, giving people. 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. Jesus said, "Lose your life, give it away, and then you will find it."

This morning I'm asking you to consider building generous giving into your way of life. I'm asking you not to be only an alms giver. An alms giver is one who from time to time responds to an individual direct need of someone, and that's all right. But I'm asking you and me, as followers of Christ, to be more than that, to become regular, generous, and cheerful givers.

To help you to be able to say "farewell to alms," here are some very practical suggestions:

First, on the negative side:

Don't play the averaging game. Some persons make the mistake of looking at the total amount of the church budget and figuring out how many members there are and trying to calculate what their giving should be. When you do this, you are trying to let something other than your own need to give tell you how much is your part. You should try to make a decision based on your own generosity; thus, some should give a lot more than the average, and others less.

Don't give out of leftovers. Give off the top rather than off the bottom. Giving from the bottom is the process of giving to the church after you've purchased everything you want. Giving off the top suggests that you decided what you are going to give to the church before your other spending. You'll discover that all your other needs can still easily be met.

Now on the positive side, the three "T's" of giving:

Thoughtfully: Begin your thinking by considering a gift of 5% of your income for the work of the church. Another way to put this is to consider giving one dollar per week for every $1,000 of annual income. Thus, if your income is $20,000 per year, consider giving $20 per week. To help you in your thinking, each member or family will receive within the coming week a letter from the finance committee, which will suggest a modest increase in your regular giving. There will be a card for you to fill out and return in an envelope, which is also enclosed with the letter. The finance committee asked that you thoughtfully consider the suggested increase.

The second "T" is to give truthfully. This means simply to be honest about your giving. Often I meet people who say, "I'm giving all that I can afford," when they really mean, "I'm giving all

that I want to give." Some people act as if their whole budget is going to be wrecked if they increase their giving by $2.00 per week. So give truthfully.

And the third "T" of giving is to give thankfully. A thankful giver is one who knows that all things ultimately come from God. When we are thankful, it brings out the best in us. A thankful giver is always a cheerful giver. A thankful person never complains about giving, but rather is thankful for the opportunity to give. Thankful people are thankful that they have something to give.

As we approach the national Thanksgiving holiday, remember that thanks and giving always go together. Amen.