Book 17

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1987

"THREE LIES AND THREE TRUTHS"

Matthew 6:19-21, 16:24-26

On January 1, 1988, I will have been with you as your Senior Minister for 16 years. When the Search Committee first interviewed me, the members of that Committee characterized this congregation as a "sleeping giant." They said that it was ready to awaken, ready to grow and expand. The Committee was telling the truth. First-Plymouth Church was a "sleeping giant," and it has awakened. This congregation has grown in many ways and is today one of the outstanding churches in our denomination or in any other denomination when measured by any of the usual standards.

Now we have to keep this giant awake. And that's what I want to talk with you about this morning. That's why in the letter which was sent to our members this week from the Chair of the Finance Committee, I was quoted as saying that I believed that this sermon today is one of the most important I have ever preached in my almost 16 years among us.

Although today's sermon is about money and your giving to the church it is really about much more than that. It is about two deeper

issues -- (1) What giving can do for you; and (2) It is about the future of this Church and its vital ministry in this community and in the larger community as well.

First, we are going to talk about money and what giving can do for you.

It may surprise you to know that in the New Testament, Jesus 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 because Jesus knew that how we handle our money and whether we are givers or takers reveals more about our spiritual lives than almost anything else.

He also knew that how we handle our money can make us either miserable or happy. It's no accident that the word "miserable" is the word "miser" with a suffix added.

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's even difficult for us to talk openly and frankly about money, especially in the church. However, just as Jesus talked openly about money, so also do we in this kind of church.

The three lies I hear most frequently concerning giving money to the church are these:

1. "If I had more, I would give more." The truth is in this Church and in most other churches, the largest proportionate or percentage givers are those who have the least. It is also the truth that frequently when individuals or families begin making more money, they do not give any more than previously, rather they spend more and more on themselves.

What often happens is that the more we have, the more we try to hold on to it. Several years ago a TV documentary filmed a method for trapping monkeys. The natives made a hole in a log and put bait inside, bait most tempting to monkeys. The monkey reached his hand in to get the bait, but when his fingers closed on it, his fist enlarged his hand so much he could not get it back out through the hole. The poor creature was so determined to hang on to what he had that he would not let go. Even while he was being captured -- frightened to death by the possibility -- he still could not let go! Even as he was being put into the cage that would take away his freedom entirely, he could not let go. All he needed to be free was to let go, but to do so was incomprehensible. His priorities would not allow it. He was possessed by what he was supposed to possess.

We ponder the fate of the poor monkey and mutter mentally -- "Poor silly monkey." Yet I meet so many human beings who are completely possessed by what they possess that they cannot let any of it go, much less freely give it away.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a 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 to ask, "Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?" "No," said the patient, "But I get such terror when I think of giving some of it away." Sounds like the monkey who couldn't let go.

The terror is real. I see it everywhere -- people afraid to be more giving, more generous. They are not afraid to spend more money on themselves, but afraid to give it away. That's why so many organizations and too many churches try to camouflage what they want people to give to them. Instead they try to sell them something. They give in to a "consumer" mentality. They know that people are more willing to give if they get something tangible in return. So churches and TV Evangelists give away books, records, tapes or anointed handkerchiefs to those who promise to give a certain amount. This church is not prepared to offer those who double their pledge a week's free stay in a luxurious

Christian resort or even in a non-Christian secular humanist resort. That is bad stewardship and bad theology. To truly give in the Christian sense, is to give and expect nothing in return -- otherwise it's not a gift, it's a purchase.

Now I've got nothing against selling and buying -- but it's different than giving, and we don't want to confuse the two.

Jesus knew that we all have a need to be givers, and not only buyers or sellers or consumers.

2. The second lie that is told frequently by people who are asked to give is: "I'll give later, after I take care of other expenses." Usually, the later never comes. Once the other expenses are taken care of, there is very little left to give freely and cheerfully. Giving out of leftovers is not what Jesus was talking about.

What such people are really saying is -- other things in life are more important to me than giving. The church is low on my priority list. If there's anything left-over after I've spent my money on my own necessities and luxuries, then I'll give some of that.

3. The third lie about giving is: "I'm giving all that I can afford." The truth is,

"I'm giving all that I think I can afford, but I've never truly examined my priorities and my spending."

I believe that 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. It is the major idolatry of our time as well. We are seduced into believing that when we get enough and control enough, we shall not only be safe, but we shall be happy. Our greed supports our militarism. We have so much that we need better hardware to protect and guard it.

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 with themselves and with God and say, "I don't believe in being a more giving person. I want more for myself."

So the three lies of our time about giving are: (1) "If I had more, I would give more." (2) "I'll give later, after I take care of my other expenses." (3) "I'm giving all that I can afford."

So to counteract those lies, here are three truths about giving that come straight from

the teachings of Jesus.

(1) The first truth is this: To be a generous giving person is our highest need. To give is to live. To not give is to die spiritually, if not physically. Jesus said it in so many ways -- "For whoever would save his or her life will lose it, and whoever gives his or her life for my sake will find it."

It is the heart of the Christian message that God is above all a giving God. The Bible stays, "God so loved the world that God gave." God's love, God's goodness, God's creation, all are 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 in our own lives as we become giving, generous people.

2. The second truth about giving is this: We are not truly a giving person until we give so that we feel it, so that it changes our way of living and our values. Otherwise our giving is cosmetic.

I've heard people say, "Give until it hurts." I think what they really mean is, "Give until you feel it." Otherwise it is not truly giving -- it's giving leftovers. Jesus was saying, "Give enough so that it makes a difference in your life. Give, not until it

hurts, but give until it feels good. If you give enough, then you are going to feel it and feel good about it."

That is what the Bible means when it says, "God loves a cheerful giver." You are going to be a cheerful giver when you are giving enough. And when you are giving enough it's going to continue to change you for the better.

The truth is that for most of us to give $5.00 per week, or $10.00 per week, or $20.00 per week, doesn't affect us very much. We don't really feel it. It 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. If we're honest, most of us give from leftovers. We give from what's left over after we've spent money on everything else we think we need or deserve.

Here's a suggestion that will turn your life around. Decided what you are going to give first. Then each week, or each paycheck, put that amount aside and give it to the church, and then do all the rest of your buying from what's left. I can promise you that it will change your whole life for the better. That's why we have the weekly envelope system.

3. The third truth about giving is this: Not only will your giving change you for the better, but through the church it will help make the world better. The future of this Church's ministry depends upon the support of all of us. AMEN.

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Sometimes people ask me as a minister what worry there is that keeps me awake at night. The most prominent one is that they are few institutions in our society which are teaching our children and us as adults how to be givers as well as consumers and takers. This morning, in a small way we are going to try to remedy that situation. Will all the children now please come forward and at the same time will the ushers begin to pass out the pledge cards for the adults.

Some suggestions for you as you begin to fill out your pledge card:

1. Don't average.

2. Don't put down the same as last year.

3. Think of what kind of regular gift will make you feel it so that it begins to change your life.