Sunday, October 31, 1993
**DISCOVER THE JOY**
II Corinthians 9:6-8,11-12; Matthew 11:28-30

A common complaint about the church, no matter the denomination, is this: “The church is always asking for money.” It may surprise you to hear me say that I think this complaint is sometimes justified. Not only do we, as ministers and leaders in the church, sometimes make the mistake of asking for money too often, but we frequently make a bigger mistake in the way we try to motivate people to give. Our primary goal should be to help people continue to grow and mature spiritually, while at the same time discovering the joy of giving.

What are some of the roadblocks that keep you, me, and others from discovering the joy of giving? These roadblocks fall into three categories.

I. The first category of things that hinder us from experiencing the joy of giving is that we tend to give for the wrong reasons.
What are some of these?

We try to get people to give out of guilt.
We work at making people feel bad because they are not giving enough compared to what they spend on other things, or compared to what some of their peers are giving.
Giving out of guilt is better than not giving at all, and perhaps it’s where some people have to begin, but as we grow and mature spiritually, there are higher and more satisfying reasons for giving. You will never be a truly joyful giver if you only give out of guilt.

A second inadequate reason is to give in order to gain recognition and impress others with your generosity.
Again, giving in order to gain recognition is better than not giving at all. But as you grow and mature in your spiritual life and in your relationship to God and others, you will discover more satisfying reasons and benefits for giving. You will never experience the joy of giving if you give only for personal recognition.

In fact, Jesus warns us about the false rewards of giving to gain recognition. Here’s what he said:
“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly, I tell you, they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be done in secret; and God, who sees in secret, will reward you.”

One of the highest forms of giving, and the most satisfying, is giving in secret. You’ve heard me mention before that life-changing novel by Lloyd Douglas, The Magnificent Obsession.

One of the main characters in the story, Dr. Wayne Hudson, is on the edge of failure and in deep depression following the death of his wife. He goes to a monument works to pick out a headstone for her grave. There he encounters the eccentric but strangely talented sculptor, Clive Randolph. Sensing the doctor’s state of mind, Randolph engages him in conversation and, as their friendship develops, imparts to Dr. Hudson a “secret” which, he says, can transform one’s whole life — and later on in the story, it does that for Dr. Hudson.

The theory, when pieced together, goes something like this: Most of us live depleted lives, that is, our lives have a certain kind of emptiness. We do not have the energy and joy that is possible. The reason is that when we perform a good deed, we advertise it, display it, or let it be known in some way, and thus collect and enjoy the credit then and there. We want our reward immediately, and we get it — and then it's gone.

On the other hand, when we do something cheap, mean, dishonest, or wrong — something we're not proud of — we carefully hide it if we can, with the result that the "credit" for this kind of action remains with us, accumulates, and can poison us.

A person who lives this way, and many do, is chronically bankrupt. They have no confidence, zest, or joy in living. They find they have to spend too much energy pretending, covering up, protecting themselves, hoarding what they have, afraid they will come up short. Over time, they become miserable and stingy.

What, then, is the alternative? Listen carefully. The alternative is to reverse the whole strategy. You admit, confess, and divest yourself of your weaknesses, your errors, your sins, your meanness, your fears, and your doubts — and at the same time, you hide your good deeds. You give generously and in secret. You avoid recognition for your giving. So instead of your sins and weaknesses becoming your innermost secrets, your good deeds become your innermost secrets.

It's exactly what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. And the good news is that you are your secrets. What you keep secret, what you keep hidden within yourself, is what you become. When you give in secret, it changes your life for the better. The fact is, you begin to discover the true and abiding joy of giving when you do it in secret.

Some people give out of guilt, others for recognition. A third less-than-adequate reason is to give out of habit.
A giving habit is a good habit to acquire, and it's certainly better than not giving at all. But unless we move beyond it, we tend to stay stuck at the same level of giving, never moving on to discovering the joy of giving, which means we never move on to a deeper level of spiritual maturity.

For example, many church members will receive their pledge card for the year, and out of long-standing habit, will simply pledge to give the same amount they gave the previous year. Good habits are helpful, but unless we grow in them, they become boring and lifeless.

Another giving habit is to always give the smallest bill — the $1 bill. A $1 bill and a $20 bill met one day on their way to the bank and inquired of each other about their lives. The $20 bill told of an exciting life — going to fine restaurants, the movies, a trip to Las Vegas, a vacation in the mountains, skiing, golf—"all in all, a great life," said the $20 bill. "What about you?" she asked the $1 bill. "My life is always the same," he replied, "frankly, it's getting kind of boring. All I do is go to church, go to church."

The point is this: when we give for inadequate reasons, we are hindered from discovering the true joy of giving, and our growth in spiritual maturity is stunted.

II. A second hindrance to discovering the joy of giving is that we do not see money as being deeply spiritual.

In fact, some people think it is almost sacrilegious to talk about money in a spiritual context. They want to separate money from their religious faith. They are quick to quote scripture: “Money is the root of all evil.” This is one of the most misquoted Bible passages. What the Bible actually says is: “The love of money is the root of all evil.” (1 Timothy 6:10)

Money itself is innocent. It is the love of money, the consciousness in which you use money, that is the cause of much limitation. Jesus knew and taught that the right attitude toward money and how we use it can deepen our spiritual lives more than almost any other activity.

Jesus taught that there is little likelihood that your life can be truly joyful and fulfilling unless you have a positive and creative attitude toward money. Why? Because it is rare that a day will pass when you will not have some kind of monetary involvement with the world.

A survey was once conducted by a research department at the University of Michigan. They wanted to know what effect money had on people’s lives. Here are three of their findings:

What do people worry about most? Money.
What makes people happiest? Money.
What makes people unhappiest? Money.
Isn’t it amazing how much of our emotional lives and how much of our self-esteem are tied to our money — how much we make or how much we don’t make? Isn’t it also amazing how willing people are to talk about the most intimate details of their lives, but rarely talk about their money?

In spiritual counseling, people often ask, “What does God want me to do with my life?” But they never ask, “What does God want me to do with my money?” They fail to see how their money and their lives are connected. God is as concerned with what we do with our money as God is with any other part of our lives.

That’s why giving money for the right reasons is one of the most spiritual of all activities and leads to spiritual maturity and joy. What is the highest motivation for giving according to the Christian faith?

The highest motivation for giving is to give out of gratitude. It is at 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. God is the divine givingness of the universe. And you are created in the image and likeness of this divine givingness. When you become a giving person, you are being what God created you to be. You cannot make any sense out of life or realize the flow of God’s goodness into your life until you begin to see yourself as a giver. That’s why we begin to experience the transforming power of God’s love as we become joyful, giving, generous people. And we do that when we give out of gratitude — and when we give enough.

Jesus said it in so many ways: Those among us who emphasize only taking, owning, keeping, hoarding, and spending our money primarily on ourselves will lose our lives and souls and become miserable. However, those among us who become giving human beings will find and save our lives, and we will discover a joy that does not fade away. We are closest to God when we are givers, not takers.

III. A third reason many people never discover the joy of giving is that they fear they will not have enough money.

And so what do they do? They give out of leftovers. They are stingy with their giving. When they have spent money first on everything else they think they need, then, and only then, do they decide what they might be able to give. If you give from leftovers, you will never discover the joy of giving.

Jesus and the Bible teach us to do just the opposite. Decide first what you are going to give regularly to the church for its ministries, and then everything else will fall into place. The symbolism here is of the highest importance. It shows your deep trust in God. It symbolizes putting God first in your life.

How do you know when you're giving enough? The simple answer is: You know you're giving enough when you are joyful in your giving. The Bible says, "God loves a cheerful giver."

Because I was a regular churchgoer from childhood on, I've heard countless sermons. Most of them I've forgotten, but I still remember the main point of a sermon I heard when I was in junior high school. I can even remember the preacher's name and see him in my mind's eye. He was a guest preacher in my hometown church, and he was talking about giving. He said, "Too often, the church has asked us to give until it hurts, but that's not the test." Then he added, "Rather, Jesus and the Bible ask us to give until it feels good."

I make this point to each new member group who joins our church: If you don't feel good about your giving, it's a signal that you are not giving enough. When you are giving enough, you discover the joy of giving, and you continue to grow and mature spiritually.

How do you begin? Set aside a certain proportion of your income and give that regularly. Some of our members are tithers, giving 10% of their income. Others have decided on a different percentage.

Choose a percentage, say 5%, and then each year, grow in that percentage so that you also continue to grow spiritually. As the Bible says, "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Have you heard the story about the man who came to his pastor with a problem? He said that he had always been a tither. He believed in tithing. He understood that this was the fair and joyful way to give. But now he had a problem. "What is it?" asked his pastor. The man said that he began tithing when he was making $5,000 a year, so he was giving 10%, or $500. When he was making $50,000, he was joyfully giving $5,000. Each year, he earned more and more money. Now, he said, his income was $500,000 a year, and he was finding it difficult to think of giving $50,000.

"I understand your problem," his pastor responded. "I think we need to pray about it." So they bowed their heads, and the pastor prayed, "Dear God, our brother here has a problem. He knows he should tithe, and he has discovered the joy of giving. With his tithing, he has prospered more and more. But now he's making so much money that he is reluctant to tithe. Please help him resolve his problem. Reduce his income so that he can feel good about tithing again."

During these next several weeks, as you consider again your level of giving, I hope you will discover the joy of giving. Amen.