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 what 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 who are ministers and leaders in the church sometimes make the mistake of asking for money too often but we more frequently make a bigger mistake in some of the ways in which we try to motivate people to give. Our primary goal should be to help people to continue to grow and mature spiritually and at the same time discover the joy of giving.

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

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

1. 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 satisfactory reasons for giving. You will never be a truly joyful giver if you only give out of guilt.

2. A second inadequate reason for getting people to give is so that they can gain recognition and impress others with their 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 in order 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 and most deeply spiritual kind of giving is to do it in secret. You've heard me mention in sermons many times 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, Clive Randolph engages him in conversation and gradually as their friendship develops, Randolph imparts to Dr. Hudson a "secret" which can, he says, transform one's whole life and later on in the story it does that for Dr. Hudson.

At no place in the novel is the theory fully and explicitly stated, but when pieced together it runs 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 possi-

ble. And 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 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 and deny it, if we can, with the result that the "credit" for this kind of action remains with us and accumulates; it builds up within us and can poison us.

Thus a person who follows such a style of life, and many do, is chronically bankrupt. They have no confidence or zest or joy in their living. Furthermore, they find that they have to spend too much of their energy pretending, covering up,

protecting themselves, hoarding what they have, afraid they are going to 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 then admit, confess and thus divest yourself of your weaknesses, your errors, your sins, your meanness, your fears and doubts; and at the same time you hide your good deeds. You do your giving generously and in secret. You do your best to avoid recognition for your giving. So instead of your sins and weaknesses becoming your innermost secrets which direct your life, 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. That which you keep secret, keep hidden within yourself is what you become and what you are. When you give in secret, it changes your life for the better. The fact is you begin to discover the true and abiding joy in giving when you do it in secret.

3. Some people give out of guilt, others for recognition, and a third less than adequate reason for giving is to give only out of habit. Again, a giving habit is a good habit to acquire, and it's certainly better than not giving at all, but the problem is that unless we move beyond it we tend to stay stuck at the same level of giving and never move 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 the pledge card for 1994, in the mail and out of long-standing habit will simply pledge to give for 1994 what they gave in 1993. Good habits are helpful, but unless we grow in them, they become boring and lifeless.

Another giving habit is to give the smallest bill, the $1 bill. A one dollar bill and a twenty dollar bill met one day on their way to the bank and inquired of each other as to what was going on in their lives. The twenty dollar bill told about her 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. "What about you?" she asked the one-dollar bill. "My life is always the same," he said, "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. In addition to these lower motivations for giving which can keep us from experiencing the joy of giving, a second hindrance or roadblock is that we do not see money as being deeply spiritual. In fact there are some people who think it is almost a sacrilege 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 of all Bible passages. What the Bible says is: "The love of money is the

root of all evils." (I Timothy 6:10) Money 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 of the University of Michigan. In essence they wanted to know what effect money

had on the lives of people. Three of their findings:

What do people worry about most? Money.
What makes people the happiest? Money.
What makes people the unhappiest? Money.

Isn't it amazing how much of our emotional lives and how much of our self-esteem is tied to our money, to 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 and will rarely talk about their own money.

In spiritual counseling, people will 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 much 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 is for giving is to give out of gratitude. 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. God is the divine givingness of the universe. And you are created in the image-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 are giving enough.

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

We are closest to God when we are givers and not takers.

What keeps us from discovering the joy of giving?

First, when we give for the wrong reasons and I mentioned three although I'm sure you can think of more...giving out of guilt, giving for personal recognition, and giving out of habit. Second, we are hindered in discovering the joy of giving when we do not see money and how we use it as a vital part of our spiritual lives. Money can be a tremendous power for the good when used correctly. Money is good, it can be God in action.

III. And third, many people never discover the joy of giving because they so much 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 which they think they need, then only 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 then do I know when I'm giving enough? The simple answer is you know that you are

giving enough when you are joyful in your giving. The Bible says, "God loves a cheerful giver."

Because I was a regular churchgoer from child-hood on through my life, 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 giv-ing. He said, "Too often church has asked us to give until it hurts, but that's not the test." "Rath-er," he said, "Jesus and the Bible ask us to give until it feels good."

I make this point to each new member group who joins First- Plymouth. 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, they give 10% of their income. Others have decided on a different percentage.

Choose a percentage, say 5%, and then each year grow in that percentage to 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 a 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. He said that he began tithing when he was making $5000 a year so he was giving 10%, $500. When he was making $50,000, he was joyfully giving $5,000. Each year he was earning more and more money. Now he said, his income was $500,000 a year and he said 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, he has discovered the joy of giving. And 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.