Sunday, November 14, 1993
THREE REASONS FOR TEARING UP YOUR PLEDGE CARD
I Corinthians 16:1-2; II Corinthians 8:1-7; Matthew 6:19-21

This morning we welcomed new members into our congregation. Those of you who have joined this church within the past ten years or more and have attended the orientation meeting for new members, held on the preceding Thursday evening, know that at that meeting, each staff member gives a brief explanation of some of the many ministries and programs carried out by this church. Near the conclusion of that orientation meeting, I provide a brief description of the finances of this congregation.

In that talk, I explain the basic Biblical principles for giving in the hope that our new members will come to discover what many of our present members already experience — the joy of giving. It's what I call the CPR of giving. More about that in a moment.

First, however, I want to remind you of some of the basic assumptions upon which our Christian giving is founded.

According to the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, to live is to give. All living is giving. We live life best and most joyfully when we give our strengths, talents, and money. As I have said many times before, it's no accident that the word "miserable," which means unhappy, sad, lacking joy, comes from the word "miser." A miser is a stingy person who wants to hold on to whatever he or she has. It's almost as if some people really believe that they can take it with them.

To give is to live. There's no joy, no sparkle in life without giving. Those of you who have never had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land have not had the corresponding experience of seeing and wading in the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee.

Here's how one person described it: There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh, and fish are in it; splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. The River Jordan fills this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine, and people build their houses near it, and birds their nests. Every kind of life is happier because it is there.

The River Jordan flows on south into another sea. Here, there is no splash of fish, no song of birds. Travelers choose another route unless on urgent business. The air hangs above its waters, and neither human nor beast nor fowl will drink. What makes the difference in these neighboring seas? Not the River Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie, nor the country.

This is the difference: The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it, another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing. It is named the Dead Sea.

Unfortunately, some of the most widely read books in recent years are like the Dead Sea. They deal with getting and taking rather than the joy of giving. These books miss the very important point that life is not lived from outside-in, but from inside-out. Unless we understand this, we

miss the whole meaning of life. Jesus taught that your life is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift to God.

A conversation which all of us frequently overhear goes something like this: "Okay, but tell me one thing, what's in it for me?" It's an attitude that's all too common. A personnel manager is quoted as referring to the new "benefits bums." He says that during an interview, these people hardly listen to the duties of the job being explained. They ask questions about salary, vacations, sick days, and other benefits and "perks." They shop employers for benefits. That, to them, seems the essence of employment. They are ready to take but not give.

The takers are the people who believe that their lives will always be the total of what they can get from the world. They are always thinking "get, get, get." They plan and scheme ways to get what they want in money, in love, and in happiness. The givers, on the other hand, are convinced that life is a giving process. Thus their subtle motivation in all their ways is to give themselves away — in love, in service, and in countless other ways. They are always secure, for they intuitively know that God's good flows from within. They know that the more they give, the more they will have. That's what Jesus taught. He said, "Give and it will be given to you." When you are a giver and not a taker, you are living up to the divine image in which you were created. God is the divine givingness of the Universe.

How then does one become a joyful giving person? According to the Bible, we are to engage in the CPR of giving.

The "C" is for being a "cheerful giver." As I mentioned two weeks ago in the sermon, if you are not now a "cheerful giver," it probably means you are not giving enough. More about that in a moment.

The "P" in the CPR of giving reminds us that we are to give proportionately. Set aside a certain percent of your income. Those who have more are to give more. If you are now giving 4%, then consider increasing it for 1994 to 5 or 6%. Grow in your giving, and that will help you in your spiritual growth.

The "R" in the CPR of giving stands for regularly. In the same way that we expect to be paid on a regular basis in our work, so we are to give regularly. A mature, joyful Christian is one who makes giving a regular part of his or her life.

Now let's move on to the main points of this sermon. The title is: Three Reasons for Tearing Up Your Pledge Card.

Most of you have already completed your pledge card for 1994. You have mailed it in or perhaps brought it with you this morning. Here are three reasons you might want to tear it up and fill out a new one.

First, the Bible tells us, "Do not give reluctantly," or as another translation puts it, "Do not give grudgingly." There's nothing worse than a complaining giver. So if you are not cheerful and joyful about the pledge you have made for the support of the church, it probably means that you are not giving enough, so tear up your pledge card and make out a new one. We want this to be a church filled with cheerful people. Giving can be fun.
A thankful person gives cheerfully; an ungrateful person gives grudgingly.

Secondly, tear up your pledge card if you think the church — and this church in particular — is an unnecessary institution. Or if you think of the church as just another one of the many charities you support, then tear up your card. The church is not a charity. It is the people of God, the body of Christ, and you are a member of it. All of us like to give to a winning cause rather than to a sinking ship. The mission of God is a winning cause. This congregation is a winning cause. I'm more excited about this church and its ministries than I have ever been. You are a generous people.
This is one of the most exciting church congregations in the country. People who visit frequently tell me that they can sense the positive spirit that is at work here.

But if you think the church and what it's doing is not all that important, then tear up your pledge card.

Or if you think this congregation should only limp along in a mediocre fashion, then by all means tear up your pledge card. We can probably limp without your help, but we cannot walk, run, and fly without your help. I know that you do not want us to only limp along in a mediocre fashion. On the other hand, if you are convinced that this church is vital to the life of this community and an important part of your own personal life, then tear up your pledge card and fill out a new one.

I heard about the chair of a pastoral search committee who described the kind of minister the church wanted. He said, "We don't want someone who is either too liberal or too conservative. We just want someone who's mediocre."

This leads to the third reason for tearing up your pledge card. Tear it up if you are not giving enough. How do you know if you're giving enough? Ask yourself these questions: Have you discovered the joy of giving? If not, you're not giving enough. Do you give from leftovers after you've spent money on everything else you think you need? Or is your giving to the church the first on your list? Is it the first check you write? Or is it the last? Remember, Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
Do you want to have a healthy heart? According to the American Heart Association, coronary heart disease remains the No. 1 killer in the United States. Sixty-seven million Americans have heart disease, and almost a million will die of it this year. But a lot can be done to change these statistics. The heart disease death rate could be lowered dramatically if we made some changes in our living habits.

Some of the living habits we need to change are the practices most of us know about — proper diet, regular exercise, and learning how to handle stress.

There's another important positive living habit that has a strong effect on maintaining a healthy heart — regular church attendance. According to Dr. David Larson, a researcher who has been studying how to maintain a healthy heart, regular church attendance is very important. In a study of a large group of men, he found that those who were free of cardiovascular disease and hypertension were those who attended church regularly and took their faith seriously. On the other hand, those individuals who did not consider religion important and had low attendance at worship were much more likely to have cardiovascular disease and hypertension.

Jesus was very much concerned about the heart. The Biblical writers and Jesus thought of the heart as being more than a physical organ. The heart was also a metaphor for the center of the person — the soul. It was the basic point of contact with God. For example, the Bible says that

when Mary watched the angels, shepherds, and the Wise Men come to see the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, she “pondered all these things in her heart.” On the other hand, when Jesus’ people refused to pay attention to God, Jesus described them as having “hardened hearts.”

We also use the word “heart” as a metaphor. We talk about God’s point of contact with us as being through the “heart” as well as through the intellect. We speak of having a “receptive heart.” But now we know that it’s more than a metaphor. A life lived in the Spirit, or by paying attention to the Spirit, actually contributes to having a healthy heart.

All of this helps us to understand what Jesus meant when he said, “Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.” Unfortunately, many people reverse the saying. They think Jesus had it backward. They think he should’ve said, “Where your heart is, there will be your treasure also.”

But he didn’t say it that way. He said, where we put our treasure is where our real commitment lies.

Where we put our money not only reflects our values, it also shapes our commitments. So if you want to have a healthy heart both physically and spiritually, then you need to be a generous giver to your church as well as a regular participant in worship here on Sunday mornings. Wherever your treasure is, there will be your heart also. Regular giving as a spiritual exercise makes for a healthy heart in the same way that regular physical exercise strengthens one’s heart in other ways. Amen.