Sunday, November 2, 1997
FOLLOW THE MONEY
Mark 12:38-44

This morning I am going to talk with you plainly and openly about the joy of being a giving person and how that relates to the giving of money for the support of the church.

Preaching a sermon on giving money to the church always puts the preacher in a strange predicament, for his salary comes out of the budget he is talking about, that same budget to which he is urging people to give generously. However, I find comfort in the fact that I am not the first or the last preacher to be in this position.

When Reinhold Niebuhr, a world-famous theologian, was a young preacher in his first church in Detroit in the 1920s, he wrote in his journal:

“Next week we are going to hold our Every Member Canvass. They expect me to preach a sermon which will prepare the good people to give generously. I don’t mind that. Most people give little enough for the church or for anything else not connected with their own pleasures. But I don’t see how you can preach a sermon adequate to the needs of the moment without identifying the church with the Kingdom of God too unqualifiedly. And meanwhile, you are drawing your salary from the church and remembering that if the canvass is a success, there may be an increase in salary next year. It isn’t easy to mix the business of preaching with the business of making a living. But let’s not be too squeamish. There is old J.Q. It would do his soul good if he loosened up a bit.”

Martin Luther was certainly not squeamish when it came to talking about money in the pulpit. In one of his sermons, he said, “I understand that many of you do not want to give money. You ungrateful people should be ashamed of yourselves... What does it mean if not that you do not want the gospel preached, the children taught, and the poor helped? I am sorry that I ever freed you from the tyrants and the papists. You ungrateful beasts. You are not worthy of the treasure of the gospel. If you don’t improve, I will stop preaching rather than cast pearls before swine.”

Today, in the tradition of Niebuhr and Luther and many others, I’m not going to be squeamish in my sermon on giving money for the support of the church. Undoubtedly, there are some J.Q.'s in this congregation whose souls would be helped if they loosened up a bit. After all, didn’t Jesus say that “where your treasure is, there will be your heart also"? In other words, your heart will follow your money.

Perhaps too often in the past we preachers have made the mistake of defining stewardship in a confused way. In an effort to make certain that giving to the church is set forth on an exalted spiritual level, we have broadened the definition so much that the concept of stewardship is blurred. The trouble is, when we get right down to it, we are still talking about giving money to the church. You know it, and no one is fooling anyone.

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) the future of First-Plymouth Church and its vital ministry in this community.

Let's look first at what giving can do for you. If your giving is to change your life for the better, then you need to be honest about your giving. I say this because after 40 years of ministry, there are three lies I hear most frequently on the issue of giving money to the church.

The first lie that is told by some people when asked to give or to give more is: "If I had more, I would give more." That's most of the time not true. The truth is that the largest proportionate or percentage givers are those who have the least. What happens is that when people begin to make or have more money, they do not very often increase their giving proportionately; rather, they spend more and more on themselves.
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, "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."

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 be more giving. That's why so many organizations and too many churches try to camouflage their request for people to give. Instead, they try to sell them something. They give in to the "consumer" mentality. They know that people are more willing to give if they get something tangible in return, so it's more like buying something for themselves. So churches and TV evangelists give away books, records, anointed handkerchiefs, and plastic angels to those who promise to give a certain amount. That's okay in the marketplace where buying and selling are a part of business, and Jesus had nothing against it, but giving is not the same as buying something. We are to be giving people because that's an important part of being a Christian. It's a gift, not a purchase.

The second lie that is told by some 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 the people who tell this lie are really saying is: "Other things in life are more important to me than giving. The church and my spiritual growth are 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."

The third lie that is told by some people who are asked to give is: "I'm giving all that I can afford to give." What such people are really saying is: "I'm giving all that I think I can afford, but I've never truly examined my priorities and my spending."
I am convinced that one of the major spiritual problems of our time is greed or covetousness. The contemporary lust for more, more, and more for ourselves is widespread. It is a major idolatry in our world. It's so easy to be seduced into believing that when we get enough and control enough, we will not only be safe but happy, and then we'll start giving.

You will have to decide which, if any, of these three lies are a part of your life when you consider what you are going to give to the church: (1) If I had more, I would give more. (2) I'll give later, after I take care of my other more important expenses. (3) I'm giving all that I can afford.

To counteract those lies, here are three truths about giving that come straight from the teachings of Jesus.

It's important to remember that Jesus, in his teaching and preaching, talked more about money and the giving of money than any other subject except the Kingdom of God. He gave an unusual amount of time to the money question because he knew that how we handle our money and whether we are primarily givers or takers reveals more about our spiritual lives than anything else.

Here's the first truth about giving. 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 many different 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 says, "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. Everything you have in life is a gift.

Since it is a basic part of God's nature to be giving, and since we are created in God's image, we fulfill that image when we are giving. To not be a giver, but instead a stingy person, is to deny the image of God in which you were created.

The second truth about giving, according to the life and teachings of Jesus, 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 only disposing of leftovers. Jesus was saying, "Give enough so that it makes a difference in your life. Give, not until it hurts, but until it feels good." You've heard me say over and over again, when you give enough, then you are going to feel it — not as a hurt, but as a joy.

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.

The truth is that for many of us, to give $10.00 or $20.00 or $40.00 per week doesn't affect us very much. It probably doesn't make us delay 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 and big luxuries which we enjoy. If we're honest, many people give from leftovers.

Here's a suggestion that will turn your life around. Decide what you are going to give first. Decide on a certain percentage of your income. Then, each week, or each paycheck, put that amount aside and give it to the church, and then do all the rest of your spending with what's left. I can promise you that following this suggestion will make you a cheerful giver. What you are telling yourself is that God and God's church are first in your life.

Follow the money. Several weeks ago, I was cleaning out one of my old file cabinets at home and came across several years of canceled checks from the 1970s. I couldn't resist looking at random samples of these checks we had written more than 20 years ago. Canceled checks can be quite revealing. For most of us, they are the only autobiography we will ever write. They are a record of our hopes and dreams, our values and priorities. There is a story in every transaction and a signature on every page.

The third truth about giving is this: Not only will your giving change you for the better, but through the church, it will continue to help make the world better.

This congregation, with its wide range of ministries, is what it is today because of the generous giving of thousands of people over the past 131 years.

As I said earlier in this sermon, giving is different from buying. When you give to the church, you are not buying something. However, when you give to the church, you are making an investment — an investment whose dividends to you come in being a more joyful person and one who is growing spiritually. It is also an investment in the future of this community.

My dream for this church is, and I know it is also your dream, that it will continue to be the strong, vital congregation it has been for the past 131 years. I invite you to join me in making this possible with your generous gifts and pledges for 1998. Amen.