

“MAKING A DIFFERENCE”
II Corinthians 8:1-7; 9:6-12
Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

It was time for the annual stewardship campaign. Bob and Susie were asked to share briefly why their faith was an important part of their lives and why they made a significant pledge to the church. Bob and Susie had been part of a Disciple Bible Study group and the subject of giving had come up often. Their Bible study group had talked a lot about the tithe, the biblical practice of giving 10% of one's income to God. In ancient times, they learned the best goat or sheep or chicken was taken to the temple as an offering. One in every ten animals was shared with God. Ten per cent of the crops went to the temple to feed the poor, and so on. In looking at their own income and giving, Bob and Susie discovered that although they gave several hundred dollars to the church each year, their giving did not come close to 10%. In fact, it was less than 2%. Bob and Susie decided as a couple that they would follow the spiritual discipline of giving 1% more of their income each year until they reached the biblical tithe of 10%.

Now at first their decision was not that consequential. But over time, Bob and Susie had to make many difficult decisions, based on their commitment to give more generously to their church. Finally, they reached their goal of 10%, and their pastor asked them to share their story with the congregation. They were able to witness to the congregation in a powerful way that instead of giving God the leftovers at the end of the month, tithing is a spiritual discipline that puts God first. It is a practical way of saying, “God really is the Lord of our lives, and we do not give into society's expectations, our possessions and our appetites.” Tithing takes enormous trust in God. Tithing strengthens faith.

Bob and Susie told the congregation how tithing forced them to think about the use of money and how all they received was entrusted to them by God. Tithing made them spend money more wisely with less waste and fewer superfluous or impulse purchases. They began to look at their money as if each dollar had a mission. Bob and Susie described how tithing had broken the sense of panic, worry, desperation and fear that had driven many of their financial decisions in the past. The knowledge that they could willingly give away 10% of their income relieved their feeling of being trapped, paralyzed and hopeless about their financial situation. By giving more, they worried less.

Bob and Susie told the congregation how the many conversations they had about priorities, family spending habits and saving patterns, and the handling of debt had enriched their relationship immeasurably. Committing to the tithe forced significant discussion about their goals and values as a family that they would never have had otherwise. In addition, tithing intensified their already strong engagement with their church. They became more keenly

involved and interested in the well-being of the church than they ever had before. They delighted in their church's growth, the effectiveness of its ministries, outreach and mission.

With minor variations, Bob and Susie's story has been repeated many times in the life of this church. I could name family after family in this congregation for whom this story applies. I have often had people tell me why they could not give more to the church. I have never had a tithing family tell me they regretted their decision.

In his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Bishop Robert Schnase tells about an incident that occurred on Sunday at a baptism. It seems that two families were having their babies baptized that day. After worship, as is typical, both families were taking pictures at the altar. At one point, the mother of one of the infants needed to get some things out of her bag, and the grandfather from the other family offered to hold the baby for the mother. As they were waiting for pictures, several people in the congregation came by and commented on the baby. "Thanks," said the grandfather, "But this one isn't mine!"

The next morning that grandfather called the church office and asked to speak with the pastor. He said, "You know, yesterday when I was holding that other family's baby, I kept saying, 'This one isn't mine.' But I got to thinking, all the children in this church are mine in a way. We said in the vows that we would take responsibility for these baptized children. I love and care about my children and grandchildren. I have left something in my will for each of them. What I want to do is to change my will so that I leave something for the children of this church. I want to divide my estate to leave an equal part to the church as if the church were one of my children." Faith involves planting trees under whose shade we will never sit.

I think this morning of the day Owen Coghlan came into my office and said, "I'm excited about what is going on at this church, and I want to see the youth program continue to grow. I want to set up a fund for youth ministry." And he did. And every year the Owen and Lois Coghlan Fund helps underwrite the youth program of this church, one of the most dynamic youth ministries in the greater Cleveland metropolitan area. I remember the day that Gordon Rowe took me to a Chinese restaurant and said, "Charlie, Vivian and I so appreciate the trips that you and the other pastors made to the hospital when she was there for such a long time. Your faithfulness means more than you will ever know. It costs money to make all those trips to the hospital. I want to start a fund for ministerial visitation." And he did. And every year there is an income stream that comes into the church budget from the Foundation to help underwrite the travel expenses of your pastors. There are other funds as well, for music and children's ministry and flowers and scholarships --- because some of the dear saints of this church caught the vision that these are not somebody else's children. These are our children, and we must do everything we can to see to it that they are nurtured in the faith and given every opportunity to grow into the people God wants them to be. In a very real way, the babies we baptize are our children and grandchildren. And we can make no better investment than to underwrite the ministry of this church ---- from choir music to Upward Basketball, from college scholarships to Sunday school curriculum, from camperships to computers and books for the church library.

What holds us back from tithing, like Bob and Susie? What holds us back from setting up a fund like Gordon Rowe or Owen Coghlan? Well, for one thing, it's the fear of scarcity that is very real in our world today. When we are young, the month often lasts longer than the money. When we are middle-aged, it seems like the kids' college bills will never be paid off. It doesn't stop. I have had conversations with older folks getting ready to go into retirement communities and assisted living, and their very real concern is: will their money run out before they die? Fear of scarcity concerns us all.

Many of us are living beyond our means. We are told that 40% of Americans spend 110% of their income! We are credit card and debt poor. Many of us are in over our heads. Even those of us who do not have excessive debt believe we need more to live on than we have.

A survey revealed that when asked how much money they needed to be happy, pretty much across the board, people said that having 20% more income would ease their burdens, help them buy all they needed, and bring security. In other words, people who earn 20% less than you do think they would be happy if they had your income! Think about it.

So why do we feel discontented with what we have? Happiness based on possessions causes people to pursue a receding goal, leaving them wanting more, and never able to satisfy their desires. At root, these are spiritual problems, not financial problems. We can never earn enough to be happy when we believe that satisfaction, self-definition, and meaning comes from possessions, and we can never trust our sense of self-worth when it rests on treasures that are material and temporal. A philosophy based on materialism, acquisition and possessions is not sufficient to live by, or to die by. At some point, we have to decide whether we will listen to the wisdom of the world or the wisdom of God.

We live in a world that is fixated on scarcity, but we worship an extravagantly generous God. One of my favorite stories is the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The word "prodigal" means "extravagant," and we usually think of the son as the extravagant one, for he went out and spent his inheritance on whatever his heart desired. But the truly extravagant one, the true prodigal is the father, who has to watch while his son makes a fool of himself --- then comes to his senses --- and comes crawling back home. Rather than scold, or reprimand, or say, "I told you so," this father welcomes his wayward son with open arms and throws him a big party! That's extravagant generosity! That's generosity that exceeds all expectations! And the shocking, surprising, mind-blowing news is that **the extravagant father is God**, who never stops believing in us, praying for us, and hoping for our safe return. When we come to our senses, God is there for us. The Bible tells us that God comes running to meet us and welcomes us with open arms. Bishop Schnase says that extravagant generosity "exceeds all expectations." That's the kind of generosity that God demonstrates toward us. That's the kind of generosity that God wants us to demonstrate toward others.

I have never served a more generous church than Church of the Saviour. Whenever there is a need, people respond in amazing ways. In a couple weeks Amy Cassady will report on the shoe and boot collection for the Homeless Stand Down. I don't know how many pairs of shoes and boots were collected, but I know that we had a whole room full. The Tower Entrance was filled last week-end with canned food for the hunger centers that were the focus on Souper Sunday, 438 pounds to be exact. I know you will be generous with your change for the Zoe project in Africa. Little did we know when Tim Persons spoke about the need for a new roof at the Methodist school in Haiti, and Judith Higbee organized the Mini-Music Marathon, that two days after we raised \$10,000 on a cold, snowy, Sunday afternoon, one of the most devastating earthquakes in world history would hit Port-Au-Prince. During the next two weeks, this congregation responded with over \$17,000 for the victims, making a total of \$27,000 for Haiti, raised by Church of the Saviour in less than three weeks, over and above our regular giving and all the other mission projects that are currently in the works.

Of course, not everyone is in a position to be extravagant with his or her money. If you are overextended, you need to get your finances in order. Bob and Susie moved one percent a year until they reached the tithe. They didn't go cold turkey. Sometimes we don't have the financial resources available. But it seems to me that all of us have 24 hours in our day, and we can be generous --- extravagantly generous --- if we choose ---- with our time.

Again, the witness of this church is incredible. The volunteer hours that some people give are staggering. I cite the commitment that 27 adults have made to be here every Saturday and at least one night a week to work with Upward Basketball. Some have given countless hours through the years as Stephen Ministers, caring faithfully for those in crisis or in need of a

listening ear and an understanding heart. No one knows the full extent of this ministry in the name of Christ. What we do know is that Stephen Ministry is a demonstration *par exsalonce* of extravagant generosity in terms of time and emotional energy. We owe our Stephen Ministers a debt of gratitude. They are setting the example of the ministry to which Christ is calling all of us.

More than anything else, I want my life to make a difference in this world. I don't care how long my name is remembered, or even if it will be remembered here or in any of the other churches I have served. But I would like to think that someone's life is fuller, richer, more productive because I passed this way. Isn't that what you want? Don't we all want to make a difference with our time, our energy, our resources? How do we make a difference? I am convinced it is through extravagant generosity, generosity that extends to unexpected measures, generosity that exceeds all expectations, generosity modeled after the example of Almighty God.

Once upon a time there was a man who used to walk on the beach every morning. He loved to get up early, and rarely did he see anyone as he walked along the shore.

One morning as he was walking, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure, who looked as if he was dancing. The man smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to start the day, so he walked faster to catch up.

As he came closer, he saw the figure was that of a young man, who was not dancing. He was reaching down to the sand, picking up small objects and tossing them into the ocean. The man called out, "Good morning, may I ask what you are doing?"

The young man paused, looked up, and replied, "Throwing starfish in the ocean."

"Why are you doing that?"

The young man replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

Upon hearing this, the man replied, "But, young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and that there are millions of starfish on the sand. You can't possibly make a difference."

At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it in the ocean. As it met the water, he said, "It made a difference to that one."

Will you use what you have to make a difference in somebody's life? Will you respond to the extravagant generosity of God?