

October 20/21, 2007
Blessed Beyond Expectation: Right on the Money
1 Corinthians 16:1-9
Rev. Susan Bresser

“If I were a rich man . . .” In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye sings this prayer to God: “Would it spoil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?”

If only I had more money. I could buy more. I could buy a new couch and a flat screen tv and a new van and new shoes ... really nice shoes ... Manolo Blahniks ... I don't even wear heels, but I'd wear Manolo Blahniks! I could pay off my student loan. I could go on vacation ... like a real vacation. An exotic vacation ...like stay at a hotel with one of those little refrigerators that has caviar in it! I don't even like caviar, oh, but I'd enjoy knowing I had it! If only I had more money. I'd probably hang out with really important people, you know, the movers and the shakers, like Oprah and Brett Favre. If I had more money, I know I wouldn't lose sleep at night ... I'd sleep like a baby. If only I had more money, I know my future would really be secure. If I had more money, I know, I know I'd be a much happier person.

Isn't it funny that we actually buy into that? If only I had more money, I'd be a happier person. I'd be pretty, I'd be smart, I'd be popular, and I would be happy.

There was once a young woman who brought her fiancé home to meet her parents. The father wanted to find out a little bit more about his daughter's future husband so after dinner the fiancé was invited into the study.

“So, what are your plans?” the father asked the young man.

“I'm a Bible scholar,” the young man replied.

“That's great,” said the father, “but what will you do to provide a home for my daughter?”

“I will study,” the young man replied, “and God will provide for us.”

“And how are you going to buy her a beautiful engagement ring?” asked the father.

“I will pray,” the young man replied, “and God will provide for us.”

“And children?” asked the father. “How will you support children when they come?”

“Don't worry, sir, God will provide,” replied the fiancé.

There were several more questions and each time the young man insisted that God would provide. Later on the mother asked about the conversation. “There's good news and bad news,” said the husband.

“What’s the bad news?”

“He has no job and no plans.”

“What’s the good news?”

“He obviously thinks I’m God.”

When I was a sophomore in college I called my parents to tell them I switched my major. I was studying music and I had dreams of being a music therapist. But it just wasn’t for me. I called home and my dad answered. Now my dad & I have a fairly good relationship but he’s my dad ... and a phone conversation goes something like this: “Hi Dad. It’s me. (I’m his only daughter so he knows it’s me.) Hi Dad. Yeah, I’m fine. Yeah, it’s cloudy here, too. Yeah ... um ... is mom home?”

So, I’m a sophomore in college, incredibly unenthusiastic about being a music major and I call home. “Oh, hi Dad. It’s me. Is mom home? Oh ... she’s not. Oh, she had choir practice tonight ... that’s right. Um, Dad, I called to tell you that I’m going to change my major ... to religious studies. Well, well, well, Dad, I could always teach. And, you know, I’ve been thinking the seminary. Yeah, I know Dad, but Dad, it’s not always about making money. Just have mom call me when she gets home. Bye.”

My father’s response when I told him I was changing my major: “you’ll never be happy because you’re never going to make any money.”

But that’s nothing. Two years later I called home and said, “Hi Dad. It’s me. I’m getting married ... to a man who paints pictures. Oh, yeah, and he’s going to make a living out of it!” To which my father replied: “ohhhhh, you’ll never be happy because you’re never going to have any money!”

Isn’t it funny that we buy into that belief; that we actually believe that it’s a value: if I had more money I’d be a much better person.

(Just so you know, my father is very happy that I married the man I did, and my parents are happy that I’m happy accepting my calling into ministry.)

Would we be better in God’s eyes if we had more money?

God isn't concerned at all about how much money we make. God is concerned about our attitude around how much money we make. What we do with our money shows where our values lie.

In our scripture reading today Paul is making good on a promise he made to the followers in Jerusalem. He promised that he would pull together a goodwill offering from his other churches as a demonstration of Christian unity. There was a problem in Jerusalem: a food shortage, a famine. So people were giving for two reasons: solidarity with their brothers and sisters in faith, and because there was great need.

We are a church that is very successful when it comes to giving in solidarity and when there is great need. People's lives are touched because of your generosity. A couple weeks ago, Rev. Jakes Voker was in worship with us, making a plea for funding for a school building in Liberia, a war-torn African country. In one weekend, we raised over \$750. Thank you.

Thank you. As a representative of Jesus Christ, I say thank you. Thank you for understanding your scripture, especially Paul's words: to readily embrace the opportunity to give ... and to make a habit of it and to give generously because God has given you so much.

Today we are in week 2 of our sermons series on Blessed Beyond Expectation. This is our stewardship series, when we preach about money, giving, gifts, and hopefully what it means to be the church.

In my home, we are a public radio family. We spend two chunks of our day in the kitchen listening to public radio. 1. In the morning getting ready for school and work and 2. in the evening preparing dinner. The radio is on most every Saturday: Michael Feldman in the morning and of course, Garrison Keilor's Prairie Home Companion. This is the season for pledge drives and NPR is no stranger to raising funds. Today as I was listening to the radio, they were talking about a recent study about people and their money. The results: you're happier when you give than when you buy.

Now this is the church. Are you happy when you give? Or is it true: all we ever talk about is money and it becomes a burden?? We had a bishop once who said: every week we should be presenting an opportunity for people to give. We should be presenting 52 opportunities for

people to give (52 weekends in a year). She actually said we should be presenting MORE than 52; we should be presenting 152 opportunities, 352 opportunities, 552 opportunities, 1052 opportunities ...

Soooo, IS it true? All we ever talk about is money? I hope not. I hope all we ever talk about is the opportunity for growth, the opportunity for discipleship, the opportunity for sharing, the opportunity for God's grace to make a difference. All I ever want to talk about – all we ever want to talk about – is what it means to be the Church.

I could, in every worship service we have, share people's stories about how their lives have been changed because of this church, because of God's grace offered here. Because you care, because you share, because you give, people's lives are changed. If one person's life has been changed, you have been faithful to the gospel: the WHOLE GOSPEL: the gospel of hospitality, the gospel of sharing, the gospel of giving. You have made a difference.

Sometimes I get a little anxious about this time of year. I get a little nervous when it comes to preaching stewardship. I worry because I think we should be more creative and clever with our stewardship messages. And then I reign myself in because I know deep in my heart God doesn't give a hoot about creative or clever stewardship campaigns. God wants us to understand one thing: giving is an act of worship. Do I always do a good job with my financial stewardship honoring God, giving thanks, offering praise? No, not always. I have 100 excuses ... but instead of complaining about the obstacles, I need to take advantage of the opportunities. I don't want to stop trying ... I don't want to stop trying being the person I believe God is calling me to be and a large part of that is my attitude in living and giving.

None of us should ever stop trying. Giving is about gratitude, honor, sacrifice, and love. Giving is not about duty, pressure or guilt. We don't collect membership dues because we aren't a club. We are the Church of Jesus Christ and we have a responsibility. Giving is an act of worship that comes from gratitude for all God has given us.

If I were a rich man (woman!!), God still has the same expectations of me. Jesus said: You have been treated generously, so live generously.

Amen.