



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 2, 2014

"Encouragement: The Gift of Giving" (Book of Acts Series)

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Acts 11:27 *At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.*

Acts 11:28 *One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius.*

Acts 11:29 *The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea;*

Acts 11:30 *this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.*

There are many ways we encourage people today—through cards, gifts, and money. It was Chinese New Year's last week. Gung Hee Fat Choy! In the Chinese culture, we give red envelopes with cash inside called Li See.

Li see is given for New Year's, birthdays, Christmas, graduations, for all kinds of events. It is even given at funerals to the guests, a practice that started in ancient China where relatives attending funerals were given money and food for the journey home.

Every culture has their tradition of giving money on a regular basis. Your culture may not call it Li See, but most cultures have a way for giving money gifts.

In the church, one of the regular ways we give money is through the tithes and offerings. Tithing meaning giving 10% of your income, and offerings is defined as all giving above the tithe.

Today is a big money Sunday. It's called SuperBowl where people pay up to \$4 million to buy commercial time during the game. People spend millions of dollars to watch the game. Teams make millions. Unfortunately, SuperBowl Sunday is not known as a day about giving away money to encourage others or for the cause of Christ, even though it falls on the Sabbath day.

But using this passage, let's look at some of the attributes of encouragement in terms of giving away money and not in terms of making money.

Now I realize that the first Sunday of each month is youth Sunday, when the senior high and the middle school join us in the service instead of their usual youth group study. And many youth (as well as adults) might think, "Oh no, a money sermon! That has nothing to do with me. I have no money to give."

But the youth do have money to give away. I know you or your parents spend a lot on you for entertainment. I see little kids today walking to school with cell phones or iPods. Teens buy gaming stations and video games. When I was their age, we never spent that kind of money on kids. We did not have that kind of

technology nor did we have iTunes or or video games or game apps, like Candy Crush, which can get expensive when you make in-app purchases like additional lives.

Yes, the youth and adults have discretionary money to spend on themselves, especially on entertainment. The question is—would we use that money instead to encourage others? (Maybe God is encouraging you to encourage someone by giving him or her a gift or even some money.) And more specifically would we use our money so that others might come closer to the Lord?

Now to our passage and our first point. **We encourage others by giving our money.**

It's not the only way, but it's a good way. Notice what happened in our Scripture passage for today. The Antioch church hears there is a famine and probably persecution in the churches in Judea. And rather than saving their money for their own tough times, they give their money away to help the churches in Judea. They give the money to Paul and Barnabas to give to the churches in need. This was a foundational principle of the early church.

I believe the central characteristic of followers of Christ is that they are generous with whatever money they have. The Antioch church could have said, "No we might need the money for a rainy day. There's a good chance we might be persecuted.

We might need it for a famine that's already in our land." But no, they gave it willingly and freely to other churches in Judea.

In the Bible Jesus talked about money more than any other topic because He knew that where our money lies so where our hearts lie. And we normally don't like people suggesting to us (especially in a sermon) how we should be spending out money. Yet God knew that no matter what we say or sing, a real indicator of whether we care about God is whether we are generous with our money. He knows our checkbook register, credit card statements, and debts are prime indicators of our hearts. He can tell more about our convictions for the communication of the gospel by looking at our check registers to see if we are supporting His cause. And it's qualitative, not quantitative giving.

In Luke 21, Jesus said to His disciples, "The widow who gave two copper coins gave more than anyone else today in the Temple Treasury because she gave it all!"

Why did He say that? Because the widow was giving sacrificially. She did not give a portion of what she had; she gave everything!

I was telling the Seekers and Joiners New Members class recently that we never have lists of who gives how much. First of all, I don't know how much people give, and second, if we did know, we wouldn't list who gave the most because in Jesus' eyes, who gave the most might not be numerically the most, as with the widow and the two coins.

As you have heard me say before, in most nonprofits they like to list the big donors in their annual reports. Some have certain donor levels with a theme, like say marine life. So the Whale level, for instance, would be

for those who gave, let's say, \$10,000. And there's the dolphin level for donors of \$5,000 or more. And the mahimahi level for those who give \$1,000. But if you only gave \$10 bucks, that's the guppy level. And who knows? Those in the guppy level might have given the most because they gave sacrificially. In God's eyes the guppies may be the big fish! (Let's hear it for the tilapias!)

We know Barnabas and Paul got this message of the need to encourage and build up churches and people by giving of one's resources because Paul wrote this to the Corinthians:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— (2 Cor. 8)

Let's stop there. In Paul's mind, when we see the need to support a church that needs help, we should be earnest in the privilege of sharing in the ministry. According to Paul, even though the Macedonia churches were going through extreme poverty, they still decided to send money to help others. Amazing! They were real encouragers.

It's a privilege to team with God to build His church. It is a privilege to be able to feel good about giving, helping, giving all you can, and leaving your heart out on the playing field.

It's like when you have been a championship team, and you can look back and say it was worth the giving of my time and my body to win the championship. It was worth the

sacrifice and pain. There is joy in that sacrifice to win the championship game.

It's the same joy that the Denver Broncos will feel when they win the Super Bowl today. Or should I cheer for Seattle since their coach Pete Carroll is the former USC football coach? Or should I pray for Seattle's Richard Sherman, who was a former classmate of my niece, who said that Sherman was arrogant then and arrogant now.

Okay, that's the last reference to SuperBowl, the great pagan high holy ritual of today.

But then the Apostle Paul goes on in Chapter 8 and challenges the Corinthians to be as generous as the Macedonian churches:

2 Cor. 8:7 Now as you EXCEL in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to EXCEL also in this generous undertaking.

Paul is compelling followers of Christ to EXCEL in generosity. I believe when we excel in generosity, it reflects that we trust God in providing for us, so much so we can be generous to others in need and be generous in wanting a strong church to spread the gospel.

Paul got this. And so when he spoke of trusting God and being able to give away our money freely without fear and being free in wanting God's word to get out and to support the Macedonian Church, he wrote this.

2Cor. 8:8 yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make YOU RICH.

2Cor. 8:10 Here is my advice: It would be good for you to finish what you started a year ago. Last year you were the first who wanted to give, and you were the first to begin doing it.

2 *2Cor. 8:11 Now you should finish what you started. Let the eagerness you showed in the beginning be matched now by your giving. Give in proportion to what you have.*

2Cor 8:12 Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it EAGERLY. And give according to what you have, not what you don't have.

2Cor 8:13 Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality.

2Cor 8:14 Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it. In this way, things will be equal.

2Cor 8:15 As the Scriptures say, "Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough." (NLT)

Paul was saying that it's not that you should feel pressured in being generous, but what about the pressures other feel who don't have enough?

He is also saying we should be EAGER in generosity. Are we eager to be generous? Are there toxins in our faith that need to be squeezed or sweated out of us?

I know many of you are eager in generosity. That's why most of our members give to Compassion International (in addition to giving to First Prez) to help children who don't have as much as we do and are feeling the pressure of no food or clothing or housing.

But then Paul says this interesting thing. He says we encourage people by sharing our SEED with them

and not just keeping the baked BREAD. Money is basically giving out seeds to help others!

2Cor 9:6 Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop.

2Cor 9:7 You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully."

2Cor 9:8 And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.

2Cor 9:9 As the Scriptures say, "They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever."

2Cor 9:10 For God is the one who provides SEED for the farmer and then BREAD to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you.

2Cor. 9:11 Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God.

We are all called to be stewards. We really own nothing in this life. God has given us things to take care of for him and to use for His purposes.

And if we are good stewards and are generous with what we have, I believe God will bless us more. When we excel in stewardship, we will excel in reaping. Now I am not saying that if you give a dollar away, God will give you two dollars back. No, that kind of thinking is nothing more than some kind of pagan belief.

But I am saying that when we are generous for God's causes, then we will be blessed so much more back. He will take care of our needs, and not necessarily our wants. You cannot out-give God. God is a debtor to no one. The question is, can we be generous to God's causes?

Notice how Paul talks about seed and bread: For God is the one who provides SEED for the farmer and then BREAD to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. (2Cor 9:10)(NLT)

See, when we give money, we are giving out SEEDS for people to grow spiritually or for their ministry to grow and be fruitful in Kingdom work. Sort of like a multiplier effect. It's like we are giving away seeds so that there will be growth all over.

This is different from sharing BREAD, which is already baked and we think we made the bread; the bread tastes good and smells good, and so we want to keep it, hoard it.

Tithes and offerings are to be thought of as seed. Tithes is then 10% of our income. Offerings is the more than the 10%. You are giving away seeds to be sown all over the world and in the church when you tithe. You are helping fund ministry work. You are helping people who desperately need help.

When you have been blessed with a lot by God and because of good stewardship, you will have excess. Now God is saying to give to His causes. Let the seed get out there so that people and ministries can grow.

Jesus cares more about what you have than what you don't have. And what you have, will you use it for God and be generous? God says, "If you sow seed, I'll give you more seed."

When He gives us extra, it's seed. Seed is what others can use to grow in their lives or for their ministry work to flourish. Seed for a lifetime; not bread to eat for a day.

How much should you give to God's causes each year? The Bible's guideline is a tenth of what you make each year; that is called a tithe. A tenth, you say? That's a lot! Is that on the gross or net? Well, it depends on whether you want God to bless your gross or your net.

Instead of thinking if you can afford giving away a tenth of your income, think of it as can I live on 90 percent of what I make for what I need and not my wants? I think most of us can live on 90% of what we have.

I think giving away a tenth is God's way of always giving us a check in our spirit. He's asking: Do you fully trust me? Are you going all out for me? Am I really the Lord of all the areas of your life? Do you really have a heart for the lost and the poor? You sing, "I surrender all" but do you mean I surrender 1%?

At this church I do not say that all 10 percent has to go to your church. This is different from other churches that say all 10 percent must go to your local church.

I do think if you give to other truly Christ-centered organizations...not charities but Christ-centered ministries, then that can be part of the tithe. But I also believe that most of the tithe should go to your local church. Why? For three practical reasons.

1) We're here. This is your family of faith, your community. If you give money to some mainland televangelist or some mainland international ministry...that is fine. But when you are sick, that televangelist doesn't see you in the hospital or at your home. That TV ministry does not

do your wedding or funeral or counsel you and your family's loved ones. Neither do they train you for ministry work or lead you in worship every week.

2) There is no one else in the world who is giving to this church—

First Prez. Did you ever think about that? No one. I know many organizations with causes ask you to give to them. We don't ask outsiders to give to us. There's no Macedonia church out there funding us. It's not like people in Cleveland, Ohio are thinking, "Let's give money to First Prez Honolulu. Yeah, I hear they need it." Or people on Bishop street saying, "Let's do a charity, and give money to First Prez's operating expenses!"

No, it's only us. The only people in the whole wide world who give to our operating expenses is we—those who worship here or have worshipped here. Our denomination didn't give us a penny or a loan or gift to buy Ko'olau. No, we paid for it. A foundation did help us with some capital expenses, but for operating expenses and programs, it's all us funding everything. Our tithes are important to make sure we pay off our mortgage, and have money for our daily ministry expenses.

How important is it that everyone does his or her part? Very important! Giving is part of the way we honor God. And we should do it cheerfully! The Bible says that, as we read in 2 Cor 9:7, God loves a cheerful giver. That is why it is critical and biblical as part of our liturgy that when we say "it's now time for the tithes and offerings," we all applaud and cheer. It's not to be cheesy or sentimental. It's a real part of the liturgy to check our hearts: Do we give money to God for His purposes reluctantly, regretfully, or with a ho-hum attitude? Do we give with great joy and desire and earnest hope that the seeds we put in the plate are going towards the growth of people and God's church?

Let's now practice our cheer and applause for tithes and offerings. Friends, it's now time for the tithes and offerings! (APPLAUSE) Applauding the time to give also shows how everyone has to do his or her part. No gift is too small.

Now you probably saw in the bulletin that finally all of our bills have been tabulated, and that our tithes and offerings are all in for 2013 for a nearly \$4 million budget. However, we came in short. We ended in the red by \$12,000. But that's great because we were that close to ending in the black!

It also means that if every one of our members and regular attendees gave just \$10 more for the year, we would have covered it. That's like just 20 cents more per week. If we gave just two more coins (like the widow at the Temple treasury in our Scripture passage), that's two dimes, the debt would have been gone.

It shows how everyone must do his or her part. 20 cents! If we give 20 cents more, a dollar more a week, ten dollars more a week, a hundred dollars more, we could plant so much more seed, and the impact would be critically important. It also shows that what everyone gives makes a huge impact, or not.

But why do we give and encourage others by giving? The third and final reason, and the most important rationale for tithing and giving, to the local church is that:

3) We have experienced the grace of Christ. When we realize that Jesus came to earth to save us, has saved us, and died for us even though we don't deserve it, we know that we've been given grace. And when we give as a way of encouraging others based on that motivation, then we are giving for the right reasons. We want to share that grace with others. We want people to be saved, helped, inspired, comforted, and forgiven as we were.