

A Legacy of Blessing – 2 Corinthians 9:1-5
October 8, 2023 Rev. Becky Shirley

The Apostle Paul wrote the text we are reading today and begins by saying: “Now, it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them.” He had been encouraging the Corinthian church for some time to gather funds to help the church in Jerusalem which has been experiencing a difficult time due to a famine. He tells them he knows they really want to help, but he wants to make sure they follow through on their heart’s desire and actually do set aside the money to help. As I read this passage, I started to think about all the times I feel my heart pulled with a desire to give financially to help out with some need in the community and then, before I know it, a lot of time has passed before I actually get around to writing a check or opening up a website and entering my credit card information. If I am honest, there are also times when my good intentions to give to a particular cause are not always followed through on. I suspect the same of true of many if not most of you. So, I started to wonder what it is that helps me to actually follow through on my good intentions to help others.

In thinking about this, I was reminded of a story I heard that was told by John Maxwell. It's about a halfway hut on a mountain in Switzerland. And it's exactly what it sounds like, except it's more like a lodge than a hut, and it's located along the hiking path halfway up a mountain. It's a place where hikers typically stop on their way to the top. The manager of the halfway hut says that on a typical day, the same kind of scenario plays out: a group below at the foot of the mountain starts out with their guide leading them, and they climb really hard all morning long. By mid-day, all of the thrill of getting started on this adventure starts to die down, and they arrive at this hut. When they do, they are pleasantly surprised to enter a room with a warm fire and the smell of delicious food cooking. So, they take off their packs and unlace their boots and relax for a minute and eat a hot meal. After a while, the guide gets up and tells them it is time to get back on the trail in order to reach the top of the mountain before nightfall. Now, the manager of the Hut says you can almost always count on it that a certain number in the group that will say, “You all go ahead. This is pretty nice we will just stay here. We'll catch up with you tomorrow when you are on the way back down.” So, the group going up the mountain put their packs on, get geared up, and head out the door. The manager says for the next few hours it is it's a party in the hut. The cards come out, people gather around the fire playing games and telling jokes. They even start making a little fun of the group that's going on saying things like: “Oh, can you imagine how they're feeling about right now? Don't they wish they could be where we are?” But, by late afternoon he can predict that it's going to quiet down. The laughter is going to stop and the left behind hikers will start making their way toward the big picture window and someone will pull out a pair of binoculars and they'll pass them around so they can see the members of their group nearing the top of the mountain. The next morning, when the people who stayed behind in the lodge wake up, there's not a lot of laughter or talking. It's a pretty somber scene as they wait for their group to return. When that group comes back at midday, it's a total reversal of the day before. The group that went to the top are the ones now laughing and high fiving each other and celebrating and telling the stories about the view from the top and what it was like to reach the summit and they tell the hikers who stayed behind: “Man, you really missed out! It was amazing!”

The story reminds me that anything significant requires sacrifice. It's a universal truth. If you want to reach the top of the mountain, you've got to give up something. If you want to lose weight, if you want to get in shape, if you want to learn a new subject, it all requires sacrifice of something. Most things in life advance only through sacrifice.

As we prepare for Stewardship Sunday coming up on October 22nd, and making a promise to give a portion of time, our talent and finances to the work of God’s kingdom through the ministries of Washington Street UMC, I have been thinking about the sacrifice it takes to makes significant ministry

happen. I look around this beautiful sanctuary, and I think about the many ministries that have flourished here over the years and that continue to flourish. I realize that none of this would be possible without a number of people willingly making a sacrifice of time, talent and finances over the years. Often when preachers talk about stewardship you will hear us encourage people to tithe. Tithing is the giving of 10% to God's work in the world. Now, the practice of tithing is discussed mostly in the First Testament of our Bibles and so there are many Christians who say, well, that that really is an Old Testament pattern of giving, so it doesn't apply to Christians today. We are a people of the New Testament, so we live under a different guideline and a different standard. But, if you come to the New Testament and you think that the standard of giving is somehow going to be a little lighter and easier, be careful. The only time Jesus gave an example of a standard for giving it was a widow he observed putting her last two coins in the temple treasury. Look at the verse as it is recorded in Luke 21: "But she, out of her poverty, has put in all she had to live on." It is as if Jesus was saying, that is what giving is like – it is the willingness to make a sacrifice. If you think about it, it is no wonder Jesus took note of this woman just days before he offered his life on the cross. He was about to give his all – his very life-- knowing that the sacrifice he was making would help you and I understand God's great love for all humanity. Jesus knew that the sacrifice he was making would not be in vain. The woman in the temple, like Jesus, was willing to make such a huge sacrifice because she focused on what was to be gained not on what she was giving up.

I learned this same lesson from watching my parents make sacrifices for me and my sisters. In particular, I recall how much my parents valued education and wanted us to receive a college education. Now, my father, never earned a high school diploma because he was bitten by a rattlesnake when he was 16 years of age and had to drop out of school, but he always valued learning. Like Abraham Lincoln, he read and taught himself the best he could. My mother, on the other hand, earned a Masters' degree in Christian Education from Scarritt College in Nashville. My mother never looked down on my father for his lack of degrees, and my father wasn't intimidated by my mother's degrees. Both of them valued education and knew that it would mean making sacrifices to ensure that all 3 of their children received a college education. When I graduated from high school, my parents really couldn't afford the cost of college tuition, but we found out that my sister Debby and I could attend Columbia College part time at the cost of around \$20 or \$25 per credit hour. My parents sat down and looked at their finances and determined they could afford to pay for Debby to take 2 college classes and for me to take 2 college classes. They weren't going to stop giving their tithe to the church, and they weren't going to stop providing for the things that my sisters and I needed at home, but they were willing to sacrifice their things. They believed a college education was a important, and they were willing to make the sacrifices necessary for us to attend college.

They were not thinking about how much it cost of what they were giving up. They were thinking only about what benefit their children would receive as result of their sacrifice. Have you ever thought that that's what we as a church community do every time we make pledges in a stewardship campaign? It's the same thought process. When we give, we are acting on the belief that our blessings can be released in ways that bless others. We believe that blessings of joy, peace, hope and healing will be realized in ways we can't see or understand because we are willing to make the sacrifice of time, talent and finances to bless others. When we make a decision to share our time, talent and finances, we are saying we believe that God will take what we give, and use it to form the faith of children like the ones who shared in children's moments today. We believe that God will take our gifts and turn them into tangible opportunities to bring healing to people, to relieve suffering, to educate, to develop, to counsel, to build up. God will transform lives. We may not know exactly how it is going to happen, but we trust that blessings will come to others because we released the blessings of time, talent and finances God has given to us. Stewardship is about focusing on the gain that will be brought to others not on what we are giving up.

When my husband Richard and I sit down to fill out our financial and our time and talent pledge cards this year, I know one of the common questions we ask is probably the same question many of you

ask. "What should we give this year?" It's not a bad question to ask-- to do the math and think about expenses and income in the coming year is certainly practical. However, this year I am going to be asking myself a different question one that I want to encourage each of you to ask as well. "God, what is the difference you want to make through me in 2024?" Now, this is a different question from "what should I give?" Asking God to help me know the difference that God wants to make through me invites me to think about the position that God has put me in and the blessings I have received that I can pass on to others for their gain.

John D. Rockefeller was 23 years old when he became a millionaire. He was 50 years old when he became the world's first billionaire. He grew up in a pretty conservative religious environment that taught that tithing is something you owe God. It's your obligation. So he gave 10% away every year to try to free his conscience of guilt all while continuing to be obsessed with how to extend his vast fortune. When he was 53 his health started to fail him. He lost his hair. He couldn't digest anything besides milk and crackers. His doctors began to wonder if he was going to live another year. One morning, he woke up startled by a dream he had. In this dream he had died and was going to heaven and he was trying to take with him everything in his life that he had worked so hard to obtain. But, when he arrived in heaven, he realized that he couldn't keep it. He couldn't take it with him into eternity. When he woke up, he had a strong realization that there would actually come a day when he would not have any of the things he had spent his life earning and building up. So, he called his attorneys and his accountants and told them he wanted to talk about directing a good, significant part of his wealth to healthcare, hospitals, and research. That day started the John D Rockefeller Foundation, a Foundation that led to the discovery of penicillin and cures for yellow fever and some of the strains of malaria that were present at the time. The amazing thing is that Rockefeller from the day he started that foundation started to get better. He lived to be almost 98 years old. I think he got better because he redefined the word "owe". He stopped looking at what he owed God as an obligation and started looking at his wealth as his opportunity to let his life be a blessing. He started looking at what others would gain instead of what it cost him to release his blessings. In other words, he started asking "God, how do you want to use the gift of my life? How do you want me to release my blessings to bless others?"

My friends, anything significant requires sacrifice. May we have the faith and the courage to do the same. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.