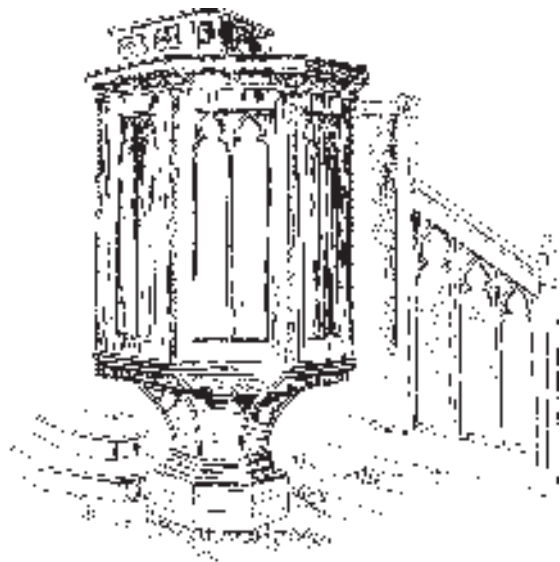


October 11, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Where Do We Begin?

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

2 Samuel 7:18-21

Today officially begins the season of the stewardship of money for our congregation. Yes, already. I can't believe it either. It's *that* time of year again. Well, just where and how do we begin?

Some say we need to begin with budgets. That makes good business sense. What are the needs of the church? Let's put a budget together. Then we can raise the dollars necessary to meet the budget. If we were the United Way or the YWCA, that certainly would be the way to go. We could make a poster of a thermometer and fill in our progress each week. Or, we could make a budget and then divide the budget 1100 ways and tell everyone what their share is. Budgets are a quick "go to" but, that's not how a church begins a stewardship campaign.

Stewardship - where do we begin?

Some folks always begin with a question. It's a good question, a practical question, a reasonable question. Here is the question: "What did I give last year?" I know that's my first question when I decide how much I'll give to Princeton Seminary each year or to the Human Race Theater Company or to Lehigh University where I went to college. It's a natural question. How much did I give last year? Then I can give \$25.00 more than I did last year and everyone will be happy. Or if they did something that upset me I can give \$25.00 less. That'll show 'em! Of course, that's not the appropriate way to begin thinking about stewardship to God and the Church either.

Stewardship - where do we begin?

One place some of us will be tempted to begin is out of our sense of scarcity. I imagine that will be a big temptation this year especially with all the economic struggles we've all been having. With all the economic uncertainty for the future, it will be really tempting to say, "I can't afford it this year. Don't talk to me about stewardship. I don't want to hear it. I can't make ends meet as it is."

Stewardship - where do we begin?

The Bible has a clear answer, a very clear answer. It's not an economically motivated answer. It doesn't have much to do with budgets or past giving habits or the fear of scarcity. It's not an immediate go to answer. It's not a practical answer or a very reasonable answer at least by today's standards. It doesn't make much business sense. Still, it's right there in the text—over and over again.

Stewardship - where do we begin? What do you think the **biblical** response is? The Bible says we begin with a sense of gratitude.

Do you remember how the 10 Commandments begin? They don't begin with a commandment, but with a statement of fact. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). It is only after God has said these words of reminder that he asks obedience from the children of Israel. God's requests are always based on his having the right to ask, because he is the Great Giver.

Christian stewardship is a response. The motivation for our giving is that we have received. This doesn't mean we try to pay God back, for that is an impossibility. It does mean that our giving begins in gratitude, so we give in thankfulness. It is a **thanks** giving. We give out of what God has given us individually and corporately as a church.

A certain man was known for his generosity. He was asked whether he was not in danger of begging himself through his gifts. He replied, "Not at all. I shovel out and God shovels in, and he uses a bigger shovel than I do. And, God started the shoveling first."

Friends, thanksgiving is not the result **of** perception; thanksgiving is the access **to** perception.

In the classic Western *Shenandoah*, James Stewart stars as Charlie Anderson, a Virginian farmer trying to keep his family out of the Civil War.

With a place setting laid out for his dead wife, and with his children gathered around the supper table, Charlie begins a litany they obviously have heard before: "Now your mother wanted all of you raised as good Christians, and I might not be able to do that thorny job as well as she could, but I can do a little something about your manners."

He gestures that they all should bow their heads and continues, "Lord, we cleared this land; we plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. We wouldn't be here, we wouldn't be eatin', if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-boned hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you just the same anyway, Lord, for the food we're about to eat. Amen."

Through the course of the movie, we see one tragedy after another strike the Anderson clan: the youngest son is mistaken for a soldier and captured, another son and his wife are murdered by

marauders, and a third son is shot by an overzealous sentry. When we next see Mr. Anderson at the supper table, there are four more empty places as he begins his ritual prayer. But this time we hear his voice quiver and break as the awful realization comes on him that he is not in control, that he is not the master of his own destiny. His voice trails off as he finishes the words, "if we hadn't done it all ourselves."

He stops, gets up, and walks away, a proud man broken and stripped of his pride.

Thanksgiving is not the result of perception; thanksgiving is the access to perception.

It is interesting to contrast Charlie Anderson's weak thanksgiving prayer in the movie *Shenandoah* with the prayer of David from this morning's scripture lesson:

King David went in, took his place before God, and prayed: "Who am I, my Master God, and what is my family, that you have brought me to this place in life? But that's nothing compared to what's coming, for you've also spoken of my family far into the future, given me a glimpse into tomorrow, my Master God! What can I possibly say in the face of all this? You know me, Master God, just as I am. You've done all this not because of who I am but because of who you are—out of your very heart!—but you've let me in on it.

David is properly deferential, contrasting his own insignificance with God's greatness. Four times in this short prayer David speaks the awesome name Yahweh God. David acknowledges all that he is, all that he has, all that he will be, is a gift from God.

While hurrying through Chicago's commuter train station, Judy Keene had an "Aha!" moment that stopped her in her tracks. She says, "I had just left the candy counter where I'd bought Valentine treats for a party a few of us were planning for our church's single moms. Doing so took my thoughts back to a cookout the previous summer, for which I had covered the cost. The single moms, their children, and I enjoyed a glorious day at a local sunshine-drenched beach, conversing and stuffing ourselves with burgers, chips, and the trimmings.

"As the afternoon ended, I sat among the moms at the picnic table as they enthusiastically divided up the leftover hot dogs, sodas, and desserts. No one thought to offer me a thing. My feelings were a little bruised. No, I didn't need the food. And, most of the moms had given little thought to where the picnic spread had come from. But, the slight was significant enough that I recalled it in the train station six months later.

"Then it hit me! *How much more slighted God must feel when, as recipients of his enormous generosity, we are reluctant to share a significant portion of our resources with him.* Just as I didn't need the potato salad, he doesn't need our money. But, he does crave our acknowledgment that all we have is from him.

Stewardship begins with gratitude. We give because we have received. We give because we belong to God. We increase our giving as we grow in appreciation of God's love and in knowledge of his goodness.

Albert Einstein was right when he said, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as if nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is." When you live that second way it is hard not to be grateful.

In his book *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner, writes:

One winter I sat in army fatigues somewhere near Anniston, Alabama, eating my supper out of a mess kit. The infantry training battalion that I had been assigned to was on bivouac. There was a cold drizzle of rain, and everything was mud. The sun had gone down.

I was still hungry when I finished and noticed that a man nearby had left something that he was not going to eat. It was a turnip. When I asked him if I could have it, he tossed it over to me. I missed the catch, and the turnip fell to the ground, but I wanted it so badly that I picked it up and started eating it, mud and all.

Time deepened and slowed down. With a lurch of the heart, I saw suddenly that not only was the turnip good, but the mud was good too, even the drizzle and cold were good, even the Army that I had dreaded for months was good. Sitting there in the Alabama winter with my mouth full of cold turnip and mud, I could see at least for a moment how if you ever took truly to heart the ultimate goodness and joy of things, even at their bleakest, the need to praise someone or something for it would be so great that you might even have to go out and speak of it to the birds of the air.