

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 8-9, 2011
Philippians 4:4-20

“God’s Giving Through Us”
Why Give? Stewardship Series – Part 3

The beautiful words of Paul the apostle in today’s Epistle lesson were written to first-century believers in the ancient city of Philippi (located in modern Greece). They are just as instructive for us today as they were when first written nearly 2000 years ago. We are not absolutely clear when or where Paul wrote this letter, but it has been traditionally regarded as one of his prison letters, written while he was imprisoned in Rome toward the end of his life. Today’s Epistle lesson ends on a beautiful note of confidence: **“I can do all things through him who strengthens me”** (Philippians 4:13). That’s a wonderful verse from Scripture to commit to memory, but there’s even more that comes after it that is not included in the Epistle lesson. Take out your pew Bibles and let’s look at verses 14-20. Here, Paul acknowledges the gifts that the congregation at Philippi sent to him, and he ends with these beautiful words: **“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen”** (Philippians 4:19-20). Those final words form the basis of today’s message, entitled “God’s Giving Through Us.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

The Washington Post used to have a TV commercial that said, “If you don’t get it, you don’t get it. The point here was that if you didn’t get this newspaper, then you didn’t get what was going on in the world. We could probably debate that for quite a long time, but that principle holds true with this stewardship sermon series: if you’re not using these daily devotions, then by and large the sermons based on these devotions are not going to have as much meaning. If you don’t get it, you don’t get it. We just finished Week 3 in reading and praying our way through *Why Give?*, the 40-day devotional book. The focus of Week 3’s Scripture readings and devotions centered on the theme of how our giving becomes God’s opportunity to give. What does this mean? Our giving begins with God’s giving – creation and all its resources, life itself, and the gift of Jesus, who has **“swallowed up death forever”** (Isaiah 25:7). Because of Jesus’ life-giving death and resurrection, he himself is with us when we **“walk through the valley of the shadow of death”** (Psalm 23:4). As the introduction to this past week’s devotions put it: “We often fail to see the vertical dimension of our giving... So often when we make a gift we fail to see the way God acts in response to our giving. We do not see beyond the human gift... Our giving is only the key, the catalyst, the opportunity for God to begin his giving through us” (*Why Give?*, pp. 121-122). The daily devotions for this past week focused on seven stories from Scripture in which the initial human gift of giving opened the door to divine and rich blessings that far exceeded anything that could be imagined. Now let me say clearly: our giving is not some kind of means by which we manipulate God into doing what we want. That, of course, would be contrary to Christian teaching. What each of those seven Scripture stories clearly illustrated was that trust and faith in God leads to faithful obedience on the part of God’s people. Through this faith and obedience God abundantly provides, even when everything indicates otherwise.

The prophet Elijah asked a destitute widow to use her very last food stores to make a meal for him, rather than a meal for her and her son. Though she was down to nothing, she trusted the Word of God through the prophet that in so doing **“the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail”** (1 Kings 17:14). And it was so. A shepherd boy untrained in warfare challenges a mighty warrior who has defied the God of Israel. When everyone else is running scared, David’s confidence is in the Lord and his strength. Trusting that the Lord God would be at his side, the giant Goliath is slain with a sling and stone, and the armies of the Philistines are routed (1 Samuel 17:48-50). Following God’s instructions to whittle down the 32,000 men in Israel’s army, through a series of tests Gideon ends up with a mere 300 men. With this small band, the powerful Midianite army destroys itself in a panic, and the victory belongs to God (Judges 7). Preparing to cross over into the Promised Land, Joshua instructs the priests bearing the ark of the covenant to step into the Jordan River, which was at flood stage. God did here what He did at the Red Sea, and the water walled up, allowing the people to pass through on dry ground (Joshua 3). A little boy freely offers his meager lunch of five loaves and two fish, which Jesus uses to feed 5000 men, plus women and children (Mark 6:30-44). Having no money to give to a crippled beggar who asks for help, Peter gives him something far better – healing in the Name of Jesus (Acts 3). A poor widow places two copper coins into the temple offering – all she had to live on. In so doing, her gift far exceeded what others gave because they gave out of their abundance, but she gave everything (Luke 21:1-4). All of these examples from Scripture serve to remind us that at the heart of stewardship is trust in God’s amazing ability to provide more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

The question for us is this: will we trust God? Will we trust God who did not spare the life of his only Son, but freely offered him up on the cross for us all? Will we trust God who asks us to step out in faith, even when doing so runs counter to human logic and reason? Will we trust God and turn over to him the resources He has first given us: ourselves, our time, our possessions? The God who loves us and gave his only begotten Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins is the One who has not only invited us to the wedding feast, but has even clothed us in proper attire for this – the robe of Jesus’ own righteousness. He shows his amazing power when life’s challenges seem beyond all human resources. It is exactly at such times that God is able to transform the smallness of what we have and not just meet the need, but exceed it in ways we never thought possible. **“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen”** (Philippians 4:19-20).