

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost • October 16, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

"Why Give?: Enabling Giving" (Series Part 4)

Maybe you have been a part of an experience like one that we regularly have here at St. John's: each year on Christmas Eve, the congregation gathers here for worship. We recall how the Son of God gave Himself to us in the miracle of the incarnation and was born a little baby boy. And with the night surrounding us, we dim the lights in the sanctuary for a special reminder of the light that he brings into the world. Taking a flame from the altar, we bring the light down into the congregation and pass it along, one person lighting another's candle. The room, once dim, glows with the shared light of hundreds of candles held by all those who have come together as God's people. The light shines out in the darkness.

That simple act of lighting someone's candle can really help us to understand our focus this week. That's enabling giving. God gives to us, and then we give to others so that they in turn can give. Seems pretty straightforward then, right? Why do we need to spend a week of our fall Stewardship focus thinking about this?

In our Epistle reading from 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul gives thanks for the report he's heard about the work of the gospel among the new believers in Thessalonica. While Paul had only been with the people teaching for a short while before having to move on, the church there had become known for living out their faith. The apostles had brought them the message of life in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, and despite the persecution they faced for their new faith, these new Christians kept on sharing it in word and action. **They owned it.** Rather than sitting on the apostle's gospel and keeping it to themselves, they took it out into their community so that it spread throughout the northern and southern regions of Greece. It became their gospel, too, just as it was Paul's. "Our gospel," Paul could say, even though he and the other apostles didn't make it up, because Jesus gave it to them to give to others. The gospel became "our gospel" to Paul and then the Thessalonians Christians in turn. The gospel of Christ becomes "our gospel" fully through giving it to others. We become a part of it.

"We Give Because Our Giving Enables Others to Give" has been the theme running through this past week's devotions in the *Why Give?* book. Reading through the devotions, though, it seemed like there was a pretty significant problem with what the author was saying: when Dr. DeVries asserted that our giving as Christians is grounded in mutual dependency and equal exchange, he's only half right. God is the One who enables our giving. He's our source, as we've heard over the past few weeks. He gives Himself to us in Jesus. We depend on Him. But God doesn't depend on us; instead, He empowers His dependents to give what we've received. Dr. DeVries is right, though, in reminding us that self-sufficiency and independence are problems for us as Western Christians. Our giving isn't meant to be limited to one-way relationships. It's kind of like the old adage of giving a man a fish versus teaching that man to fish for himself. **Enabling giving brings both giver and recipient into a community which gives to others in turn.**

There's an upside to the dropping temperatures that come this time of year: the bonfire. Even when it gets dark and chilly, you can get together with friends around a bonfire and it's not so bad. Especially when you consider another upside to cooler weather: making s'mores. A few weeks ago, our Church Council went out on a weekend retreat to look ahead at our ministry together as a congregation. We were going to gather around a bonfire at the fire pit for a service of evening prayer, followed with s'mores; however, when we got to the fire pit, we discovered that it hadn't been prepped for us: only a little bit of kindling and a small pile of logs sat nearby. We tried to get the fire going, but it kept threatening to burn out before the logs caught the flame. A number of the

logs, you see, were a bit damp. **Damp logs just soak up the heat**, refusing to join in with the rest of the bonfire. They just give off smoke, not the fire that they're being given. **They're missing out on what they're meant to be.**

You and I can be a lot like those damp logs. Is the gospel outside of you? It is only "Jesus' gospel" or "Pastor's gospel" or "my family's gospel?" You might hear it often, even every week or more in worship and Bible study. You might believe that Jesus is God's Son, the Messiah who came into the world to bring about reconciliation with God – and I pray that you do. But is it *your* gospel, as it was for Paul and those early Christians in Thessalonica? Or have you been content to soak up the warmth and light that come through Christ without giving it in such a way that it enables others to give, too?

Back at the Church Council retreat that night, things were looking pretty dim – literally. Thankfully, though, our congregation's Vice President stepped up and got to work. Having been involved with Scouting for a good many years (and having two sons who are soon to be Eagle Scouts) he knew a thing or three about setting up a good bonfire. He arranged the logs – even the damp ones – standing them up kind of like a little tepee so that they were all connected yet still had space for the air and kindled fire to surround them. After a little more coaxing, the logs took flame, and the bonfire grew from one to the next until all had become part of the larger whole. (And we all got to enjoy our s'mores that night.)

God is propping you up today, too, connecting you with both Christ and with those who need to receive the gifts that come through him. He offers His forgiveness for a people who have been damp logs, given through His Son, who hung on the logs of the cross. God intends for His gospel to be your gospel, one which you give to the people around you through your witness in words and actions. **And He intends for your gospel to be their gospel, too**, one which He is enabling them to give through your giving, calling you and them alike to be a community in Jesus the Messiah, dependent on Him yet also depending on each other. **Like the logs in a bonfire, we need each other's support in order to be the community that we are meant to be.**

There's another regular occurrence that takes place at St. John's around this time of year: budget planning. While it might not be as much fun as enjoying s'mores around a bonfire, it's an important part of how we manage God's gifts as a congregation. The elected members of our Church Council look ahead to the new calendar year and seek to identify the ways in which we will be using the funds that God will provide, especially those that come through you, the people of St. John's. As we plan to support our ministry together for 2012 and beyond, we as a congregation need to make enabling giving a priority. **Church Council ministry leaders: as you consider how St. John's is giving to our community and world, making choices on how and where we give what God has enabled us to give, set plans that support people and organizations that will give our gospel to the people who need it** – so that they may be enabled to give it to others. God is at work to transform lives as we give what we've been given.

When you give, remember those candles in the dark, seeing the light pass from one hand to the next. You carry the light of Christ with you wherever you go, and as you give time and energy and wealth to others, our Lord is giving his light through you. Your giving enables others to give, bringing them into the community of the gospel: the community of *our* gospel.

Amen.