



GRASPING HURTS

November 20, 2016, Christ the King, Stewardship Dedication Sunday

Luke 12: 13-31; II Corinthians 9:6-8

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Theme: Grasping hurts; giving frees.

Lord of Life, sometimes your word's like light shining into a dark corner of life. Sometimes it's like a gentle breeze wafting through a stuffy room. Sometimes your word's like a violent storm come to trouble our ease. Be in our hearing of scripture, read and proclaimed, this morning, that it might shape us more into the human beings you call us to be. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Unlike any sermon I've ever preached, this one's going to be participatory. You have something to do, something *physical* to do besides listen to me talk. I got this idea from my minister daughter. It worked for her stewardship sermon down in Charlotte; *maybe* it'll work in New York. Toward the end of each pew are some pieces of scrap paper, actually outdated church stationery. There should be enough for everybody to have one. They look like this.... I ask you to find that piece of paper... and crumple it up in your hand. Make a fist around it, a tight fist so you can't see any of it. I'm not going to ask you to do anything I'm not doing, so here goes... Now, here's the hard part, we're going to grasp this crumpled piece of paper for the next 18 minutes of this sermon. Don't peek at it; don't loosen your grip. **Grasp it tight.**

It's stewardship dedication Sunday and I'm going to start with a story on me. Some months ago, I mentioned to my 91-year-old mother that Brick Church was in the midst of a major fund-raising effort in conjunction with our 250th Anniversary. I told her that it was my job to meet with people and ask them to



consider giving money to our “Campaign for Brick.” She laughed, and reminded me of something I’d totally forgotten – or maybe repressed. Mom said, “*Do you remember when you were about eleven-years-old and had a paper route?*” I did recall that. Every day after school, I delivered some 40 copies of the *Willmar Daily Tribune* in our neighborhood of the town in western Minnesota where we then lived. I usually put them between the two front doors or in the milk box on the front steps. Then my mother asked, “*Do you remember that every other week you had to go door-to-door to collect the subscription money?*” I did remember; I even remembered how much it was – 15 cents a week, 30 cents total. Then my mother reminded me of what I’d either forgotten or repressed. “*Do you remember,*” she asked, “*that you were so shy that you couldn’t do it, couldn’t ask people for the 30 cents they owed, so you took you little brother along on collection day? You’d knock on the door and step back and Mark would make ‘the ask:’ ‘Collecting,’ he would say.*” It all came back – my cute little tow-headed baby brother, seven years old, dragged along on collection days because I was not up to the job.

Asking people for money is still not my favorite thing in the world, but I’ve mostly gotten over it. I’ve mostly gotten over it because – counter-intuitive as it sounds – I’ve come to understand that asking people to give to something that matters is actually a way of giving them a blessing. **Are you still grasping your piece of paper tight?**

In the Gospel lesson that Don read, Jesus tells a parable. This is just after a stranger in the crowd asks him to resolve a financial dispute he’s embroiled in with his brother. Jesus’ parable is straightforward. A prosperous farmer has a few good years, so good that his storage barns won’t hold it all. He builds bigger barns, fills them up, and looks in the mirror, mighty pleased with himself. He then utters his famous and fateful line: “*Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.*”

Now, you have to admit that this sounds quite prudent. “*Load up the portfolio in your good years, retire at 55, move to Boca, and play golf every other day.*” The catch, of course, is the fact of his mortality. “*You fool! This very night your life is being required of you.*” Jesus summarizes it in the last verse of the passage, “*So it*



is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.” I doubt that the late Steve Jobs ever heard this parable (he was hardly a church-goer), but he also summed it up nicely when he asked his famous rhetorical question, “*What’s the point of being the richest guy in the graveyard?*” **Are you still grasping your piece of paper tight?**

I’ve spent my pastoral career working around people *with* money and people *without* money. I’ve learned that there are indeed delights and pleasantries that can be bought – the comfortable apartment, the travel, the country house, the nice restaurants. The “*eat drink, and be merry*” part, I guess. What money can buy *can* be very agreeable. And there’s some level of security that comes with resources – a safe neighborhood, good schools for the kids, better health care – especially when you get older.

But I’ve also seen the downside of money. The security is often fleeting and overblown. Yes, you can send your kids to the priciest school in town, but they can still give you grief. The country house is sweet, but it doesn’t really make you any happier. My experience has also been that sometimes – more often than rarely – money can *isolate* and *insulate* people. It leads folks to think that the joy is in stuff and not in relationships. Money can make people a bit suspicious of other people. “*Do they like me, or do they just like me for my money?*”

The real joys of this life are always in relationships with others – family, friends, and church. As human beings, we are built for community, built to love and to be loved. As Jay Unger and Molly Mason sing in one of my very favorite songs of all time, “*Only two things money can’t buy, that’s true love and home-grown tomatoes.*”

In the New Testament passage Don read, the Apostle Paul sums up his two-chapter-long stewardship message. This ancient financial appeal was aimed at raising money from the wealthy Corinthian congregation he’s addressing to assist the impoverished Christian church in Jerusalem. The verses we heard today are near the end of this ancient stewardship letter. Paul sums up: “*The point is this,*” he writes, “*the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who*



sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” Later in the letter, Paul makes a daring promise, “*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.*”
Are you still grasping your piece of paper tight?

These last two Sundays, our adult education speaker was a professor from Princeton Seminary named Rick Osmer. His first lecture was entitled “The Paradox of Generosity.” Osmer began by saying that most people don’t go to church these days in order to get into heaven. They go to church for the sake of *this* life more than the life to come. People ache for a here-and-now life that’s full – deep and high – connected to God, connected to other people. Folks are looking – rightly – for a life of meaning and purpose, maybe even... joy.

Osmer then took us on a deep dive into a scholarly book by a pair of sociologists from Notre Dame named Smith and Davidson. The book has the same title as Osmer’s lecture, “*The Paradox of Generosity.*” Its subtitle is “*Giving We Receive; Grasping We Lose.*” The paradox that Smith and Davidson chase in their book is simple enough. You’d think that if you give away time and energy and money you’ll then have less of that all good stuff and you wouldn’t be as happy, right? But their exhaustive research – surveys, long interviews, home visits – found that, paradoxically, the opposite was true.

The book’s subtitle sums it up: people *receive* when they *give* and they *lose* when they *grasp*. Typical of sociological research, they offered a long list of specific findings. Here’s a few, couched as they are in research language:

“Generosity often fosters and reinforces positive emotions and reduces negative emotions...”

“Generosity often triggers chemical systems in the brain and body that increase pleasure...”

“Generosity increases personal agency and self-efficacy...,” enhancing *“happiness and health...”*

“Generosity tends to reduce maladaptive self-absorption...”



Quite simply, their research discovered that people who give generously – give of their time, give of their talent, give of their treasure, are the ones who most often flourish. The evidence is in: *human generosity begets human flourishing*.

This is why I don't have to bring my baby brother along when I ask people to give to the church. I understand giving blesses the giver, and when your church asks you to give, your church is actually offering you a blessing, the potential for human flourishing. I didn't need the Princeton professor or the Notre Dame sociologists to tell me this, but they did confirm it.

So, are you still grasping your piece of paper? It's almost time to let go. Every year on Stewardship Dedication Sunday, we invite everyone in church to come forward during the singing of the Offertory Anthems and place something in one of the baskets on the chancel steps. It may be your annual stewardship pledge to the church; it may be a pledge to the 250th Anniversary Campaign. If you've already pledged or are still thinking about it, it might be a note to that effect. You could bring forward a resolution to do something you've been pondering, perhaps an offering of time, a decision to forgive, or maybe a resolution to try harder at something.

This year, you can also bring forward that piece of crumpled paper you've been grasping and toss it in the basket. If you're like me, it's starting to hurt a bit. Grasping hurts. My hand is a little bit sore; it'll feel good to let go.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.