

Sunday Sermon
November 12, 2017
“We Have Hope for the Future”
II Corinthians 9:10-15
Hebrews 3:1-6

Introduction:

Have you heard the story about the little boy who swallowed a dime? His mother became frantic. “Quick!” she yelled to her husband, “Let’s get him to a doctor.”

“No,” replied the father calmly, “I think we ought to take him to the pastor.” “The pastor?” the mother exclaimed. “Do you think he is going to die?” “Oh, no,” the father said, “but our pastor can get money out of anyone.”

I wonder if that is how you are feeling as we come to the conclusion of our Stewardship emphasis, that I am trying to get money out of anyone and everyone, and a lot more than dimes. And that is true. I make no apologies for encouraging anyone and everyone to pledge and give to the work of God’s kingdom in this place.

I.

Our theme for Stewardship emphasis has come from the theme for our celebration of the church’s 220th anniversary: Hebrews 12:1, which begins, “Since We Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses.” Each week we have finished that phrase with an affirmation of what we are called to do and be as recipients of a great heritage of blessings. That is why we give in order to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. “Since We Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses. . .”

Week 1: We give as disciples of a high priest who has given for us atonement for sin.

Week 2: We give out of commitment to Christ’s church, which is his body alive and at work in the world.

Week 3: We give to serve others in Christ’s name.

Week 4: We give out of the traditions of our faith.

Week 5: We give because we are a community of saints.

And today for Consecration Sunday: “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we give because we have hope for the future.”

II.

Our first scripture lesson today, from Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, expresses that hope in God’s abundant provisions. God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways, Paul says, so that you are ready to do anything and everything that needs to be done.

I once served on a presbytery staff in Charleston, South Carolina. In my position, I got to preach in a lot of churches. I was always moved by worship in the rural churches out from the city. In those services, the high point of the service was not the sermon or the anthem but the giving of the offering. And mind you, many of the churches where I preached were very poor churches in very poor communities.

Often before the plates were passed, the people would stand and together recite II Corinthians 9:7-8: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

Then as the ushers passed the plates, the choir would start singing a song of praise. Then the congregation would stand and begin singing with the choir. People would start clapping their hands and swaying and dancing, moving up and down the aisles, playing tambourines and singing faster and louder, until the music ended with a great chorus of hand-clapping praise as the ushers came forward with the offering.

They would put the plates on the table, have a prayer of dedication, and then everyone would sit down and get very serious for the rest of the service. People who faced what seemed to me as hopeless circumstances have found the joy of giving in the promise of God’s abundant provisions.

Our second scripture lesson comes from the epistle of Hebrews. Six times in this little section of Hebrews, the word “house” is used as the house of God. Yet the reference is not to a church building. You see, the New Testament churches were house churches. It would be two to three hundred years before churches would have dedicated structures in which to meet. So reference to the house of God means “the people.”

We are God’s house. God dwells in us that we may be the tabernacle of God’s dwelling on earth. “Christ was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.”

III.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman points out that at the very beginning, Chapter 1 of Genesis, there is the story of the creation of the earth and with it the promise of God’s abundant provisions for all creation. That theme of God’s abundance continues through Genesis, Brueggeman says, throughout the stories of the patriarchs and God’s people, until the 47th chapter.

Then in Genesis 47, the Pharaoh of Egypt has a dream, and Joseph interprets that there will be a famine in the land. So the Pharaoh organizes a plan to control and monopolize the food supply, thus introducing the principle of scarcity into that world’s economy. For the first time in the Bible, someone says, “There is not enough. So let’s get everything we can get.” And the notion of scarcity instead of abundance is introduced.

Martin Niemoller, a German pastor who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler, was part of a delegation of leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church who met with Hitler in 1933. When Niemoller returned home from the meeting, his wife asked what he had learned from the meeting. Niemöller replied, "I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man."

Pharaoh, like Hitler many years later, was afraid that there would not be enough to satisfy him, so he acquired and hoarded everything he could. When crops began to fail and people began to run out of food, the Pharaoh had people give him their land and their cattle until they had no collateral left but themselves. And then the people became slaves to the Pharaoh.

By the end of chapter 47 in Genesis, Pharaoh has all the land except that belonging to the priests, which he did not touch because he wanted someone to bless him.

By the end of the book of Exodus, the Pharaoh has been as brutal and mean as the belief in scarcity can be. Still he finds himself exasperated by the people of Israel who continue to claim hope in God's promises of abundance. So he summons Moses and Aaron and says, "Take your people and leave. Take your flocks and herds and just get out of here!"

And then a very interesting thing happens. The great king of Egypt, presiding over a monopoly of the known world's resources, asks Moses and Aaron to bless him. The power of scarcity bows to the liturgy of abundance saying, "It is clear that you are the wave of the future. So before you leave, lay your powerful hands upon us and give us some energy."

The future is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources. The future is in the hands of those who trust and practice God's abundance. (above adapted from Walter Brueggeman, "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.)

Conclusion:

We have a lot of needs here in this church and out there in this community. It is easy to think scarcity instead of abundance. But when we the people are willing to be the house of God, and we pledge and give as faithful stewards, God pours out the blessings in astonishing abundance and provides for every good work. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we give out of hope for the future." May God help us as we commit our lives and our tithes. Amen.