

Sermon
Sunday, October 22, 2017
“We Serve Others”
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Hebrews 6:9-12

Introduction:

Our emphasis for Stewardship season comes from the theme for our celebration of the church’s 220th anniversary. We are using the beginning of Hebrews 12, verse 1, “Since We Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses . . .” Each week we finish that phrase with an affirmation of what we are called to do and be as recipients of a great heritage of blessings.

Week 1: “Since We Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses,” we give as disciples of a high priest who has given for us atonement for sin. Week 2: “Since We Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses,” we give out of commitment to Christ’s church, which is his body alive and at work in the world. And today, Week 3: “Since We Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses,” we give to serve others in Christ’s name.

Chapter 3 in *Lift High the Cross*, the church’s history, is about this congregation’s heart for reaching out to others. The church has shown remarkable zeal, the author writes, in engaging in mission work that continues to this day. But do you see yourself as a missional church?

I.

Our two texts today come from epistles written to early Christians. In both instances, the people are struggling with their identity as believers and uncertainty about their callings as a church.

The writer to the Thessalonians says, “Your faith is growing abundantly, and your love for others is increasing.” In chapter 6 of the epistle of Hebrews, the writer gives encouragement to those readers. “You are not going to fall away from the teachings of Christ and your faith in God. Imitate the faith and patience of those who have gone before you. You will inherit the same promises. Go forward, keep serving others.”

One of the thoughts that has been expressed repeatedly in this year’s mission study is how this church has so many individuals involved in mission and outreach in the community. Yet we do not talk about it, you said, so we do not know what everyone does. We do not talk about what we do and why we do it. So do you see yourself as a missional church?

II.

When my husband was pastor of a Presbyterian church in upstate South Carolina, the Methodist church down the street had a break-in. The members were upset, but they did an interesting response. They wrote an open letter to the thief. It was printed in the town paper. I want to share with you some thoughts from that letter:

Dear Thief in the Night,

We are sorry we missed you. We would have liked to have been here when you broke the window and entered our church.

The police said you were looking for cash. We know that you have probably heard that we take up money on Sundays in a thing called the offering. Here is how it works: We pass some plates around and people put money in them. Sometimes they put a lot of money in them.

Our general guideline is to give 10% of whatever we earn. We guess for you that would be 10% of whatever you steal, but we would be careful, because our Leader talked to one man named Zacchaeus who had stolen from people, and Zacchaeus ended up giving all the money back four times over. We guess a thief's tithe is steeper than a church member's tithe.

Last year, hundreds of thousands of dollars went into our offering plates. We give it gladly and cheerfully and do not even make a big deal over it. So, we can understand why you might have thought we had some money here at the church.

Well, here is the irony for you. We do not have any money because as soon as we receive these gifts, we give them away. If you had come through the front door, you would have left with a way to get help at the grocery store or the gas station or the power company. But when you came breaking in through the side window in the middle of the night, you found nothing because we had already given it away.

The money goes out as fast as we get it in, sometimes faster. This church is not in the business of hoarding money. It is in the business of giving itself away for the sake of One who died for us.

We know it does not seem possible, not these days and times. But there still are some folks who believe that it is better to give than to receive, that if we help the poor, the hungry, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, that we have not only helped a fellow human being in need, we have helped Jesus himself.

We know this must seem strange to you. But your failure to find any money here is proof that your way is not the only way. Next time, come in the front door so we can share with you and show you how joyful it is to give rather than take.

III.

Rather than focus on what they had to protect, those members focused on what they had given away.

Sir Moses Montefiore was a British financier and philanthropist who lived in London in the 1800s. He was a very successful and wealthy businessman who was knighted by Queen Victoria for his humanitarian work.

One time a young man approached Sir Moses and asked him how much he was worth. It was an ill-mannered inquiry. But Sir Moses paused for a moment's reflection, and then named a figure, one that fell far short of what the questioner expected. That cannot be right, the questioner said; surely Sir Moses was worth 10 times more than that.

"Young man," Sir Moses replied, "you did not ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I am worth. So I calculated how much I have given to charity this year, and that is the number I gave you. You see, in life we are worth only what we are willing to share with others."

Conclusion:

I am thankful for the way this church shares with others. I am thankful that you are always looking for more ways to share.

I am thankful for the way you gave \$8,627.85 this fall in response to the hurricanes and floods. You helped Presbyterian Disaster Assistance have enough money for 230 families to receive clean-up buckets as a first response for their homes, their businesses, their churches.

The writers of Thessalonians and Hebrews told their readers they had a faith that was strong, a love for others that was increasing, and a constancy or fidelity that was enduring. You have those traits also.

You are a missional church.

"Since You Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses," you serve others in the name of Christ.

In the coming weeks, we are going to be making pledges toward what God is calling us to do in 2018. Reach out, go forward, and make your pledges reflect your history and your future in serving others.