

“Living to Get, Living to Give, Giving to Live” *Pastor Lauren Wright*
“It’s a Blessing to Give” *Nov 11, 2018*

Key Text: Acts 20:25-37

Last Sunday, we took a group of confirmation students and parents, as well as some additional people up to Washington DC to McPherson Park on a TOPS trip. Now, in case anyone’s not familiar with TOP, it stands for Teens Opposing Poverty, and is a ministry engaging teenagers with people who are experiencing homelessness. The students and adults prepared a lunch and collected toiletries and clothing to distribute. Many of you made that possible – the gift of your tithes and offerings paid for the meal, and others of you donated clothing, shoes, blankets, and other warm-weather winter clothes. I know I haven’t been here at CUMC very long, but one thing I’ve seen over and over again is that this is a church that is passionate about mission, about serving Christ through serving others.

The way that we serve God, through serving others, is stewardship. In September, we talked about whole-life stewardship, and the way that we are called by God to integrate our work life and faith, our money and faith, our call, and our time. All of these are parts of stewardship!

We see this call to stewardship in our scripture lesson this morning that you just heard. It came from the book of Acts, which tells the story of the early church. In our Bibles, Acts is placed immediately after the gospels – because Acts shows us what happens immediately after the life and death of Jesus Christ. Often times, we use Acts as a model for how we as the church should be – in tune with Christ, striving to love and lead others to Christ.

But today’s passage in particular isn’t about the early church so to speak. It’s not from the beginning of Acts. It comes around the transition to the last third of the book. It’s Paul’s farewell address, of sorts, right before he gets on the boat and bids the people farewell, heading to Jerusalem. These are some of Paul’s last spoken words to the early church. We see that in verse 25, where Paul says **“Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again”** – in that day and age, in that time period, communication was limited at best. Paul knew that these were final parting words.

And what does he choose to make his parting words to the people be? Not easy, simple words. Not light-hearted fluff. As we see all throughout scripture, Paul doesn’t mince words. Paul makes this last address be about stewardship. He gives a challenge to the people. It’s like he’s gathered them together one last time, before he’s about to run out the door and skip town and declares “Alright church – I’m never going to see you again on this side of heaven, so here’s the truth. Here’s what you need to do. Now do it – go be the church!”

We’re doing something similar here at CUMC in these first three weeks of November, leading up to gratitude Sunday. Last week, we started a new sermon series. In case anyone missed it, we’re spending the first three weeks of November talking about everyone’s favorite topic: Stewardship! Last week, we talked about a passage in the gospel of Luke, with a pivotal verse telling us that the measure we use to give is the measure we will receive. And today, we’re continuing that message.

One thing that we did last week was pass out these di-cut pitchers to everyone. The front says, “How can I transform my lifestyle into a giving lifestyle?” Everyone was given one, and encouraged to think about that, write a response, and then place it on the altar table as a response to the message. I’ve spent quite a bit of time this week reading over the things that were written on them – both the promises that some people made, and the questions that others had. And there have been a few themes that really stuck out to me.

First, there was a lot of conversation about priorities and learning to prioritize on the pitchers. There was talk of learning to say no to unnecessary expenses and extras, so that we can learn to say “yes” to God. There was talk of prioritizing schedules, so that time can be spent in prayer and scripture and service. I think that this is precisely what Paul is talking about in today’s scripture, when he says in verse 35 **“In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak.”**

It’s truly a balancing act. One person wrote “giving time to listen and HEAR concerns and joys.” I love the emphasis on HEAR. It’s not enough to just listen, but to truly hear what someone is saying, to truly “step up a cup” in our care for the weak, in our care for our brothers and sisters.

Another cup shared about the impact of Financial Peace University on understanding the importance of prioritizing funds and spending. Maybe some of you heard the sermon on “stepping up a cup” and want to support the church financially but are overwhelmed with debt and don’t know where to start. Maybe you think about what it would look like to give 10% and can’t imagine what it would look like to ever be there. Did you know we have resources here at the church to help? This fall, we’ve offered two sessions of FPU, and are willing to offer more. If you wanted to pray, and weren’t sure how, you’d come and talk to me or Pastor Randy, right? The same is true for other spiritual practices. Come and learn, come and practice!

Our cornerstone verse for today comes in verse 36, when Paul quotes Jesus, saying **“remembering the words of our Lord Jesus himself, it is more blessed to give than to receive.”** It is more of a blessing to give, than to receive – let that soak in for a minute.

Now, how can that be? A refrain that came out of last week’s message was to “step up a cup” – what if everyone gave 1% more? What if everyone prayed five more minutes a day? What if everyone invited one more friend to church each year? What if everyone served one extra hour a year? Can you imagine how our church would be transformed?

I’ve got to say, I think not only would our church be transformed as a whole, but each one of us would be, too. Why? Well, let’s explore that. Let’s use the example of prayer. Maybe someone in this room already prays for an hour every day. Maybe someone else prays for thirty seconds. If each one of us were to “step up a cup” and commit to praying for five more minutes a day and say there were 250 of us to do that, that’s 20.8 extra hours of prayer EACH DAY. Over the course of the week, that’s 145 hours. A year, 7,583 extra hours of prayer.

And friends, let me tell you from my experience, when I am praying for others, I encounter Christ. When I am giving of myself in that way, I am blessed. I pray for my YES student each day, and in those quiet moments of praying for her each morning, of praying for specific things for her day, I encounter God.

But this isn’t just true for giving of our prayers! Can you imagine what this would look like if we all gave one 1% more? If we served one hour more?

It isn’t about how many more things we could purchase with the extra money, or how many more mission trips we could take with all the extra volunteer hours. Think about how your life would be changed, as you encounter God through giving in this way, as we are blessed in our giving.

Sometimes, though, these verses get used in a way that’s dangerous. We don’t give, either of our prayers or our time or our money because we want to get something out of it. We don’t “step up a cup” in our giving, so that we will also “step up a cup” in our receiving. This is not what God has called us to do! We don’t give with an attitude that it’s about what we’ll get in return.

And why is this? Because it's not about us. Several popular Christian speakers and writers have been quoted saying before that "once you join the church, it's not about you anymore" – and for a long time, I thought I agreed with that. I thought that we should spend more time with those who haven't joined, and that once you join in, you aren't just here to be served, but to serve.

But I've got to tell you, friends, I think maybe we can nuance that out a little further. I think regardless of your membership in the church, once you accept the call to follow Christ, it's not about you anymore. Once you say yes to God, you've got to start learning to say "no" to lots of other things. Once you have Christ in the center of your life, the things that used to occupy that center space have got to go away.

Once you follow Christ, your life is no longer allowed to be just about you. That means the way you spend your time, your money, your prayers, and your energy matters. Someone's pitcher from last week summed this up well. They wrote that transforming to a giving lifestyle looked like "asking myself what percentage of my deeds have been for me today? How much for others? How much for God?"

And friends, here's some truth that I've learned from my own life, in my own struggles to "step up a cup" with my giving – God can do more with my tithe, with my 10%, than I can do with my 90%. It's some messed-up math that only makes sense with God, but I've seen the fruits of that time and time again. Each week, when we take up our tithes and offerings, we share about a way that those are used here at the church. We've recently shared about Stephen Ministries, and Confirmation class, and buying Bibles for Children. And friends, if you are giving financially, you are helping make that possible! Your 10% matters. When I think about the things that I've done with the rest of my 90%, that doesn't make its way to the offering plate, is that building the kingdom? Often times, that answer is no.

Engaging in this type of deep, meaningful self-reflection is hard. It's hard to say to your bank account, to your packed calendar, to your devotional life – It's not about me. But this is how God calls us. This is how Paul urges the early church to respond. Paul leaves the people, committing them to God, saying "**now I commit you to God and to the word of God's grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified**"

Paul's saying, "I've been here with you. You've seen the way I've lived and served. And now, I'm giving you to God. I'm leaving you in God's hands. And God's got this. God's going to continue to work in you and through you. God is enough for you."

And you know what seems a little crazy to me? After Paul talks about what it means to truly serve, after he says all of these things about giving, after he makes bold requests – how do the people respond? Verses 37-38 tell us "**they all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them the most was the statement that they would never see his face again**". That's what they were the most upset about – not seeing Paul again. It wasn't that they were upset about the sacrifice to give or that their leader asked for money and time and resources. It was that they wouldn't see him again.

Of course, Paul and the early church aren't perfect. They were people, just like us. And sometimes they messed up. But I think this is something they got right. Here in that moment, they got it. They got that it wasn't about them and what they wanted. But this continues to be a struggle because we're fleshly people.

We've been talking about these same themes with our confirmation students. And a few weeks ago, we focused on another early church group – John Wesley and the Methodist movement. Together as a group, we talked about what it meant to be a steward, and we passed out cards with the Wesleyan covenant prayer. We prayed

that prayer together and talked about what that meant. The root of all of it is, that our life isn't about us. As followers of Christ, our life is about God. And today, as we continue to think about the way that we spend our money, our time, and our prayers, the same is true. So will you join me in that prayer?

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,
Praised for you or criticized for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.
And now, O wonderful and holy God,
Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
you are mine, and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it also be made in heaven.
Amen.