

“Growing in Faith”
Brookfield Congregational Church
October 24, 2010
2 Corinthians 9:1-1, Luke 4:1-4

As I close in on five decades in ministry, I become more aware that I have learned many things about ministry the hard way. One particularly hard lesson had to do with making assumptions.

On a Sunday morning many years ago, a young couple was visiting our church for the first time. As they went through the line at the sanctuary door, I shook their hands warmly, smiled and said, *“Welcome... so glad to have you visiting with us.”* Then I congratulated them as I smiled at the woman and inquired, *“When are you due?”* (You can see this coming right?) The woman frowned and answered curtly, *“I am not pregnant!”* (They joined the local Presbyterian Church.)

Another lesson I learned the hard way had to do with stewardship. Our church was in the midst of a crucial fundraising effort and we were asking people to make sacrificial and generous pledges. One of the leaders of the campaign came to me with Emma’s pledge card. On her card, she had written, *“I am going to give up my twice a month manicure and give the \$10 a month to our fund drive.”*

Emma was an older woman, widowed for many years and she lived in a tiny house near the church. She lived on very meager resources and yet was one of the most giving, friendly, warm people I have ever known. Her smile could light up a room. Many of us knew that Emma’s one luxury in life was getting her nails done twice a month at a very nice salon. They charged her \$5.00 a visit and the price never changed. I suspect they valued Emma’s company so much they wanted her to keep coming even as prices were on the rise.

I had grown fond of Emma and I found calling on her lifted my spirits. I felt so badly that she was going to give up her one luxury in life and decided to take her pledge card to her and tell her that we were really doing quite well with our fund drive and that she should continue to have her nails done twice a month. In fact, I offered, I would pick up the \$10.00 a month in her honor.

Her response was not appreciative as I had expected. She took offence. Great offence. *“How dare you try to take away the joy of giving one of my most treasured things to God!”*

I learned more about giving from Emma than I did in any seminary course or stewardship education program I have ever encountered. My approach would have had Jesus going to the widow and saying, *“Thank you mam – but there are plenty of people here who can afford to put large sums into the temple coffers. Why don’t you keep your two pennies.”*

Over the years I have served a number of congregations and then spent some years teaching and talking with seminary students about giving in the church. I would share with them the things I learned from Emma crystallized that over the years morphed into three core concepts:

- The universe is driven by love and the bible tells us that God is love. The essence of love is giving. The bible tells us that *“God loved the world so much He **gave** His one and only Son.”* Emma was misty eyed when she told me that she could never give as much as God had given her.
- Giving is driven by love. I come to understand that I am deeply loved by God, then God grabs my heart and begins to shape me into the person I was designed to be and begins to love others through me.
- When the love of God is the central message of a church and when the people of that church are being shaped by divine love... there will not be a lack of generous giving. *In other words... when there is a lack of funds in a church it is usually a spiritual issue – not an economic issue.*

When people give generously, it is because they have come to know that God loves them and has blessed them. Then God grabs their heart and they love their church and they give so that others may know the blessings of God. And in doing this – they change the world.

One of the most amazing examples of God grabbing someone’s heart happened on a trip I took some years ago with our church leaders. We went to research the possibility of supporting a small church in a very poor section of Juarez, Mexico. They wanted to build a church and hoped for two or three hundred dollars a month from us.

While we were away on the trip, our church back home was negotiating with a real estate company to purchase 40 acres of prime land to build a new church and ministry complex. We had submitted a fairly low bid.

When we arrived in El Paso, the pastor of the little church picked us up and drove us directly to the Juarez city dump and parked the van. I started to ask him what we are doing, but he put his finger to his lips signaling we should remain silent. After some minutes, a garbage truck pulled into the dump. As it began to empty its contents, at least 40 people emerged from cardboard shacks and abandoned cars. Most of them were women and children and a number of elderly. They were clutching at bits of food and clothing that fell with the garbage. None of us had witnessed such poverty in our lifetimes.

Back at the “Colonia” we met several of the church members who were better off. They lived in 12 x 14 foot huts with water available at a spigot for every six or eight houses. We spent five days playing with the children, watching the absolutely devoted efforts of the pastor and generally were blown away by the faith and happy spirit of the people. On Sunday about 60 people crowded inside and out the door of a 20 by 30 foot sanctuary.

During our time there, there was a young girl about 8 years old who developed an amazing bond with one of our council members I’ll call him Jim. Jim was a very quiet, unemotional man – CEO of a manufacturing company. Everywhere we went, Jim carried this little girl on his hip. She had a remarkable resemblance to his daughter. When the time for us to leave arrived, she clung to Jim and her mom had to literally peel her off Jim’s hip.

On the flight home, we were fairly subdued. I looked across the aisle at Jim who was gazing out into the sky, and a tear trickled down his cheek.

On the evening we arrived home there was a council meeting. The council was jubilant because the bid for land for a new church had been accepted. Yet –those of us, who had traveled to Juarez, remained subdued.

“What’s the matter with you folks,” the president of the council asked, *“Aren’t you happy with the news?”*

Our hearts were back in Juarez and our minds stuck with images of children clutching at food falling from the back of a garbage truck. The discussion turned to the request of the little church for two or three hundred dollars a month. *“We can do that,”* someone offered.

Breaking his silence, Jim spoke up. *“We need to build them a church. They are the one sign of hope in a very bad place.”*

“How much will that cost?” the treasurer asked. *“40,000 dollars,”* we answered. As you can imagine, there was a fair discussion that followed - but there was openness to the idea. The difficulty was that the people of this congregation had given enormous sums of money to fund our ministry and bid on new land.

Finally Jim spoke up again. *“Let’s see what we can raise. I will write a check for the difference.”* Now Jim had been a regular and generous contributor – but nothing like this.

A couple of jaws hit the floor, but not mine. I knew what was taking place when I watched Jim staring into space on our flight home. Remember the second core concept of giving?

Giving is driven by love. I come to understand that I am deeply loved by God, then God grabs my heart and begins to shape me into the person I was designed to be, then begins to love others through me.

Do you see? Jim knew that God loved him and then God grabbed Jim’s heart and **God loved that little girl through Jim!** And Jim was determined that she would have a church where she could grow up with faith and hope in a world of poverty.

Today we begin our financial stewardship campaign with the theme, *“I Love This Church.”* We have already seen some amazing generosity and we are hopeful that we will not only meet the needs, but actually surpass what we need both for the annual budget and the capital fund.

Kathleen served a church that was doing well financially... so well that the treasurer produced a monthly report showing what she called, *“Net Profit.”*

Churches don't have "profit" of course, but the treasure was simply expressing the joy of not being in the red. But – let us hope for the wonderful outcome that would lead us to pray, *"Dear God, give us direction as to where you want us to bring hope to a broken world with the surplus this generous people has given for your work!"*

Kathleen and I believe along with you that our church is at the threshold of doing something wonderful for God. We are absolutely committed to God grabbing our heart as a church and loving a broken world through our ministry. We believe that young lives will be formed in faith... that all of us will grow in faith and love and that faith and hope will come to many because you cared.

The words Paul wrote to the Corinthians speak clearly to us today:

God loves it when the giver delights in the giving... God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done... This most generous God... is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.