

## **GIVE UNTIL IT FEELS GOOD**

**EPHESIANS 1:15-23; MATTHEW 25: 31-46**

**NOVEMBER 24, 2002 – DEDICATION OF PLEDGES, NEW MEMBERS**

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Recently, I saw a list of nine reasons people give money. Things like affiliation – you're a member of the library so you give to it; tradition, our parents gave; obligation, we give because we're on the board; or transformation, we want to help change a life.

Blatantly absent from the list, however, was feeling good. We give because, well, it just feels good to give.

I'll never forget the comment of a ninety year old member of the church I served in Pennsylvania when we were talking stewardship and saw the name of a wealthy member of that church who gave only a small amount each year. "He hasn't discovered the joy of giving," Cy said to me.

On this day dedicating our pledges and gifts for 2003 and welcoming new members into our church family, I want to explore the business of giving until it feels good. It is at the core of our faith, defines who we are as believers. And, with all due respect to the nine other reasons to give, giving until it feels good may just be the best reason of all.

Today's parable from Matthew is like having the answer sheet before the final exam. Matthew is saying to the church in Jerusalem, "here's what you have to do to pass the test of life, to be received into eternity with Jesus and all the saints."

Generation will follow generation, says Matthew and at sometime on some day known only to God, at the end of history, everything will be accounted for. What was good will be counted good and what was bad will be counted bad. A final balancing of the ledger.

And the measure of our success, the benchmark not just of our discipleship but our humanity will be the extent to which we gave ourselves like him to the "least of these." That's what the Bible says. Do you believe it? I believe it.

It would be easy not to believe it. Maybe things will add up at the end of time but sometimes in the here and now they just don't figure the way the Bible says. There are other ways we use to measure success.

I'll never forget several years ago we were visiting the Inner Harbor in Baltimore. It was a lovely summer evening. After a seafood dinner we strolled along the docks of the yacht club. I realized the boats were getting bigger and bigger.

What were 30 or 40 foot boats became 50 and 60 foot boats with little dingys.

Some of the dingys had outboard motors. Finally, we came to huge ship that was tied up. It had not one but two speed boats sitting there pretty as you please on a special deck at the back of the ship. Above the speed boats was a stern with fancy tables and chairs the size of the Case Library. We walked toward the bow. A long enclosed hallway ran the length of the starboard side. Paneled in mahogany. In the hallway there was what looked a lot to me like a French Impressionist painting.

Scrolled on the side of the vessel was the name of the ship, "Limelight."

We started guessing who owned Limelight. Cal Ripken. Donald Trump.

A Saudi prince. Wealth is one way to measure success.

There are other ways we measure success. Maybe you were at opening night at the Buffalo Philharmonic when Rene Flemming performed. I never thought too much about opera. Don't mind having it on the radio Saturday afternoons when I am doing my chores around the house. But wouldn't necessarily go out of my way to catch one. You know what I mean?

That was before Rene Flemming. After Rene Flemming I think I would camp out in line to get in to hear her perform. It is her voice but not just her voice. She has presence and poise on stage. She modulates her arias on a dime. She fills the room with her song and beauty.

Grown men were bidding at a silent auction at dinner before the performance for the chance to spend ten minutes with her after the show. It was a great fund-raising move. The place erupted after her last song. Standing ovation, encore, ovation, encore. Reminded me of Yo-Yo Ma two years ago. Talent is one way we measure success.

There are other ways the world measures success. Years ago, the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college I took a job in the steel mill in Pittsburgh. I showed up first day. I was part of the labor gang.

My brother-in-law's father got me the job. He was a foreman in the plant. A great guy, a very sweet guy whom I had never seen in his place of work but only at his home...often sitting on the steps of the front porch, unlit cigar in his mouth and a big smile. Mr. Bell said he wanted me to have the experience working in the mill so that I would never think twice about or regret getting a college education.

That first day we were asked by the tough hourly guys who got us our job. You had to know someone. Four or five guys answered ahead of me. Fathers, uncles, neighbors got them their jobs, vice-presidents, managers, white collar vips. "Al Bell got me my job," I said when it was my turn. "I think he's a foreman here." "Al Bell?" one guy asked, eyes open wide, voice high pitched and trembling. "Yes," I said. "Please," he said, "let us know if there is anything we can do to make this a positive experience for you." You see Al Bell had power. Power is a way of gauging success.

But wealth and talent and power don't even show up on the Bible's list of what makes for a successful life. We are defining success as living the kind of life, a good life, that makes its mark on eternity and leads ultimately to deep joy and happiness.

I don't mean to say those things aren't important. Wealth, talent and power.

They just don't seem to be important to the Bible, to Matthew, to Jesus.

Now do you see a certain discrepancy? Much of world, probably many of us place fair stock in wealth, talent and power. I do. I am happy as a clam driving around in my 1990 Volvo but then one of the very few cars I lust after will pass me on the road and I will dream dreams of wealth. Or talent. To master your craft like Rene Flemming or Barry Bonds. To command that kind of awe and respect. Or power. You know deference, privilege, no waiting lines – the things power buys.

In fact, the list Jesus comes up with in today's story seems laughable next to the world's criteria for measuring success. Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned.

Anybody can do those things. What's so special about that list? You don't need any advanced degrees or training. They don't require wealth, talent or power. They certainly don't attract the kind of attention wealth, talent and power do. In fact, if that is the answer to the question of successful living then it seems like a trick question. How could such an easy answer work for such a difficult question as to what provides deep joy and happiness?

So what happens is – and the parable clearly shows – many of us don't take Jesus seriously. We get wrapped up pursuing other things. Don't think twice about the hungry, the stranger, the sick or the imprisoned at least beyond our United Way contribution or immediate circle.

But then you run into someone who does take Jesus' list to heart or at least seriously enough for long enough to devote some time and energy to the least of these.

An old friend, a crackerjack salesperson who today owns his own company. They make guardrails, operate a large foundry, the business has boomed in the wake of congress approval for billions of dollars for highway repair and construction. Almost fifteen years ago when his church opened its doors to homeless men, he got involved. Showed up nearly everyday...to help serve meals, play cards, listen to the men young and old who took shelter in the fellowship hall for two winters.

"I'll never forget it," he said to me the other day. "It was a defining moment for our church. Something happened that changed us forever."

Today, the guardrail company owner teaches Sunday School and runs his church's junior high fellowship. The kids love him. You know kids. They have a sixth sense for honesty, integrity. Bill calls himself a follower of Jesus. They believe him.

Years ago I took the high school kids at North Church, Williamsville to Maine – like our own senior highs do each year. It was the first year for our work project. It wasn't easy getting interest or support. Who wants to give up ten days working in the hot sun when you could be swimming or playing tennis or golf or hanging with your friends.

But we managed to sell the idea to thirteen kids and one parent. Our project that week was to clear out an old pile of scrap wood and build a wheelchair ramp to the front door of a trailer an older man, a widower was living in.

The man was a little wary at first, as I am sure we were too. Especially, when we started pitching pieces of wood from the scrap pile into the back of a pick-up truck and about a dozen snakes came slithering at top speed out from under the pile. We ran in all directions some of us a half mile down the dirt road.

At the end of the week, there we were all of us standing proudly in front of the new wheelchair ramp getting our picture taken with the old man who had become our friend. Before leaving, after saying our good-byes, not a few of us had tears in our eyes. It was an experience, one of the girls told me years later after she had become a ranking officer in the Army corps of nurses, that changed her overnight, sent her in a new direction.

You see what Jesus says happens when we serve the least of these is that we do it to him. “When did we see you hungry and feed you Lord, or thirsty and give you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing, in prison and visited you?” “Truly, I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” said Jesus.

Augustine called this the Christ in me seeking the Christ in you. For Christians, what defines a successful life is not achievement, acclaim or accumulation but a person. Jesus of Nazareth. What his followers have never gotten over is that in him we saw the image of God that we sensed was in each of us. We hungered to let that image live fully in us. Because if we did, we would be whole. We saw what we were meant to be from the dawn of creation.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism gets at the same thing in a different way. What is the chief end of man? “To glorify God and to enjoy God forever.” That does not mean rigidly showing up in church every Sunday. Although, if we get out of the habit, it is probably a signal that we have let other parts of our lives get out of focus too. Nor does it mean God will punish us if we don’t obey certain rules. The point of the parable today is not to turn us into rule-followers. But drift away from our chief purpose – to glorify and enjoy God – and as inevitably as the sun rises and sets, we set ourselves on a course of weariness, loneliness, emptiness of soul.

What I am saying today is that giving feels good because it is good for our souls. It is why we were made. St. Paul says the same thing today. “I pray God may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance...the immeasurable greatness of his power.”

The true measure of success at the end of time is not a fancy boat or the ability to hit a high C on stage with the audience swooning, or to have waiting lines removed from your life. The true measure of success is when the Christ in you reaches out to the Christ in others and both of you are made whole.

Giving till it feels good is what we dedicate ourselves to do today with our new friends. When you boil it down to basics it’s why we’re here. Amen.