

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

November 10, 2019

UMCG

Can you do this with me as the embodiment of our purpose for Vision 2020 this morning? Sitting up in your seat right where you are. . . **Reach Up while raising your eyes... Reach In as an act of embrace... Reach Out in a broad stretch...**

Those three embodied movements, and what they mean, are at the heart of our Vision 2020 Initiative. An initiative birthed by Church Council over the past few years in an effort and prayer to revitalize our church, with God's direction and help. Like so many other churches in America, we have been in a slow but steady decline over the past 20 some years.

So, how do we see the future anew? Well...we build on our strengths. One of our strengths is worship – including a music ministry second to none. **Reach Up.** Another strength is that, overall, we are a friendly, welcoming congregation. And, of course, we always have room to grow. Hence a renewed emphasis on hospitality...deep-hearted hospitality. **Reach In as an embrace.** A third strength to build on is extending ourselves in outreach. Mission. We engage in rewarding missions and social justice ministries up and down the Fox River, in Appalachia, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. (Today we'll hear from one of our partners in ministry right here in town as Lieutenant Dena Smith of the Salvation Army shares a mission moment with us). **We Reach Out in a broad stretch.**

Since the beginning of Fall, we have preached two 3-week sermon series. One on Reaching In, the other on Reaching Up. We've used Phil Maynard's book *Shift: Helping Congregations Back Into the Game of Effective Ministry* to guide us. Each November we highlight our annual Stewardship Campaign. And so our stewardship emphasis begins today...the first of three sermons based on the 5th chapter of Maynard's book titled "From Survival 'Mentality' to Generosity." In fact, that is the theme of this year's stewardship campaign. On Thanksgiving Sunday, November 24, we will have the opportunity to offer our pledges to the Lord as we commit to generous giving of our time, our talent, our treasure, and our own selves.

Phil Maynard observes that churches caught in "Survival Mentality" feel threatened. And when they feel threatened, survival instincts kick in. And so, in order to survive, these churches tend to do two things. 1) They "chop" their

budget and 2) “cut” staff. One of the first things to go is mission support (often starting with apportionments). Then churches cut back on funding out-reach ministries in the community – such as our missions up and down the Fox River. Churches start focusing inward—on themselves. For example, they limit Vacation Bible School to the children from their church to reduce costs. They stop important church mailings to save funds. They let the regular maintenance of their facilities lapse (think of our need, right now, for a new HVAC system and a new roof). They cut the programming budgets for youth and children. In short, churches with “Survival Mentality” focus on staying afloat financially and taking care of their own. And this, of course, continues the cycle of diminishing returns.

So how, exactly, do we move toward an upward spiral? What, exactly, do we need to believe, and think, and do in order to move from “Survival Mentality” to Generosity? I believe the answer is found in our Bible. Hence today’s sermon – “Blessed to Be a Blessing” – based on Genesis 12 and 2 Corinthians 8.

Today’s reading from Genesis 12 reminds us that, as God blessed Sarah and Abraham, we too have been richly blessed by God. God is still pouring out blessings. Why? In order for us to be a blessing to others. Our reading from 2 Corinthians 8 fits right in with this theme. *Ray Stedman, Pastor and Seminary Professor, points out that 2 Corinthians 8 is all about giving as Jesus gave – not tight-fisted, miserly, grudging giving...or wild, spendthrift, careless giving...but true, generous, gracious, abundant giving. 2nd Corinthians 8 begins with an unexpected discovery of giving by the Macedonian believers (what is now just north of modern day Greece). And remember, the Apostle Paul is writing to Jesus’s followers in the Greek city of Corinth in southern Greece. Many of these Corinthians were rich in assets and resources! Paul dares to tread where most Pastors do not—he compares these commonly-rich Corinthians to their modest Macedonian brothers and sisters who were uncommonly generous givers.

You see, the Apostle was taking up an offering for the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. A great drought had struck Palestine and a fierce famine ensued. Many of the disciples in Jerusalem simply did not have enough food to eat, especially the poor widows. So Paul enlisted the aid of Gentile churches for the relief of the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem. Paul thought this would be a marvelous way to express the oneness of the body of Christ, and the breaking down of the wall separating Jews and Gentiles. In short, the Macedonian response to Paul’s

request for famine relief was a stunner of godly, generous giving, expected by no one! So what lessons about giving can we learn from these surprising Macedonian believers?

First, let's look at their **motivation** in giving. In 2nd Corinthians 8, verse 1, we discover that true giving, proper giving, always begins with the **grace** of God. Paul writes, "And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches." God is always concerned about motives. And what was their motivation for giving? It was the grace of God! The Macedonians gave because their hearts were moved by the grace and love of God. They had experienced the reality that "God so loved the world that God gave his Son, Jesus, so that whoever believes in him (Jesus) would have eternal life" ...abundant life...meaningful life, right now, and throughout eternity. What motivated the Macedonians to give was God's grace, God's love that they had personally experienced through Jesus.

Second, let's look at their **manner** of giving. And wow, do we ever learn a lot from them!

1. For starters, they didn't offer excuses for not giving. Amazingly, they could have offered many excuses not to give. For example, they had suffered persecution. The "severe ordeal of affliction" that Paul mentions in verse 2 no doubt refers to severe persecution of some sort faced by the Macedonians. But remarkably, this didn't stop their giving! They also could have given the excuse of meager means as a reason not to give. But no! The fact that they knew tough times—instead of being reasons for not giving—evidently gave them reason to give. Why? Because they understood what people feel like who are poor and are going through tough times. What excuses do we have for not giving to God?

2. Verse 2 tells us that Instead of giving excuses, they gave joyfully with overflowing joy! Now that's amazing! In the midst of persecution and meager means, the Macedonians gave joyfully. You know, God loves a cheerful giver! Are we joyful, cheerful givers, no matter what we might be going through?

3. Verse 3 tells us they gave voluntarily. In other words, they gave willingly, not grudgingly. Do you and I give to God willingly? Or grudgingly? Or both, depending on the circumstances?

4. Verse 3 also tells us that they gave what they could..."according to their means." Let me ask you a serious question. Are you giving to God what you can give? What you are able to give? Or, do you find yourself holding back? (I read about a man who when asked to give an offering said, "Well, I think I could give \$10 and not feel it." The usher said, "Why not give \$20 and feel it?")

5. And that's the way the Macedonians gave. When they gave, they felt it! Verse 3 tells us they gave sacrificially..."beyond their means." Phew. In other words, they gave until it hurt. Is that how you and I give? Or do we give safely, painlessly?

6. According to verse 5, "They gave themselves first to the Lord, and then to others" (the Apostle Paul and his team). God wants you, first and foremost. Who are you and I giving ourselves to? God? Others? Or primarily ourselves?

7. Verse 9 points out that the Macedonians gave following the example of Jesus who gave generously. "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Think of all the blessings you and I have received as followers of Jesus. We have been truly blessed. Blessed to be a blessing!

I like the way the old hymn puts it: "We give thee but Thine own, Lord. What'ere the gift may be. All that we have is Thine alone. A trust, O Lord, from Thee." Soon you'll be receiving a letter from our Stewardship Committee with a Pledge Card enclosed. Here's how the cover of the pledge card reads: "Everything we have, everything we are, is a gift from God." What gifts will we in turn pledge to God so that we through Christ can better **Reach Up, Reach in, and Reach out?**

Amen.

*Ray Stedman, Authentic Christianity blog.