

Generosity through the Generations – Stewardship 2020

Sermon: Why Should I Give? Because Others Gave Before You

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:7-11 (NIV)

Now that we are back in the building worshiping together, your pastors got together and thought **“yes, we have them trapped inside again so it is time for our annual stewardship series and then we rubbed our hands together and laughed maniacal laughs. Actually nothing could be farther from the truth.** Even when none of us could even enter the building, you continued to support your church financially and that meant we could still reach out and help others in the spirit and love of Christ. Thank you is completely inadequate, but I am going to say thank you anyway Church!

However, since stewardship is one of the ways we worship God we still want to take some time to focus on giving back to God. Our stewardship theme this year is called **Generosity through the Generations** and we will look at what faithful giving looks like in the past, in the present, and in the future. Our resource is Fields of Gold which is not the song by Sting although we did try to get him sing it as an anthem this morning. Actually Fields of Gold is a book by Andy Stanley that we will be using. So let’s begin with God’s word from 1 Peter 4:7-11.

SCRIPTURE 1 PETER 4:7-11 (NIV)

⁷The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. ⁸Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰Each of you should use whatever gift you have

received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Whether we are willing to admit it or not, during the stewardship season, many of us have a specific question that crosses our minds: **Why Should I Give?** Other people have greater financial resources than I do and will my giving really make a difference? Yes it will and we are going to explore today three faith affirming reasons why your gift to the Kingdom of God through our church is so essential.

This is going to sound like a Captain Obvious statement, but we give to our church because others have given before us. Vestavia Hills is a multi-generational church. The first time I came to Vestavia, someone told me, "**everybody is related to everybody else and they were not kidding!**" It is not unusual to have three generations of the same family here. Sometimes we even have four generations and the generosity of previous generations has impacted our current church life in countless ways.

Vestavia Hills UMC began as most great things do: with a vision. A family who lived in Vestavia Hills were Methodist and the closest Methodist church was in Bluff Park. With two lively young daughters, it was very difficult to get to Bluff Park on time so the dad (Marshall Burgin) dreamed of a neighborhood Methodist

church. His idea was rejected multiple times, but he persisted and finally after two years a Methodist congregation was formed. The new church met in the Community Center which served as a nursery school and dance studio during the week. The room they rented for worship was small and decorated with clowns on the drapes and ballet barres encircling the room. What is so interesting is after all these years, we still have SS classes that meet in rooms with walls of mirrors and ballet barres for dance classes. I suppose that phrase, “everything old is new again” is true.

By 1953, a **building campaign** (now that sounds familiar) was launched and the budding church bought a five-acre lot on the corner of Kentucky Avenue and Eastwood Place. A family who is still attending our church sold the land at a bargain basement price (S. W. Strozier) and the dream expanded. It was a beautiful Easter Sunday in 1953 when the young congregation gathered to worship on the site where they would build our church. The men wore suits and the women and girls wore hats and white gloves while the choir and the preacher led the service from a flatbed truck (do **we have some good photographs of these events if you can find them**)

Time past and building began and our original sanctuary was in what we now call the Rutland Memorial Chapel. There were concrete floors and people sat in folding chairs. But because of people you do not know, we now have pews, beautiful stained-glass windows, and an altar with a cross and candles that guides us into God’s presence. It is a beautiful jewel box of a worship space and countless people have found peace and comfort in the beauty and the stillness of

that space. I have led funerals and weddings in that sacred space and it is truly holy ground.

Or take a walk through our church and just look, really look at what you see. Some of the Sunday school rooms for both adults and children were built by those who came before us. Because of them, you adults have found deep relationships, support, and an opportunity to know God in a more personal way in Sunday School and in small groups. Think of all those rooms where the children of the church and our day school laugh and sing and learn and make crafts and are told in countless ways that God loves them.

Or find the McGimsey Garden and the beautiful clear stained-glass doors that lead into a place of comfort, beauty and silence. There is a lovely angel that sits in the middle of the garden and 3 turtles who are not as lovely but are still beloved by the children of our church. There are countless plants whose names I do not know and the most beautiful roses in the known universe thanks to our keeper of the roses. There are places to pray or simply sit and enjoy the serenity of the garden. In our Columbarium, there are the ashes of some of those who gave so generously to provide what we all enjoy. It is probably my favorite spot in the entire building and it feeds my soul in countless ways.

Here's the thing: if we follow Christ, every aspect of our lives change. Our faithful generosity to God's church derives from a profound reorientation in our thinking about how we find contentment and meaning in our life. So once again, we must focus on the question, **"Why Should I Give?"** We see the answer to our question in our scripture passage today from First Peter. We give because it is who God calls us to be and the generations who came before us understood that

on the deepest level. Although 1 Peter is a short letter, it has much to say about the Christian life and the responsibilities of discipleship. Peter is reminding us that holy living means we are to follow in Christ's example especially in times of adversity say for example a world-wide pandemic because a faithful way of living gives hope to those who are struggling and feel abandoned and alone and a part of that faithful living involves our finances.

Our passage today begins with a reminder that the end is coming soon. This sounds a bit strange to our modern ears since 2,000 years have passed and Jesus has not yet returned. However, I believe **the end is more than a divine time line. Instead it is a reminder the end is not as important as the now**, so our focus should be on love and the making sure our words and our actions are consistent. Peter remind us that love is at the center of what we believe and we show that love by giving to God through our church.

Each one of us have specific and unique gifts to serve Christ through our church and those individual gifts are just as necessary as any other gift. The ones who followed the Way of Christ before us not only understand God's call to share our gifts, but they actually did so in countless ways. They used their talent, their time, and their treasure to build a dream that we now live. They dreamed of a neighborhood Methodist Church, but thanks to their faithfulness and the Spirit's power our church has grown into something none of those first generations ever imagined, a place where people meet God, but also a place that reaches out to our neighborhood, our city and even around the world mission in countless way. **We want to be community church where people in need know to come to get help.**

There is one final answer to our question to explore: **Why Should I Give?**

We give because of those who gave before us and we give because it is who God calls us to be. But we also give because we stand on the shoulders of heroes in our faith. Those early generations that build our church gave, they shared, they dreamed of a future they would never see. And God took their dream and expanded it ways that seemed impossible back in 1952.

But we cannot stop there. Just look around our current sanctuary. The pews you sit in, the stained-glass windows that captures the holiness of the space, the stunning altar that focuses our attention on God, the glorious organ that allows us to sing our praises to God would not be there without the generosity of those who have gone before you. It is the same for Tyson Hall. I suspect Bishop Morgan and his lay leadership never dreamed Tyson Hall would become a place of contemporary worship and a place used by the community in so many ways. And no one ever considered that the balcony outside Tyson would be the perfect place to lead outdoor worship in a pandemic. But with faithful people and the Holy Spirit extraordinary things will always happen. Why should you give? **Because we are following the footsteps of those who have dreamed a dream that you now enjoy. And that my friends, is no small thing.**