

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for November 1, 2009
Lessons: Psalm 37:1-11, 21-24 and Luke 6:27-38

WITH GLAD AND GENEROUS HEARTS

I suppose I was too Western, too American, and too modern to appreciate the outcome of a short story I read as a young man. I recall neither the title nor the author but only that the story offered a twist on the literary theme of the journey, of life as a journey. In this one, outward progress is an illusion. The person making the journey realizes at its end not only that he has reached the place where he began but that he really never left it. He has arrived, not at some new place, but at peace with his place in the universe. I understood (sort of) but rejected that view of human life and destiny. For biblical faith, the journey is internal, for sure, but also external. We need to be changed, but so does the world. Otherwise, change would be accommodation to things as they are. Peace would mean inner calm achieved by finding one's place in the universe and by acceptance of all things.

I reject that view to this day but have learned we can go overboard with goals and objectives, with purpose-directed living and outcome-based evaluations. If I give myself too strong a sense of purpose to the point of a crusade, I start trampling on other people. Complete surrender to outcome-based thinking sanctifies the terrible lie that "the end justifies the means" because the outcome is all that matters. Then there is no right or wrong but only what works and what does not work. Then the kind of person I am becoming as I pursue my goals is no longer an issue, and ethics become just constraints glorified by losers.

On the light side, how many Phillies fans call it good game if the Yankees pull out a win in the end? On the darker side, have we not developed systems of cheating inside the bounds? I have watched basketball teams practice falling to draw a foul call without having been fouled. That's cheating, but it's legal cheating; so it's just a tactic. Who stops to wonder what young players are being taught about life by such tactical deceit? We are suffering through a recession caused largely by legal cheating made possible by relaxing the regulations or working around them to achieve the outcome, not of a more productive economy with increased prosperity for all, but of outrageous wealth for the few, the clever, the arrogant. We have taught our highest achievers that the world is comprised of winners and losers and people get what they take.

As we know from politics, clever thinkers and fast talkers can put a spin on anything, and biblical faith has been spun to be purpose-driven and outcome-based, or so it looks to

the modern eye already trained to see life that way. In the Bible, life is a journey. From the time God tells Abraham and Sarah to set out for a new land, God's people are on the move. Moses speaks with God in the Tent of Meeting, which the Israelites roll up and carry with them as they journey toward the land promised. God is on the move with the people, and God resists settling down. When King David, embarrassed by his own fine new house, proposes to build God an even finer house, God fails to see the need for a permanent dwelling among a people who are supposed to be on the move in life.

Biblical faith is not purpose-driven but, rather, promise-led, which may seem a subtle distinction, but it makes a big difference. The very word "driven" tells the tale. Throughout most of the world, shepherds drive their sheep, but in ancient Israel, the shepherd led the sheep by gaining their trust. "The LORD is my shepherd," presents a powerful image for life led forward by the combination of trust and hope. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to direct our lives toward promises we ourselves cannot fulfill. So, we must never take those promises into our own hands and decide it's up to us to get the job done, by whatever means necessary.

Jesus has given us the vision of world healed by redemptive love – a world in which injustices are corrected because people no longer wish to succeed at the expense of others, in which people are not written off as worthless because all are known to be loved by God, in which people are happier to give than to receive and more eager to serve than to be served. Clearly, we cannot achieve such a world, but Christ calls us to orient ourselves toward that vision. Believing Jesus makes us discontented with things as they are, because he shows us life as God wants it to be. A contented disciple of Jesus is a contradiction in terms. We are not to make peace with life's present realities. How can we believe Jesus and make peace with the death of a vibrant, loving child? Can we make peace with racism, with dismissive contempt for women, with the exploitation of our children's educational system for really big bucks, or with a healthcare system that leaves people uncared-for to maintain high profits? There are countless things in life and society with which we should not and cannot make peace if we keep our eyes on Jesus' vision of the world God wants.

Now, let's ratchet the level of this conversation down a few notches and bring it into church life. What is the goal of a pledging campaign? In general, we might say that the goal is to meet a budget that is being expanded by increasing ministry and service both to our own members and to the community in which Christ calls us to serve. That goal sounds good, but we could meet it only by an extraordinary influx of new members who were also good givers. A more realistic goal at present would be to increase the financial support of our life, ministry, and mission as a church with larger offerings made by living people to reduce our dependence upon money from the Minch fund so it could be better used to develop new ministry and service. That goal is realistic and therefore challenging rather than self-

defeating. But something is still missing. That goal, though worthy and realistically attainable, remains outcome-based in a measurable way and, therefore, misses the mark with God if we look no deeper.

The goal of a campaign worthy of the high-sounding name of *stewardship* is to foster a giving spirit, a spirit of freedom and generosity derived from faith in Jesus Christ and hope that commits us to his promise of a humanity healed and made new by God's redemptive love. So, we cannot really measure our success by looking at the numbers. Does that mean the numbers are irrelevant? No, it means they are an outward (and, therefore, superficial) sign of success or failure that leaves us trusting God for what is really going on in people's minds and hearts where we cannot see the changes happening. We like to measure outcomes that can be quantified; God looks at the spirit in which things are given or withheld.

In the New Testament book the Acts of the Apostles, we read of the early church:

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food *with glad and generous hearts*, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

There, I believe, is the spirit God wants in our stewardship: they "ate their food with glad and generous hearts." People responded to that spirit. The same book of Acts observes that people were drawn to these early followers of Jesus because they cared so much for each other – "See," people said, "how they love each other." That is not what people in our society are saying about Christians these days, not even close.

Don't we care about the outcome of reducing our dependence for survival as a church upon the Minch Fund investments so we can direct what has been entrusted to us toward more ministry and service in our community where the needs are so great? Yes, we care, and toward that end we direct the efforts of our campaign, but we also keep in mind what God wants, which is the spirit of glad and generous hearts. Jesus calls it being children of our Father in heaven.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

Jesus is not pitching the TV message of, "Give more, and you'll be blessed more." That's Christian con artistry. He's giving us a new spirit to support new actions done in trust and hope, keeping our eyes on the vision of God's promised new world. Amen.