

Trinity United Methodist Church

October 27, 2019

“First: The Commitment”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.” Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

If you’re not a sports person, you might not have realized that the Washington Nationals are one of the two teams competing against the Houston Astros in the World Series this year. So of course I’ve been following the coverage much more closely. And I heard on the radio that a young man won a ticket to Game 3 this past Friday night in D.C. for the World Series, but he was quite disappointed when he got to Nats Park and

he realized that his seat was way up in the nosebleed section. And so he got to looking down in the rows below to see if he could somehow see an empty seat he could maybe sneak into down below. And lo and behold, he saw one right behind the Nationals dugout. And so he snuck by Security to get down there. And there was an older gentleman sitting next to the empty seat, so he tapped him on the shoulder and asked, "Is anybody sitting here?" And the guy said, "No." And the young man said, "Who in the world would give up a seat like this, especially at the World Series?" The older gentleman responded, "Well, you see, that's my wife's seat, and she died just a few days ago. We've been to every Nationals game together since the day the franchise came to D.C., but she's gone now." "Oh, how sad," the younger man said. "I'm sorry to hear that, but surely you couldn't have found *somebody*, family or friend, to come to the game with you?" And the older man said, "Nope. They're all at the funeral."

Now, obviously we know that's a rather fictitious story, because who would give up the World Series at Nationals Park for a funeral? I mean, come on! But that is a fictitious story. The real story, however – I don't know if you've heard of the Itkin Brothers. Anybody heard of the Itkin Brothers? They are Nationals fans *par excellence*. They, ever since the franchise came from Montreal to Washington some 15 years ago, have had close tickets, and for at least the last decade or so have sat right on the first row, right behind home plate, front and center, every single game. If you know what they look like, you can spot them on TV when you're watching the broadcast.

But the thing about one of these brothers – Henry, the older one – he actually lives in Las Vegas. And so he flies back for every single home game, 81 games per season. And he makes that trip at least a dozen times per season, because the home games are clumped together, so at least he's not making daily trips back and forth. But still, to have regular tickets right there behind home plate, that's got to be astronomical. But the commitment to fly clear across country nearly every week for months every season – now *that* is the definition of a fan, and *that* is the definition of real commitment.

Commitment is what we're talking about today. It's a word and concept that many folks today tend to shy away from. For example, there are the stereotypes and jokes about single men in particular who shy away from marriage commitment. And it's true of a larger trend in general. Pew Research reported earlier this year that the median age for a first-time marriage has increased to the highest that it's ever been in our country – age 30 for men and age 28 for women. And as the U.S. marriage rate has declined, no surprise the divorce rate has gone up, particularly among those 50 and up.

Across many aspects of society it seems that commitment is waning, particularly among volunteer organizations, and particularly even in the church. Exhibit A, I might call your attention to our worship statistics from last week. Yes, we had some bad weather, but we missed a lot of you last week. And yes, I was out last week, too, on a

break. We need breaks sometimes. But let's try not to take them all on the same Sunday, how about that? We good? All right. (Laughter)

Why does commitment seem down overall? Some pop psychologists point to the phenomenon of "FOMO." I talked about FOMO a few weeks ago. You remember what FOMO is? The Fear Of Missing Out. You put the acronym together, you get FOMO. And the idea is that we are afraid to commit to something these days because we're afraid a better offer might come along. "Hey, we really need you to sub in children's Sunday School this particular Sunday." "Oh, but you know, it's the World Series. I might win a ticket," so I'm going to say "no" to that because of what *might* come along.

It is true that every time we say "yes" to something, we say "no" to something else, because indeed, we can only do but so much. But I think that gets at the real reason of why commitment seems to be down overall in our society. It's that we all struggle with increasingly competing commitments in our lives. By and large, we're just *overcommitted*, especially when living out our faith.

Many of us long for the olden days of "Blue Laws," of businesses being closed on Sundays, of not really any other activity to do on Sundays but to go to church. And nowadays we have to compete, if not with sports competitions on Sundays, we just have to compete even with the idea that we're so committed to so much on Monday through Saturday, wouldn't it be nice to just kick back and sleep in and relax on Sunday? In fact, I can't tell you the number of times when I've seen families out and about in the community and said, "Hey, we haven't seen you for a while in church. We miss you." Or families that might come to church, but their kids aren't active in youth group, and "Hey, come to youth group on Sunday nights." I can't tell you how many times I've heard the response, "Yes, but that's our *family time*." Well, what better way to spend time with your family than in church? To get your worship on? To praise God?

Now I realize that I'm bordering on going from preaching to meddling, and I'm also preaching to the choir. Indeed, many of you are some of our most faithful folks, week in and week out. It's all too easy when we talk about such things to point fingers at others. "Oh, if only they had been in here to hear that." But remember, every time we point our finger at someone else, we've got three pointing back at us.

We've *all* got room to grow in our commitments, don't we? Especially when it comes to the theme of this sermon series: **First**. Reflecting on Matthew 6:33 – "But seek **first** the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well."

We've been exploring this question of, "what would it look like to truly put God first in *all* that we do?" It's a theme throughout the entire Bible. We're looking at Genesis in Bible study and looking at how we were created in God's image to do what God does

and live like God lives, and that there are bad ramifications that occur when we humans fail at that.

Our lesson for today is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, to the church in Corinth that he started there. And he talks much about his first letter, which if you read 1 Corinthians, he doesn't pull any punches in that letter. He calls them out on some stuff. "Hey, quit doing that. Start doing this." It's pretty harsh at times. But Paul in 2 Corinthians says over and over, "It's not meant to put you down. I didn't mean to beat you up. I'm trying to help you *put God first*." And now he's sent Titus and the others back to the Corinthian church with this letter filled with reminders of putting God first. But also, admittedly, with an agenda: To collect an offering for the church back in Jerusalem, which was struggling. But note that Paul doesn't use any gimmicks. There's no promise of sending some kitschy, "for the low donation of \$59.99, plus shipping and handling, we'll be happy to send you this lovely sculpture." There's no promise of their names on a plaque or a brick anywhere. He simply lifts up the faithfulness of others.

In Chapter 8, before our reading for today starts, he says, "We want you to know about the grace that God has given to the Macedonian churches. And in the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations." Their commitment was rooted in grace given by God in the face of circumstances that should not have led to such extravagant commitment and generosity. It's as if Paul is saying, "Hey, they put God first – and look what happened."

Here's the thing. The Corinthian church wasn't in dire straits. Corinth was a very wealthy city, and by implication, the church there was of means as well. And Paul says in the beginning of Chapter 9, "I know how much you want to help with this gift to the Jerusalem church, right? And I know that you want to help so much that I've already told the Macedonians how much you want to help. And so, you want to help, right? *Wink, wink, nudge, nudge*." It's a tactic, yes. But one in which Paul says, basically, "Look how God is moving in your brothers and sisters in Macedonia. Examine how God is moving in your life and the lives of those that you know. Look how overall God is committed to us. Shouldn't we be committed in return?"

In today's reading, he then turns to this agricultural metaphor of sowing and reaping. And Paul basically says, "If you're not committed to it all with sowing, good luck on that harvest you plan to reap." Because it's not about the amount, Paul says, but the attitude. Paul says God loves a cheerful giver. I had a pastor in my home church that, before the offering every single Sunday, he would tell a joke. Or he would *try* to tell a joke, at least, and we would all chuckle. And then he would say, "And now, God loves a

cheerful giver, so let us give of our tithes and offerings.” He finally had someone tell him, “Bill, your jokes are so bad, we’re not cheerful when we give.”

But that’s not what it’s about to begin with. When Paul is talking about sowing with generosity, it can more accurately be translated, sowing with *blessing*. And that’s the attitude behind being generous.

Mike Slaughter, who is pastor of Ginghamburg United Methodist Church, one of the largest in the denomination, one year and many years after that, challenged his congregation at Christmas time to a special Christmas offering. And he said, “Whatever you spend as a family on Christmas presents for yourselves, for others, etc., tally it all up, and whatever the total amount is that you spend on Christmas presents for yourselves, bring at least 10 percent of that to the church for the annual Christmas offering.” The idea being that it should help us think about what we spend on Christmas for ourselves, and the tagline that year was, “Christmas Ain’t Your Birthday. It’s Jesus’ birthday. Let’s bring the birthday boy the presents.”

And so Mike tells the story of a family. The dad decided to take the whole family; his parents, his wife’s parents, their grandkids – large family, multiple generations, all going on a cruise together for the family Christmas present. And on the way back into port, one of the youngest children present said, “Well, do you have your check ready for the Christmas offering?” And the dad said, “What are you talking about?” “Well, you remember Pastor Mike’s challenge – whatever we spend on Christmas, bring 10 percent back to church for the Christmas offering. And you took us on a cruise for Christmas, so you’ve got your check ready, right?” So Mike tells that he was in his office and the man walked in, plunked the pretty hefty check on his desk, and said, “Here. Now don’t do it again, darn it.” (I just churched that up for you, too.) It’s about the attitude, not about the amount.

Paul admits in verse 12, “Yes, the service that you perform is supplying the needs of the Lord’s people. But it is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.”

Our commitment to Christ goes hand in hand with being generous. Being committed to God in all that we do, even in committing to generosity, makes life not about us, but about others, about the glory of God and bringing others to know that glory as well. And it takes commitment.

Max Lucado tells the story of February 15, 1921, in a hospital in New York City. There was a doctor, Dr. Kane, who was to perform an appendectomy. It was to be a routine procedure; he had performed thousands of appendectomies before. And so the

surgery was meant to be uneventful in all ways except two. The first was that he was going to use local anesthesia instead of general anesthesia for major surgery. He was a proponent that local anesthesia was far safer than general, and many of his colleagues agreed with him in principle, but they had to see it in action. And so Dr. Kane went on the search for a volunteer, but as you can imagine, he wasn't able to readily find a volunteer to go under local anesthesia instead of general for more of a major operation.

Eventually he found his man, and so on Tuesday morning, February 15, 1921, the historic operation occurred. It went as routine as could be. He skillfully removed the appendix, he sewed the individual back up, they went into postop, the person recovered and was out of the hospital two days later, and was just as fit as could be. Thanks to the willingness of a brave volunteer, Kane demonstrated that local anesthesia was a viable, even a preferable, alternative.

Now there were two things that made this particular surgery unique. The first was that it was the use of local anesthesia. The second was who the patient was. The courageous candidate for surgery by Dr. Kane was Dr. Kane. To prove his point, Dr. Kane operated on himself – which evidently proved to be a wise move, because now, today, we can have surgeries with local anesthesia! But the doctor became a patient in order to convince the patients to trust the doctor. Talk about commitment.

But it's not unlike God becoming human in Jesus in order to convince us to trust Him and commit to Him all the more. Jesus said in Matthew Chapter 6, "Do not worry about what you'll eat, what you'll drink, what you'll wear. Even the pagans run after these things. Everyone else worries about these things. You're not to be like everyone else. But you seek **first** the kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be taken care of." What if we made that our focus? What if we committed in all that we do and all that we are to seek God **first**?

Thanks be to God. Amen.