

## **THEME: The Life God Blesses**

### ***"The Blessings of God"***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

November 17-18, 2012 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

### **2 Corinthians 9:6-13**

*Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure, "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say, "They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever." For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. So two good things will result from this ministry of giving—the needs of the believers in Jerusalem will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God. As a result of your ministry, they will give glory to God. For your generosity to them and to all believers will prove that you are obedient to the Good News of Christ.*

**VIDEO      The Blessings of God - Sermon Starter**

**SLIDE      The Blessings of God**

Please take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and Meditation Moments. Your Message Notes contain today's scripture passages on them and there is a place for you to write down anything you would like to remember from today's sermon. On the back side you will find Meditation Moments that will help you think and pray more deeply about living the blessed life. There are two passages you were going to read this week in the meditation moments which are very confusing to people. They are famous passages but they are often misunderstood and I think you may come to understand them more clearly through these meditation moments this week. I think you will find that to be a blessing so please take them home and use them for a few minutes each day.

Two weeks ago we began a new sermon series on living a blessed life and we began with the fundamental question of, "Why?" We started with the "why" and recognized that we can't make good decisions and we can't experience life the way God dreams for us to experience it unless we begin by understanding that we were made by God to be loved by God. The problem is that we listen to all of the voices around us that tell us we are not worthy of love or we are not good enough. When we don't get that "why" down then we end up listening to the other voices around us in our world which tell us we need certain things to really be loved or to be lovable.

That led us to last week's sermon in which we talked about how we manage our resources. We talked about how when we don't get why figured out then we find ourselves filling our garages and our bedrooms and our storage spaces with so much stuff that we are overwhelmed. You have heard me say this before but I believe that the two things that most Americans are most afraid of are the fear of death and the fear of losing our stuff. We talked that first week about our fear of death and what it means to be made by God to be loved by God not just now but for eternity. We talked last week about how we get consumed by everything that we own and by having enough.

Today we want to talk more concretely about how God blesses us by our giving and how what you do in your commitments touches the heart of God. Today I simply want to cheer you on and to thank you and to bless you for what you have done through your commitments to this community of faith. We're going to do that by simply looking in the Scriptures at the stories of people who gave sacrificed for God.

In the Old Testament people didn't bring money to God because they didn't have money. People traded grain and animals with each other as a way of surviving. The first time that you find people giving their stuff to God is in Genesis 4 where we find Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve, coming to worship God. This is the first example we have in the Scriptures of people coming to worship God and what you find is that people inherently knew they should bring something with them when they came to worship God. Cain was a farmer and so he brought grain to worship with him while Abel was a shepherd and so he brought an animal which was one of the best in his flock. This week you will get to read that story and wrestle with why Cain's offering was not acceptable to God but Abel's offering was.

This was the first example of people bringing offerings to worship and you will find from this time forward that the central focus of worship for the Israelite people, the Jews, was the offering. The primary focus of worship was not the sermon or music but rather sacrifice or the offerings that were often burnt offerings.

The second example that we have in the Scriptures of someone bringing offering to God was Noah. You remember Noah's story in Genesis 6 -8, how he built an arc and the floodwaters came. He and his family and two of every kind of animal were pent up inside the ark for months, waiting for the floodwaters to recede. In chapter 8 we finally find Noah getting off of the arc and this is what we find that he does in verses 20 and 21.

**SLIDE      *20 Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and there he sacrificed as burnt offerings the animals and birds that had been approved for that purpose. 21 And the Lord was pleased with the aroma of the sacrifice and said to himself, "I will never again curse the ground because of the human race, even though everything they think or imagine is bent toward evil from childhood. I will never again destroy all living things. 22 As long as the earth remains, there will be planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night."***

This passage teaches us several important things about Noah and about how God's heart was touched. First, we need to remember that Noah took more than just two of every animal. He took seven of each of the animals who were seen as clean. Then, when Noah gets off of the arc in this story remember that there are no more animals on the Earth except for the ones that just came off of the arc. If there is ever going to be a time again when animals are going to be used for food you would think that Noah would preserve and protect those animals. Instead, Noah immediately builds an altar by taking stones and dresses the animals will be sacrificed and he burned them before the Lord.

I know that we struggle in today's world with thinking about sacrificing animals on an altar but this is what they did several thousand years ago and what it tells us in this story is that Noah gave up something for God that he couldn't have had for himself or for his family in order to thank God for the blessings of life. Noah wanted to honor God and thank him for preserving his life. Notice what we learn about God in verse 21.

**SLIDE      *And the Lord was pleased with the aroma of the sacrifice.***

When we read this passage we find ourselves having to ask this question. Is it really true that God enjoys the smell of barbecue? Is God touched by the smell of barbecue and if so is it Serious Texas Barbecue? Maybe God would enjoy that but this passage is an anthropomorphism which is a human statement about God to teach us something about God.

It is not that God enjoys the smell of barbecue so much as that God is pleased by the fact that someone was willing to sacrifice for him. God saw the sacrifice and the faithfulness of Noah and the desire that Noah had to bring a blessing to God. That touched the heart of God so much so that God made a promise. This is called the Noahaic Covenant where God makes a promise, as a result of seeing this man's offering, that he would never again destroy the earth by flood, even though human beings persisted in their evil. God said he would never do this again because in Noah he saw the potential of human beings, offering to bless God with his sacrifices.

This tells us something about how God looks at our offerings and our willingness to sacrifice. When you are willing to sacrifice something that you could have had for yourself and instead you say, "No, I give this to God willingly," that is a sweet smelling aroma to God because he sees your heart. God sees what you could have done with it and God is touched and moved by the fact that you chose to give it up for something other than yourself.

This is a powerful idea and we find it in 41 other places in the Old Testament, where people offer burnt offerings and it becomes a sweet smelling sacrifice to God. The third chapter of the book of Leviticus takes the first seven chapters and describes how these offerings are brought to God. This was commonplace, for people to bring their burnt offerings to God which created a sweet aroma. These offerings were brought for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they were simply "thank" offerings brought to say "thank you for the blessings I have received." There were times these offerings were brought to simply say, "I love you and I honor you God. I want to bless you because you are my creator." These were "praise" offerings meant to give praise to God.

Sometimes a person would commit a grievous sin which would separate them from God or from other people. They would offer a sacrifice as an atonement and they would say, "God, I've made a mistake and I give you this gift

as a way of saying that I am sorry for what I have done." People sometimes felt far away from God and so they would give "fellowship" offerings. They would offer an animal and they would burn part of it as an offering that they would eat the other part of it in proximity to the altar as a way of saying, "God, I feel far away from you and eating this meal here in this place helps me feel closer to you." That is what we do during holy communion as we take this meal here in the sanctuary together as a way of being close to God and close to each other. It is our way of saying, "We want to be reconnected to you God."

There are a variety of reasons why people gave offerings to God but it were always they came from the heart as a way of expressing who God is and who they longed to be of God's people.

Whenever you read about an altar in the Old Testament you are reading about a place where God's people could give a sacrifice. It began with just a collection of stones with a fire built underneath it and they could then place an animal or grain on top of it to be burned. Later, altars were carved out of stone and were much more elaborate like the one you see on the video screen.

**SLIDE      Ancient Altar (Picture)**

You can see the projections from the corners of the altar and these were called "horns." The animal was sacrificed and the blood of the animal was placed on the horns of the altar and then the fine meats and fats of the animal was burned in the center. By the time the tabernacle or the first sanctuary was built for the Israelites the altar was made of acacia wood but on top it would be bronze and the fire was built on top of the metal then the offering was placed on top of that fire. 373 times the word altar is used in the Old Testament and whenever it is used it is meant to signify a sacrifice or offering. We read these words in Genesis 12:7 – 8.

**SLIDE      *7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I will give this land to your descendants.\*" And Abram built an altar there and dedicated it to the Lord, who had appeared to him. 8 After that, Abram traveled south and set up camp in the hill country, with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. There he built another altar and dedicated it to the Lord, and he worshiped the Lord.***

Abram would later become Abraham and in this part of Genesis he is in the land of Canaan which would later become Israel. In response to a promise from

God Abram builds an altar so that he can give an offering or a sacrifice to God. In verse eight Abram is coming to a place where he is going to pray and before he does that he built an altar to God so we can offer a sacrifice.

Here at First United Methodist Church our altar is made of wood because we don't offer animal sacrifices anymore. We learned in the New Testament that Jesus was the one, final sacrifice offering himself for the forgiveness of our sins. This altar however is still a place of sacrifice as each week we pray over the offering. We lift them up before God and we place them upon the altar. We pray, "These are the sacrifices of your people O God—their offerings given to you in worship." I am always honored to hold the baskets or the plates before the altar because they say something about who we are as God's people. This is not simply a financial transaction but these are the gifts of God's people, given to honor and bless. These are the sacrifices of our hands for God's work in the world. This is what we do when we offer our tithes and gifts to the Lord.

We look at the Old Testament and the idea of sacrifice but now let's turn to the New Testament and see what Jesus says about offerings. The first is a parable that Jesus tells in Luke 19:12-17. This is called "The Parable of the Ten Servants."

**SLIDE      *12 Jesus said, "A nobleman was called away to a distant empire to be crowned king and then return. 13 Before he left, he called together ten of his servants and divided among them ten pounds of silver, saying, 'Invest this for me while I am gone.' 14 But his people hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We do not want him to be our king.'***  
***15 "After he was crowned king, he returned and called in the servants to whom he had given the money. He wanted to find out what their profits were. 16 The first servant reported, 'Master, I invested your money and made ten times the original amount!' 17 "'Well done!' the king exclaimed. 'You are a good servant. You have been faithful with the little I entrusted to you, so you will be governor of ten cities as your reward.'***

The noble man in this parable is Jesus. He is going to a distant country to be crowned King which means that Jesus is going to die and go to the kingdom of heaven where he will be crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Before he goes to that distant country he calls the servants to himself. The servants are the disciples, but this is also you and me. To each servant he gives 10 pounds of silver

which was a huge sum of money in the first century Palestine. This sum of money is meant to represent your life, not just your money. God gave you your life and your existence and you have nothing apart from God who created you. You exist because of God and so your time, your talents, your spiritual gifts, your experiences and all your financial resources are represented in that large sum of silver.

The nobleman says to each of his servants that they are to take that silver and recognize that it belongs to him. Your life belongs to God. All that you see around you belongs to God. You came with nothing into this world and you will leave with nothing in this world and everything you acquire in between is going back to God. The nobleman tells each of the servants to take that lump of silver and do something meaningful with it while he is gone. He tells them to manage his resources while he is gone. The nobleman leaves, which in this case is Jesus going to heaven.

At a distant time the nobleman will return and this is meant to be the second coming. He calls his servants before him and this act is meant to represent the final judgment. At this time the nobleman ask for an accounting of their silver. The first servant comes forward and shows that he is multiplied that silver by 10. Here is your silver.

Let's think about this for a moment. What is Jesus saying in this parable? He is saying that one day we will stand before him and we will tell him what we did with this valuable life that he offered to us. We will say, "Lord, you gave me this life and here is what I have done with it." Maybe you will bring before him all of those people you invited to church and invited to faith in Christ. Maybe every child you taught in vacation Bible school will be lifted up to God. Maybe every meal that you served at the soup kitchen will be laid out in front of that heavenly banquet table. Certainly all of your offerings and every way that you served to bring about the kingdom of God and to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world will be lifted up and counted towards what you offer to God as you show him what you did with what he entrusted to you.

As your pastor, I long for each one of you to hear from God the powerful words in verse 17.



**SLIDE        *“Well done!’ the king exclaimed. ‘You are a good servant. You have been faithful with the little I entrusted to you, so you will be governor of ten cities as your reward.’***

This is an interesting idea where Jesus says that your offering of yourself, how good of a steward you are with what you have been given, is a test of your trustworthiness. Can God trust you with the little things? If God can trust you with those little things then God will continue to give you greater responsibility. You know how this works because it works this way in the world. Usually, if you are in a workplace and your boss gives you a small task to do and you do it well then they might give you a bigger task. As they see that you are trustworthy with that small amount of responsibility they will give you more and more because they found that they could trust you.

So in some ways what we do with our gifts and resources in life is a test. God tests us to see if we will be faithful in small things. As we become faithful with our tithes and offerings then God entrusts us with more. I am certain that in the kingdom of heaven we are not going to sit around and strum harps all day long. I think there is stuff to do in heaven and when God sees that we are trustworthy on Earth we will be given greater responsibility in the kingdom of God. This is part of the test.

In the Old Testament there is a similar test when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. This is a perplexing story that you will study on Tuesday this week in your meditation moments. Abraham and Sarah are an old couple by the time they have their child Isaac. Isaac is the son of promise and the one who will inherit the estate and lead God's people. God says to Abraham, "I want you to take your son to Mt. Moriah and there I would have you sacrifice him."

Remember that the other gods and goddesses of this time period required human sacrifices. Abraham doesn't know any better. Does God require this to? We can read this story and know that God is going to stop him before he sacrifices his son, but Abraham doesn't know that. Will Abraham be faithful? I can't imagine being given this test and I would've failed. But Abraham takes his son and I am sure with tears in his eyes goes to Mt. Moriah. He built the altar and prepares to sacrifice his son saying, "If the God of the universe asks this of me, I know that he must know what he's doing. I will even give him my son."



At the last moment God intervenes and says, "Stop Abraham! I don't want you to sacrifice your son. I just wanted to see if I could trust you with everything before I gave you the inheritance. Before I gave you the keys to the kingdom and leadership of my people, could I trust you?"

Last week I had a woman in our congregation come to me and say that what we talked about last week was true. She said, "I find it easy to give Jesus my heart but I really don't want to give my money. In the end, I have come to realize that it is a matter of trust. Do I trust God and can God trust me?"

In Mark 12:41-44 we read this powerful story.

**SLIDE**      ***41 Jesus sat down near the collection box in the Temple and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. 42 Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins. 43 Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. 44 For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on."***

This is an interesting story for several reasons. First, I find it very disturbing to think about Jesus sitting down and watching me put my offering in the plate or basket. You may not know this, but when the offering is taken here at First United Methodist Church, I refuse to look at you. I don't want you to think that I'm looking to see if you are putting something in the plate or in the basket. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable and so I stare at my shoes or I pretend to be in prayer. Actually, I am sometimes in prayer, but sometimes I look at whoever is singing or I look at the bulletin and try to think about what we're doing next in worship. What I won't do is look out and make eye contact during the offering because it makes me uncomfortable for you.

But Jesus sits down across from people and watches them intently as they put their offering in the offering box. Why did he do that? What was going through his mind? Certainly he saw a connection between our offering and our faith.

I also want you to notice that Jesus does not dismiss the rich. He doesn't say that the rich are not doing their part when they put in their offerings. He doesn't speak poorly about those who are wealthy and place their offerings in the

box. He actually is rather neutral towards them, like they are doing their part placing their offering in the basket.

What he does do is motion to the disciples and say, "Hey, I want you to come over here and see something. Do you see the poor widow? She took her last two coins and gave them. Out of her poverty she gave the last that she had."

Jesus didn't tell her to do that. He doesn't say here that every person who is poor needs to give their last two coins to the Lord in the midst of their poverty. He doesn't demand anything, instead, he sees a woman who chooses of her own volition give the last that she had to the Lord.

**SLIDE      Widow's Mite (picture)**

On the video screen you will see an actual Widow's Mite from the time of Jesus. It is a small little coin that is half the size of a penny. She took two of these and put them in the treasury at the Temple. Notice what Jesus says as he points out what she gave. "She gave more than all of the rest, even though she gave just two of these small coins."

What is Jesus saying? He is reminding us that is not the quantity of our offering that matters, but the relative sacrifice in our lives. When he saw this, the heart of Jesus was moved seeing a woman who in her poverty gave all that she had. What did that say about the woman? It said that in her poverty she trusted God and would be faithful to the Lord no matter what.

I want you to notice that one of the things that Jesus is reminding us is that some of the folks who give the greatest amount in our congregation are our children who make no money and people who make the least amount of money but are willing to sacrifice and trust God in doing so. They say, "God, I don't know how I'm going to make it but I'm still going to be faithful to you." In the midst of their struggles financially they still trust in God and this blesses the heart of God. We learn something powerful and profound about the heart of God and what it means to be Jesus Christ to the world in this story.

**SLIDE      Jeff and Family in Mexico (Picture)**

I went to Mexico City on a mission trip when I was in college to serve in a very small village on the outskirts of the city. There was much poverty and destruction because of the recent earthquake which devastated the city. We meet day in families homes and for our meals in the evenings we would often

have chicken in some form. I didn't speak any Spanish so at the end of our stay I asked our translator how it was that these families who had nothing were able to feed us with chicken. She told me it was the only chicken that this family would get all year and they wanted us to have it because we were their guests and they knew that God would provide.

**SLIDE        Prostitute Anoints Jesus Feet**

I love the story in the Scriptures of the prostitute who comes to the feet of Jesus and anoints him with oil while she is weeping. We know that Jesus has already forgiven her of her sins and she found in him grace and mercy. What does she do when she finds grace in Jesus? She gave him the one thing that she had of any value and it was her precious oil or perfume. She breaks the alabaster flask and she pours it on the feet of Jesus. Why did she do that? She did it because it expressed a love for him. She was grateful and filled with graciousness toward the one who offered her life.

**SLIDE        Zacchaeus**

We learned two weeks ago about Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector who had cheated many out of their hard-earned money. When Jesus called him to follow the Zacchaeus gives away half of his estate and repays anyone who he has cheated. Why does he do this? It was a reflection of the way that his heart was changed by Christ and his newfound desire to serve.

Let me give you two words of warning about your giving to God. First, you could give the full tithe to God and it could still not be pleasing. God is not, in the end, looking out for your money so we can get a raise. God wants all that you are and he mostly want your heart which is willing to follow. God doesn't just want 10% of your money but he wants 100% of you. God wants you to love and to follow and to serve every day with your lips and your hands and your mind and your heart.

The 10% is meant to be a reflection of a desire to serve him with all that you are and all that you have. I have known people who thought that giving their 10% in the offering plate made up for a whole bunch of terrible stuff they intended to do the next week and the following month and the next year and they had already done the last week. We find in the Old Testament that God speaks against this on several occasions where God says through the prophets,

**SLIDE**        ***"Listen, you're burnt offerings are no longer a pleasing aroma to me. Instead, they have become a stench in my nostrils because you have failed to love justice and to seek mercy and care for the poor."***

God is looking for something more than just giving 10%. In Luke 11:42 Jesus says this to the Pharisees.

**SLIDE**        ***42 "What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore justice and the love of God. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things."***

In other words, they not only gave 10% of their finances but they took 10% of their gardens they took it to the literal fraction. He tells them that tithing is a good thing but what he wants just as much of his justice and the love of God coursing through their hearts.

The second caveat is simply that motive is everything when it comes to your offerings and gifts to God. God cares about why you give and this is important. There are a group of pastors and leaders in the religious community which have preached and taught something called the "prosperity gospel." The idea behind it is that God wants you to be rich. If you will plant your seed then God will take your gifts, pressed down and shaken together and pour out blessings upon your life. The idea is preached that if you give \$100 in the offering plate then you will get far more than that financially the Lord.

It doesn't really work that way otherwise nobody would invest financially in the stock market. About this time every weekend during the worship service there would be a flood of people who would show up, run down to the altar, and put their offerings and the plate. They would come for the sermon or the music or the prayers but simply to put something in the offering basket so they would get back 10 times more. It simply does not work that way. This is not why we give. Does God bless us when we give? Yes, but that is not why we give so we can anticipate getting something back. We give because God already gave to us everything, and we want to express a love for him and honor and to keep things in perspective in our lives by recognizing what God is done for us.

Several months ago we were sitting around our family dinner table talking about what we liked best about our day. My daughter and I had gone for a bike ride and so I looked at her Vika and I told her how the best part of my day was

just riding bikes with her on the River Trail. The next day Vika came up to me and she grabbed my hand and she looked me in the eye with these sweet brown eyes of hers and said, "Daddy, can we go for a bike ride together?" Before I could say yes or no she hit me with another question, "And then daddy, can we go get ice cream at Dairy Queen?"

That just kind of ruined the moment for me! I just wanted to go for a bike ride because it was fun to go for a bike ride but she had a bit of an ulterior motive, having visions of a hot fudge sundae or and Oreo Blizzard. Truth be told, my daughter loves to ride bikes as well and so it could have been just her way of going for a double bonus but it still killed the mood.

I think that God must feel the same way sometimes. When you give your offerings I don't want you to do it so you will get something back. I think God just wants us to honor him and love him and give out of that desire to express our true feelings inside. In the midst of that I think God longs to bless you when you have loved him. The truth be told I took my daughter to Dairy Queen anyway.

With that in mind I want to talk to you about three blessings that you receive when it comes to your generosity.

**SLIDE      God takes care of our needs.**

The first is that when we do give, God takes care of our needs. I don't understand exactly how works and it doesn't always work the way I wanted to work, but I do know this. When I have given God has a way of giving in return. It's not a formula but rather just a way of knowing that we are taking care of. We read about this in 2 Corinthians from our Scripture passage that we read today. The apostle Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians asking them to give a special offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem who are living through a famine. Listen to the spiritual principles that Paul gives to them. This is from the New Revised Standard Version of the Scriptures.

**SLIDE      *6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully... 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work...10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You***

***will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others,***

Notice that he doesn't say that you will have **MORE** than enough of everything. He says that you will simply have enough of what you need when you are generous. Here at First United Methodist Church your offering makes possible the ministries of the church and makes it possible for us to reach out to others and be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

The spiritual principle is that if you sew sparingly you will reap sparingly. If you sew bountifully then you will reap bountifully. Financially, that means that God will make provision for our lives. Last year I met a young man who started coming to our church about two years ago. He said to me, "Pastor Jeff, when I first started coming to First United Methodist Church I was struggling financially my job and trying to make ends meet here in Durango. Whenever the offering basket came around I felt guilty, but I decided to make a commitment to put whatever I had in my billfold that week in the offering basket. Some weeks that was only a couple of dollars and other weeks it was a \$20 bill. When I put the \$20 bills in there I asked myself how I was going to pay the bills that week. I still felt compelled to do this even though I had no idea how I was going to eat some of those weeks. Jeff, I have to tell you that there was never a week that I did that in which there wasn't enough to pay the bills. I can't explain it. I just know that this is what happened when I trusted God each week and put that money in the basket."

In my own life, when Tami and I got married and I was a pastor just starting out we had no money and student loan debt up to our eyeballs. It made absolutely no sense for us to tithe. I would've been embarrassed as a pastor to ask a young couple like we were to tithe. As a matter of fact, I had never been asked to tithe and no one had taught me this spiritual principle but thank goodness my senior pastor did ask me this question and encourage me to give it a try. I thought he was crazy but we made a commitment that year and we have stood by it ever since. I can tell you that week after week our needs were met. I

don't always understand it but it's how it's happened in our lives. It felt like, year after year, God entrusted more to us because we were found trustworthy with a small things.

**SLIDE        You can't out give God.**

You may have heard those who tithe say this saying and it sounds rather trite but it is true. It may sound cliché to some of you but it has been through for many of us. It seems like somehow when I give I get more in return. I can't fully explain it.

That is the least of the blessings we get when we learn to grow in the grace of giving however. Giving changes our hearts and the quality of our life.

**SLIDE        Giving changes our hearts.**

When we learn to give it changes how we look at the world, how we look at money and how we look at life for the better. Let me give you an activity right now to do. Think of two people in your life. The first person I want you to think of is the Ebenezer Scrooge in your life. Think of that person who loves money, who tries to hold onto money, who is afraid to let go of money, whose focus is money, they live for money and they don't share. Do you have somebody in mind?

Great, now think of that person in your life whose life is characterized by generosity. They would give you to shirt off their back if it would help you. They would do anything for you. They are constantly giving. They have a joy in giving that you can almost see on her face.

When you think of those two people, which one has a higher quality of life? I'm thinking of two people who are both millionaires. One of them is a man whose wife left him years ago. He lives by himself but is worth several million dollars. He's an older man and he's been very careful to tie up his will so that his children can't touch his estate until they are over 65. He wants to control his money even after he is gone. He's very careful with how we spend the money and hold onto every dime. At the end of the year he writes out five checks to five charities for \$25 each. That is the sum of his charitable giving. He does this so when his tax returns are done there is not a zero on his charitable deduction line. He is one of the most miserable men I have ever seen and if you look at him there is an emptiness in his eyes.



The other person I'm thinking of is a man who doesn't flaunt his wealth but is worth just as much as the first one. He doesn't even really think about how much money he has and he is constantly giving it away. He gives a tithe to the church and he gives beyond that to the building fund or the special Christmas offering or whatever it is that the church and its ministries are asking for. He always gives to every special cause that comes his way and when it comes to silent auctions he always writes out a check for more than what he bid for an item. There is a joy for him and just giving things away. He is happily married and his kids are more generous than he is, never asking their father for any money but instead asking him to give money to a charity in their name when it's their birthday or at Christmas.

When I think of these two, is this last one that I long to be like. There is a quality of life and a blessing that we receive only when we learn to give and grow in the grace of giving.

Finally, this last blessing from giving is the greatest of all. We recognize and remember that when God wants to work in the world he works through people like you and me. God accomplishes his purposes through human beings and through the church.

**SLIDE      When we give we are participating with God in changing the world.**

Here at First United Methodist Church you are helping to be Jesus Christ to the world through missions and service and caring for one another and reaching out across the globe and inviting others into a relationship with Christ. Every time you give your time and your talents and your resources to something that can happen here at this church that would not happen without those things. When you walk in today you received a bulletin because somebody paid for that bulletin. You sit here and there is electricity and light because somebody paid for electricity and light. You have video screens and an organ and a choir and a praise band because somebody paid to help bring those things to our church. You have pastors and worship leaders and Congregational care ministers and Stephen ministers who will come and connect with you and care for you and pray for you because people give their resources and their time for that to happen. You have people in the children's nursery and in childcare and in the youth department because people give up their time and resources for that to happen and you bring the presence of Christ in the lives of those in the next generation.

Every week in our staff meeting we have a time for people to share stories of changed lives here at First United Methodist Church. It would take me hours to share all of those stories with you but I thought I would share one of them with you. I received this e-mail several weeks ago.

*I was raised very fundamentalist. After I turned 18, I rejected religion of any sort and lived a life of total rebellion to everything I heard growing up, a life no one would be proud of. My husband was raised in a Christian home but doesn't remember going to church after age 12. We married. I was always afraid of the God I had rejected. My husband explained to me scientifically that I didn't need to be afraid of a God because God didn't exist. His explanations were very compelling and it soothed me for a while. Deep down however, I was still afraid, but I knew I wouldn't see God without my husband.*

*I looked for comfort and satisfaction. I have so many self-help books and I read and I meditated. I was looking for peace but I felt like I could never find it. I couldn't be good enough for that either. I still felt an emotional emptiness, even though intellectually I understood it. Deep down, I was still afraid, and my husband thought Christianity was worthless. We had long conversations into the night on religion for years. In the words of Mick Jagger, "I couldn't get no satisfaction."*

*I take Fridays off and starting several years ago, every Friday morning I felt like, "Now what! He we go again on another week." I started looking through the Yellow Pages at church ads and if they had an Internet address I would look them up. I found FUMC and for several months would occasionally listen to the sermon on the Internet. My husband wasn't interested.*

*In August I walked into First United Methodist Church and I was handed a bulletin. The sermon was on the denominations of the Christian faith. I went home and said to my husband, "You are not to believe what the sermon was about! It was about the denominations of the Christian faith! I can't believe I'm saying this but I think I want to check out Christianity again." I went on to explain some of the things I learned in the sermon and he simply said something like, "That's nice. I have to go work now."*

*I went to each of the following sermons on the different faith traditions and I told my husband about them each week, trying to get him to go with me. He said he would go with me someday. I said, "You really should go with me to the one on*

*Methodism. I think they are going to compare Methodism to all the different Christian traditions." He said something like, "Will see. I think I'm busy." I said, "We don't have to go to the whole service, we could just go for the sermon and then leave." He finally said he would go.*

*We didn't say anything to each other during the message. The sermon wasn't on what I would thought it would be. At the end of the sermon you asked everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes. I thought, "Great, an altar call on my husband's first service he had been to since he was 12!" Growing up I was used to them, but my husband wasn't and I was sure it would turn him off. I wasn't so sure that I wasn't going to be turned off too. But I thought, "All these people at all the services, it can't be too scary or they would've fled by now."*

*You said something like, "Put your hands out on your lap, hands open like you are receiving a gift from God," and all this other really great stuff that I wanted to believe and I wanted to accept, but I thought, "If I put my hands out, my husband is going to think I've lost my mind." I thought, "There is going to be a division between us from here on out, and I love my husband more than I love God." At least that's what I thought.*

*I was in such mental turmoil at that moment and then a really strange thing happened. I felt my husband's arm next to mine move, putting his hands out on his lap in response to the call. I felt such relief I put my hands out on my lap as well and opened them up to God for the first time in years.*

*We didn't speak about the service much on our drive home. He went out into the garage without saying a word and he was out there forever but when he finally came into the house he was crying. I asked what was wrong and he said that he couldn't stop thinking about the sermon all day. He asked if we could go again to worship and so we did. We didn't talk much after that service either. He then woke me up in the middle of the night crying and said, "Why would God love me? What's wrong with me? I can't stop thinking about God and talking to others about what they think about Jesus."*

*I said, "Honey, I have no idea why God would love me either. I just hope he does." We tried to be a church every week that we are in town and we watch church on the Internet when we are not able to come. Our hearts and ears are open for the first time in years and we can't wait to see what God has in store for us next. It's a new adventure. That's our story and it's not finished yet.*

I want to end by simply saying thank you. Thank you on behalf of this couple that you have helped to create a church like that where people can come and meet Christ. Thank you on behalf of the almost 100 children and their families who come to our Methodist preschool and nursery each week. Thank you on behalf of everyone else who gathered here this weekend for worship. Thank you on behalf of the 50 college students and young adults who have found a community to connect with this semester through Rooted. Thank you on behalf of all the teenagers who meet here every Tuesday for youth group. Thank you on behalf of the hundreds of children who will receive Operation Christmas Child Shoeboxes because you brought them and you organized them to be set out this week. Thank you on behalf of the many churches who came here two weeks ago and left more excited than ever about their church and the future of their churches. I want to say thank you on behalf of the hundreds of people in Shiprock, New Mexico and Espanola, New Mexico and at the HOREC orphanage in Kenya and in the community in Guatemala that will benefit from the medical clinic you've helped to build and in the slums of Spring Valley in Kenya where girls can now sleep safely at night.

On behalf of God, I want to say thank you to you. Because of your faithfulness and your love, God is blessed and touched by your sacrifices and your gifts and your expressions of faith. I am very proud to be your pastor. You are a giving and generous congregation and you make this place possible. I'm grateful for each and every one of you. Let's pray...

**SLIDE      Prayer**

*Oh God, we are so grateful to you for what you have done in our lives. We are grateful for the blessings that we see flow freely from your hands, and the hope and promise that we have in you. Lord, it is exciting to be a part of a church like this, to see your hand at work week after week. Sometimes we take for granted and we forget just how remarkable this is. Lord, I pray for this flock and these your people who are here. I pray that you would help them sense the connection between their offerings and their faith. I pray that you would help them oh God to feel your blessings as they offer themselves to you. I pray that today when they share their commitments that it would not be a financial transaction but a spiritual act of worship for them. God, receive their offerings and their commitments in that way. Bless your people here in this place. Find this trustworthy the small things so that you can entrust to us even greater*

*responsibilities in your kingdom. We give you our hearts, our lives, our finances, are all, in Jesus name. Amen*

## ***“The Blessings of God”***

### **Theme: The Life God Blesses**

#### **2 Corinthians 9:6-13**

*Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don’t give reluctantly or in response to pressure, “For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.” And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say, “They share freely and give generously to the poor.*

*Their good deeds will be remembered forever.” For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. So two good things will result from this ministry of giving—the needs of the believers in Jerusalem will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God. As a result of your ministry, they will give glory to God. For your generosity to them and to all believers will prove that you are obedient to the Good News of Christ.*

**Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:**

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**Meditation Moments – Monday, November 19** – Read Genesis 4:1-7. This is a story that is often confusing for people. To understand it one must read between the lines. Note that Cain brought “some of the fruits of the soil” – this is a rather sparse description of his offering compared to what is said of the offering Abel brought: the “fat portions of the firstborn of the flock.” The difference between grabbing a bit of grain and intentionally setting aside the best portions of the firstborn points to a difference in the attitude and heart of each brother toward God and worship. Read Genesis 8:20-21. Here Noah has just disembarked from the ark, having survived the flood and what is the first thing he does? He only brought five extra of each clean animal and bird onto the ark, and now he sacrifices these to the LORD – an act of faith for a man who had been eating grain for months and who now sacrificed some of the only meat available to him. 39 times in the Old Testament sacrifices were said to be a “pleasing aroma” to God. What does this mean? What does it say about the effect our offerings might have on God? Notice that as a result of Noah’s sacrifice God makes a promise that we still benefit from to this day.

**Tuesday, November 20** – Today we will read another of the confusing, yet profound Bible stories. It is important to remember as you read that Abraham lived in a culture where his neighbors worshiped a host of different gods and goddesses, some of which required human sacrifices. It is also important to remember that Isaac was Abraham and Sara’s only son, born to Sara long after she should have been unable to bear children. One has to read this seeing Abraham wiping the tears from his eyes as he takes his son to Mount Moriah. Read Genesis 22:1-18. Throughout the Bible God teaches that human sacrifice is detestable to him. But here God is searching and testing Abraham’s heart and faith. Do you think God ever looks at our offerings today as a test of our heart and faith? How did Abraham’s act of faith touch the heart of God? What promises did God make as a result? What might this mean regarding God’s blessings in your life as you give?

**Wednesday, November 21** – Today we turn to the teachings of Jesus regarding giving. Let’s begin by revisiting the end of the story of Zacchaeus, whom we read about two weeks ago. Read Luke 19:7-9. How did Zacchaeus express his desire to follow Jesus? How was Jesus moved by this act? What did Jesus promise? As we move to our next passage remember that a “mina” was a unit of money equivalent to about three months wages. Read Luke 19:11-17. This is a parable of the last judgment. Note verse 13 – the master’s command, “Put this money to work.” This passage points to part of the role of wealth and blessings in our lives – we are to put them to work doing Jesus’ work in his absence. At the last judgment we will give an account of what we did. Verse 17 is the key here – “because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter...” What is Jesus saying about our offerings and use of our time and talent for him? What is the blessing he promises?

**Thursday, November 22** – On this Thanksgiving Day, use the following prayer at your dinner table. You might also spend time letting each person at your table share the blessings of God they have seen this year.

*Great God in Heaven, we give thanks for the pleasure of gathering together for this occasion. We give thanks for this food; prepared by loving hands. We give thanks for life; the freedom to enjoy all of its blessings. As we partake of this food, we pray for health and strength to carry on and try to live as you would have us. This we ask in the name of Christ.* – adapted from Harry Jewell

**Friday, November 23** – Today’s scriptures are beautiful and teach us about our offerings and the heart of God. Read Mark 12:41-44. Note that Jesus intentionally sat down to watch people give their offerings. Why do you think he did this? What was he thinking about as he watched them? Note, he isn’t putting down the rich and their offerings, but he is moved by the offering of the widow. He also is not saying all

widows must put in their last mites – this woman chose to do this. Why do you think she gave out of her poverty? These verses teach that God looks at the relative sacrifice of our offerings – an idea captured also in the tithe where each of us doesn't give the same dollar amount, but the same relative sacrifice. Read Luke 7:36-50. This woman brought something of great value – perhaps something she had been saving in the hope that one day she would find real love and leave her life of prostitution. What was she feeling and thinking, do you suppose, to pour this on Jesus? How did this touch the heart of Jesus? What did he promise her? What might this say about how we offer our tithes and how Jesus receives them?

**Saturday, November 24** – In today's passage Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to give generously to a special offering for the poor in the Jerusalem church. Note carefully what he says about our giving. Read II Corinthians 9:6-15. Read it one more time, pausing at each verse. What does this passage teach about our giving and the blessings of God?