

“Money Follows Mission”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Commitment Sunday, November 3, 2019
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Acts 4:32-37

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

³⁶ There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). ³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

2 Corinthians 8:1-11

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵ and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶ so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷ Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

⁸ I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹ now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.

Money Follows Mission

“Money follows mission.”

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale dropped that pearl of wisdom
while speaking at a Regional Assembly here in Georgia.

"Money follows mission," said Cynthia Hale.
I've long reflected on that pearl,
held it up to the sun,
considered the lightness of its being,
tested the hypothesis against the realities of God's Economics.
She flipped what we've held as a truism,
turning upside down the adage that money precedes mission.
Once upon a time we'd teach and preach
that to do mission, first one needed money.
Without currency, there'd be no community service.
Raise the means first, we believed, then you minister in the streets.

The late comedian Flip Wilson told about going to a church where, after the sermon,
the offering plate shot around the room and came back empty.
Preacher sent it back around, and again it came back empty.
Preacher said, *"This church has got to get up and crawl."*
"Make it crawl, Rev!" shouted the congregation.
"After this church crawls, it has to get up and walk!"
"Make it walk, Rev!"
"After this church walks, it has to get up and run!"
"Make it run, Rev!"
"For this church to run, it's going to take money!"
"Let it crawl, Rev, let it crawl!"

You know what, money preceding mission may have been true in the by-and-by.
By now, wisdom gleaned from experience has shown us:
money follows mission.
Serve first. Love first.
Give first the best of yourself together with Christ's Church.
Trust that – wait for it, here it comes –
God will support what God wills to come to fruition.
Do mission first,
trusting that people see what you are doing, serving, being,
and will support the work, the play, the love you do in the name of Jesus.
The Lord provides resources
through those who are informed and inspired by the mission that God wills.
This is what Cynthia Hale is driving at:
Sufficient means will be provided by God through God's people;
however, first we've got to serve somebody.

Money Follows Mission

A sister congregation in St. Louis didn't have two spare nickels to rub together,
yet they started collecting troubled youth from the neighborhood.

First the church served, loved, welcomed home
 some rough-around-the-edges young people,
 kids who'd been aimless, bored, lost and getting found by trouble.
Then a local business owner noticed what the church was doing,
 saw the good in it, in them,
 took an interest in the mission,
 and quietly offered to fund scholarships to send kids to camp.
Maybe a week of these kids being gone
 sounded pretty good to the shopkeeper.
Either way, money follows mission.
A 12-year-old who had never left St. Louis saw mountains! Mountains!
He was over himself in excitement!
Imagine the sheer joy he felt that first experience away from home,
 in God's great outdoors, singing camp songs,
 roasting marshmallows, swimming & fishing in the lake.
And don't you know,
 word got 'round about how much that child of God so enjoyed himself,
 so enjoyed creation, enjoyed being free to be.
The church folks and community shopkeeper smiled,
 as the Holy Spirit put some pep in their step.
They learned firsthand that...

Money Follows Mission

To give oneself to God is to give oneself to other people.
To give oneself to other people is to give oneself to God.
Mission is about
 seeing people as real, with flesh and blood and hopes and dreams,
 relating to folks as your neighbor,
 daring to ask, "what does my neighbor need?"
 then acting in love, with love, for the love of God.

There are no nameless or faceless children of God.
Every plight and plea for mercy moves the heart of God.
The Lord dares to command anyone who would listen to provide,
 and then to live into the trust
 that one day the recipient may well become the provider.

The Gospel commands those who would follow Jesus
 to have empathy and compassion for one another.
Every social program, every fiscal policy, every local and state and national budget,
 every church and temple and mosque ministry
 needs to be held up next to the measuring stick
 of whether it hurts or helps, harms or heals, offers hope or hinders
 the widows, the children, the marginalized,

the broke and broken in our midst.

Money Follows Mission

One day in the 1950s

my parents sent my eldest brothers David and Jonathan outside to play.

We lived in one of a row of tenements in Spanish Harlem.

There was a safe play area nearby,

and our mother could watch from her window as the boys went down the street.

David and Jon were around 5 and 4, respectively.

One day when they walked out the front door

a man on the street stopped and said, *"Let me take your picture."*

David and Jonathan had been taught to be wary,

to not take candy from strangers,

so they shrank back, uncomfortable,

leaning into each other

in the corner of the doorway on the stoop,

as the man snapped a photo.

A short while later

a poster was put up in churches and temples across the city.

The poster featured a photo in black and white and grey

of two children in play clothes,

with huge eyes and frightened looks,

huddled together in a slum tenement doorway.

Buffy and George Calvert were quite surprised when they saw the poster,

and recognized their own children!

The poster's big, bold lettering read:

These Children Need Your Help! Please Give!

These days brother Jon laughs when he recalls

that morning on the stoop and subsequent poster.

"Hey, it's still true," Jon says. *"Send money! I can put it to good use!"*

The Lord does provide.

We who have received, whether a little or a lot, in turn become God's providers.

May we trust that at the intersection of real need and deep generosity, grace abounds.

Money Follows Mission

We give out of gratitude, grateful for what God has already given to us.

You know the story about two mice out for an early morning stroll surprised by a cat.

Just before the cat pounced upon his breakfast, one of the mice *barked*.

The cat, startled by the barking mouse, turned and fled.

Whereupon the mouse who barked turned to her companion and said,

"In times like these, it is always nice to know a second language."

Tithing, my friends, is a new language to many people, including church members.
The people of God need to hear either for the first time or to be reminded
of the authentic guideline around tithing

-- not as a legalistic rule or as a rung on the ladder to sainthood.

Tithing is the joyful giving of a portion of our resources.

Tithing empowers human transformation.

Herbert Miller, a Disciple teacher and church leader, said,

*“The primary aim of stewardship development is not to finance
the church’s annual operating budget but to change lives.”*

Tithing changes lives. Period.

Tithing is at the essence, the heart, the crux of God’s Economics.

We are talking about money, yes,

yet we’re really talking about the miracle of people changing, changing people.

Tithing changes lives, yours and mine and all of us together.

Tithing and giving generously in grateful response to God’s grace

is not something we think about just as the offering plate is about to be passed;
tithing is a positive way of life.

My father, the Rev. George E. Calvert,

taught me and his congregation, the Church of the Living Hope,
to dedicate to God the first 2 hours of work each week.

Try it, and see how your attitude at work and productivity
and collegial relationships and family life improve.

Give to God the first tithe of your time and effort in a relationship,
and see how that impacts your friendships.

Give to God your first two thoughts of a new day,
and see if your daylight hours aren’t brighter.

Give to God the first two hours of your weekly income,
and see if you still don’t have enough for all the rest of your bills and livelihood.

Make the first check or automatic payment be your tithe to God’s ministry,
then watch with gratitude how the Lord provides for you and yours.

Please do not walk away thinking God’s Church does not need your precious resources.

The reality is we put to work and play every precious resource
you generously donate for the glory of God.

The truth of the matter is we can do so much more
if and when we have more to work with.

Having said that, we covenant to continue to work with and share
whatever the Lord provides the Church through you and yours.

And I know of few organizations, profit or non-profit, near here or anywhere,
that are more thrifty, transparent, considerate, grateful, or prayerful
of every blessed gift given and entrusted to this community of faith
in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are a thrifty, lean, mean ministry machine!

Your pledge and my family's pledge for 2020 make a difference.
Our pledges help our church leaders to plan and anticipate
 what glorious, gracious ministries we can prepare and promote, or not.
Our pledges indicate our level of commitment to our common cause;
 signing a pledge as a commitment for the future
 is a sign to yourself and to your community of faith
 the level of investment.

Let's talk about levels.

Like Planet Fitness, we are a judgment free zone.

Every single soul has something to contribute, something to share,
 some gifts, talents, time, treasure to offer and provide the Beloved Community.

100 percent of us are on fixed incomes.

100 percent of us have outside demands and responsibilities, loans, debts, bills.

100 percent of us would love to give more than we are right now.

Trust me, your Church understands.

We are all in the same boat, and sometimes it feels so small and the sea is so wide.

That kind of talk, about feeling less than, feeling small, unimportant, inadequate,
 like scarcity is winning, is ultimately unhelpful;

 it's grounded in fear, and fear is the mind killer.

The same can be said about jokes about needing to win the lottery.

That is defeatist talk.

Everything the Lord wills to provide to do the mission of Christ's Church is here,
 among us and within the reach of our ripples of hope.

We are amazing, we are beautiful, we are richly blessed.

We can all give something, and each gift makes a huge difference.

We are grateful for each and every offering, every sharing.

If you're unsure what the future holds, consider a pledge of \$5 or \$10 or \$20 a week.
\$5 times 50 Sundays is \$240.

Ordering one less fancy coffee a week grows to become \$240,
 which pays for 100 people to eat at our monthly Community Dinner.

5 promises to take a sack lunch once week becomes 5 new \$5 pledges totaling \$1,200,
 increasing the reach & resources for our Vacation Bible School.

Imagine each week 10 disciples skipping a new rental on Amazon Prime at \$4.99 a flick,
 so they can pledge \$5-a-week to raise \$2,400,
 so they can send scholarship 10 young people to go to church camp
 to swim and fish and be reminded God loves them.

Remember, just as the poster said:

These Children Need Your Help! Please Give!

Money Follows Mission.

Last month at our Community Dinner,
I was serving hot baked potatoes, wearing plastic serving gloves
trying my best to unwrap hot aluminum foil
from a 400-degree baked potato.
As one of the 85 folks from the city and church walked past,
she slipped me a \$20 bill.
Now, the food is free, served and shared with no agenda.
She didn't need to contribute.
That's wrong.
She needed to contribute, and we needed to receive her offering.
As Harry Chapin said, I slipped the twenty in my pocket.
We thanked her and kept on serving.

The next morning I met two people in downtown Decatur whose names I knew
because we broke bread together here,
the night before, doing good works in Jesus' name.

Money Follows...

A week later, we got a nice thank you note in the mail with a check
thanking FCC of Decatur for serving her such a nice dinner.
Same Community Dinner experience, different neighbor.
The check is for \$200.
She didn't need to contribute.
That's wrong.
She needed to contribute, and we needed to receive her offering.
You know the cost of the meal?
\$220.
One bill and one check covered the whole set up.
Yes, we fed 85 people that night, spending around \$2.60 per meal served.
God will support what God wills to come to fruition.
Do mission first,
trusting that people see what you are doing, serving, being,
and will support the work, the play, the love you do in the name of Jesus.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Extra Material:

Note: I am indebted to Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock's book "The People's New Testament Commentary" (2004) and Ernest Best's "Second Corinthians" (1987, Interpretation Series) from which I drew deeply for biblical exegesis.

(They say that most people wish to serve God--but in an advisory capacity only.)

The Macedonians in Jerusalem were in rough shape.

Titus and Paul made an appeal for churches

to collect goods, coins and offerings of aid for the Macedonians.

Christian folks stepped up to the cause.

Later, Paul and Titus appealed to the hearts and minds of the church folks in Corinth.

They invited the church to collect an offering of resources,

to be engaged in the real needs of their sister community.

The scriptures point to a number of congregational conversations in Corinth

that highlight the cantankerous nature of the church.

Yet the Bible also points to their incredible acts of generosity and deep faith.

Still, as Paul and Titus made their way from one Christian church to the next,

Paul anticipated that the church in Corinth might raise an objection.

Paul thought the Corinthians might say,

"There are limits to giving; others may give more in offerings; yet, they have more."

So, he was ready to respond by telling them

to only give in proportion to what they have,

and to offer whatever they might best manage.

Paul and Titus had no illusions that most folks were tightening their belts to get by.

They saw no sense in creating an impoverished community in Corinth

in order to ease pain in Jerusalem.

Even so, Paul and Titus pursued their conversation with the Corinthians.

They used theological terms to connect the local church

with the needs of their distant neighbors,

speaking of offerings for the sake of serving others as designated or related to

grace.

"We want you to know, brothers and sisters,

about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia"

"Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness,

and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also

in this generous undertaking of this grace." 2 Cor. 8: 6-7

Grace is love in action.

An offering of goods and compassion for someone in need is grace.

Support follows outpourings of grace.

Put it another way, money follows mission.

Let us speak of the offering of our goods and services and compassion

as a visible, manifest, extension of ourselves.

Here Paul and Titus pointed out to the church in Corinth

– and by way of the Bible to us –

that ordinary people, quite poor people in fact,
are giving a substantial portion of their limited resources
to help people they have not yet met,
all because of their faith in Jesus Christ,
and all because of Jesus Christ's faith in them.

The church in Corinth gave themselves to the cause of service above self
because they chose to follow the God of Grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.
They came to believe that at the heart of the universe
is not the struggle for survival
but rather a self-giving love
that has the power to conquer evil and death,
and unite us in a glorious love that lasts forever and ever.

This is what Christianity is about.

Jesus Christ demolished the concept
that everyone always acts in his or her own self-interest.

The Christian Faith is not self-interest;
it's not even enlightened self-interest.

We are other-centered, focused on giving away the best of ourselves for the sake of building up
the Beloved Community, ever-widening the Lord's Table, making room and resources for all
people to gather at the Great Feast in the Kingdom of God.