

WHAT IS GOD ASKING?
Matthew 6:19-21
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 6, 2011

Next Sunday is Consecration Sunday. We're having a single service in our newly refurbished Sanctuary at 10 AM, followed by a wonderful catered brunch here in the Fellowship Hall. We hope all our members and friends can come because your presence is important and today I'm going to tell you why.

The key question you will be asked next Sunday is: "What is God asking me to give from my weekly income?" Not what is the Session or the Stewardship Team or the Pastor asking me to give but "What is God asking me to give from my weekly income?"

You may be thinking, "Framing your question in that way is downright manipulative, implying God will judge me if I don't give enough."

That's not my intention. The last thing I want is making you feel guilty. That doesn't make for a spiritually healthy you or a spiritually healthy congregation.

Even so, there's biblical justification in asking the question, "What is God asking you to give?" Nowhere in the scriptures are we ever asked to give to the church but we are consistently urged to give to God. That's why I'm compelled to ask "What is God asking you to give from your weekly income?" not just because of the church's financial needs, but especially because of your personal needs. My chief concern as your pastor, isn't getting your money, but growing your faith.

I think you'll find my stewardship sermons are actually similar to all my other sermons and I'm also sure you're aware of the recurring themes of my preaching over the years: giving your life away, lowering yourself to raise others up, helping someone who can never pay you back, making time and expending energy for a cause greater than yourself, never being afraid of giving away so much you'll have nothing left for yourself, being kind, brave, gentle and strong in all situations, trusting your life to Christ, never dismissing a stranger in need because it just may be Christ himself.

My sermons are usually about the cost of discipleship, emptying yourself without any expectation of reward so you can grow to be Christ-like, becoming more like Jesus. So my track record is consistent, I want you to fall in love with Jesus so you can grow in spirit and experience the joy only found in giving.

Ideally, that should be your motivation, not just your financial giving but in every other way. I'm sure you already know this. Whenever you give generously you begin to sense a growing connection both to God and your neighbor because you realize giving is

at the heart of all relationships. You also begin to understand that sacrificial giving is the primary component of a life well lived.

Misers aren't known to be particularly happy fellows. People who only think about themselves and very little about others don't fare much better. Too late, too many people discover believing that "the one who dies with the most toys wins" was a foolish delusion from the start.

On the other hand, people who choose to be generous with their time, talent and treasure are emotionally and spiritually healthy. I'm not claiming they never get tired out and if they don't watch themselves, get burned out. And yet they've come to experience that as quickly as they empty themselves to fill others up, God refills them just enough to keep moving onward and upward.

Again, I'm not claiming the discipleship/stewardship lifestyle is frustration and worry free, but I am suggesting those who've mastered the art of sacrificial living have growing intimate relationships with God and their neighbors and through these relationships they've discovered the deepest meaning of life.

I recently read that the word "give" appears in the Bible 2,172 times. That's more times than the words "believe," "pray" and "love" appear combined. Why would that be? Obviously, giving is God's highest priority, especially when you consider the verse "God so loved the world he gave his only son..." (John 3:16) Giving your time, energy and love allows the Kingdom of God to come near to you and those you serve.

Learning how to give appropriately is called stewardship. The New Testament Greek word for steward normally referred to a servant or slave entrusted with the responsibility of managing his master's property, including his income, goods and personnel. Many times Jesus used the metaphor of the steward in his parables. Sometimes the steward was honest and shrewd, other times untrusty and careless, but always the steward's job was being his master's servant manager. Good stewards realized they were given a sacred trust to take good care of things not belonging to them.

As Christian stewards, we need to remember "the earth is the Lord's...the earth and all that is in it. The world and all its people belong to him." (Psalm 24:1) Biblically speaking, you may think you own your house and possessions, but you really don't. You may be convinced "It's my life to live as I please," but you're only kidding yourself. God made you for himself, to be completely dependant on him. But, because God loves you, you've been given the freedom to choose how you'll spend your life and treasure. You're free to think you're beholden to no one or you can choose to realize with deepening gratitude that all that you are and have is loaned to you, to be used by you lovingly and wisely for your welfare and happiness and the welfare and happiness of others.

That's the biblical perspective of reality and when you make the biblical perspective your own, you'll see yourself and your possessions in an entirely different

light. Your security won't be found in your bank account but in being a child of God and a disciple of Christ.

"...don't worry about what you shall eat or what you shall wear... Look at the birds of the air... Consider the lilies of the field... Therefore do not worry... But strive first for the Kingdom of God... and all these things will be given to you as well."
(Matthew 5:25-26; 28-29; 33)

This wasn't Pollyanna talking, it was Jesus, speaking to people who lived a hand to mouth existence, with the men not knowing if they'd be hired tomorrow, wondering if their children would be fed and clothed another day. If Jesus thought these people, who experienced hardship and uncertainty on a daily basis, were ripe for this message, surely he expects the same from us, to realize our ultimate security is found in God and in one way or another God provides just enough every day.

All the more reason for having a child-like faith, an innocent trust in God's provision that releases you from fear and blesses you with a growing sense of awe and wonder.

We don't always experience awe and wonder, most of the time we're mostly aware that from our fixed incomes we're still required to pay higher taxes, utility bills and other expenses. Still, once in a while, when we let our guard down God does get through to us asking us to set aside our very real financial concerns and make a commitment and stick to it, even when we're given the opportunity to gracefully back out.

An African missionary came to a church to talk about his ministry. At the end of his talk each member of the congregation was invited to put a generous gift in the collection plate to support his ministry. When the collection plate passed to a young girl, she held the plate for a long minute while staring at a ring on her finger.

After the service, while helping to count the offering, the girl's father recognized the ring and went looking for her.

"Honey, this is an expensive ring given to you by your grandmother. Why don't you take it back and let me give you some money for the offering?"

The little girl was firm. "Daddy, the man from Africa said to give something important. And anyway you can't give it back. I didn't give it to you, I gave it to Jesus."

The little girl got it right. She gave her generous gift directly to Jesus. She gave back what was loaned to her. That's the essence of stewardship.

Let me be honest with you. It's tempting to say "you need to give generously because especially in this hard economy the church needs to make ends meet, so help keep Babcock afloat for another year and support our budget." No one could fault me for

saying that, but I would be asking you to do the right thing for the wrong reason and I'd be failing you as a pastor. God wants more from you than annual dues. God wants you to surprise yourself by risking yourself, trusting that God will always provide for you and your family. God, not me, is asking you and me, "What are you willing to give me from your weekly income?"

That is an intimate, spiritual question and people answer it in different ways.

Some people tithe. They give 10%.

Other people want to work their way to tithing because they're not quite ready to make the commitment so they start at 4%, 5%, or 7% trusting God will honor their decision and spiritually grow them to increase their giving in the coming years.

There are others who already tithe and are considering growing beyond giving 10% of their income, but that's a story for another day.

Last Sunday, I made the observation that we all have brave dreams and would like to see ourselves being wise and bold when it's time to make the right decision to do the right thing even though it may cost us a lot. But like Peter, who at the critical moment denied Christ three times, when reality strikes our brave dreams give way to compromise.

However, I believe this to be true: when we trust God, and take that risk to give God more of our time, energy and income, somehow God will prepare us for the time when we will be called upon to be more brave and truthful than ever before, and because we've been faithful in the little things, we'll be better prepared to be faithful when it matters most.

Please be in prayer about all this and wait upon the Lord to love and encourage you to give your best, nothing more and nothing less, to Christ and his Kingdom.