

Deuteronomy 14:22-29
used for Pentecost 23-C-01
"BEYOND Charity to Community"
Rev. Randy Smith

As I trust you all know by now -- with the exception of the encouraging number of guests in worship with us recently! -- that this congregation, St. Matthew, has come to a **"turning point" moment** -- or at least what *could* be a "turning point" moment -- in its 66-year history. There have been any number of **milestones** in our history, beginning with the church being officially *organized* at Easter, 1955, an early multi-purpose facility consecrated in 1957, the design and building of an *inspired*, and **inspiring** 42,000 sq. ft. Sanctuary facility consecrated in 1967, and -- when the original multi-purpose facility was destroyed by fire in 1985 -- the addition of an Education and a Family Life Center/Gym facility which were consecrated in 1988.

We have been led to where we are today by the **frank recognition** that the truly remarkable 1967 Sanctuary facility, which has been at the heart of St. Matthew's worship for over half a century, was **mis-built** in the very beginning, and mis-built in such a way that **water** has been continually and destructively intruding into the structure, such that the *many and various* band-aid solutions applied to the resulting problems with the building over the years were never going to achieve a permanent repair. (In case you've ever wondered, by the way, why God "in the beginning", in Gen. 1, went to such great lengths to make sure the *waters* of the earth *knew* their places, and *stayed* in their places, now you know: when water doesn't behave well, not-good things result!)

That **clarity** led the church's leadership, beginning in **2015**, to begin to work on a plan for making **permanent repair** of the facility. On August 29 of this year, a Building Committee -- which had been at work for 2 years -- presented to the congregation a plan for doing this, a plan which was overwhelmingly approved.

That's **the good news part** of this long saga, which has for decades *forced* the people who are St. Matthew, on too many occasions, to begin their conversations about their church by first talking about "**the building**". Because by **doing** this -- by **having** to do this, with the issues with the building *always* in the **back of our minds**, and the **need to address them eventually** always *hanging over our head* -- we were in effect *continually* **holding ourselves back** as a church. It was a **spiritual drag** on our progress. It was **emotionally draining**. And it was an always **looming financial liability**.

And **now** we have a **plan**, a plan to move us beyond where we have **lingered** for so long, a plan devised through *many months* of **meetings**, with *highly qualified* people, and *hundreds* hours of **conversations** and **emails**, and all of it

bookended by honest-to-goodness **prayer**, as our Building Committee Chairperson, Mike Wattenbarger insisted all involved do. All of this is, without a doubt, **good news!**

But, then, there is this *other* news. I would prefer not to call it the "bad news", because I honestly believe that **it** is essentially good news *as well*, but that it is **hard** for us to hear it and receive it as good news. And that's because it concerns **money** -- the money needed to pay the architects and the builders to complete the design, and construct the permanent solution to, our main facility's problems.

And it's a **lot** of money.

Our terrific "Generosity Consultant", Alan Wildes acknowledged this when, on a couple of occasions -- one, when talking with the Building Committee, and another time, when talking later with the Steering Team leading our Initiative -- he told what is actually a classic church joke. It goes like this:

The "good news", folks, is that you already have all the money you need to pay for this project. The "bad news" is that, at this moment, it's still in your pockets.

The joke implies that having to let go of our money -- at least in any significant amount -- is something we are inherently *averse* to doing, *fearful* of doing, *threatened* by the prospect of doing.

I believe the truth, however, is that every opportunity that comes along, for us to move beyond the **conventional attitudes**, and the **moral habits** toward money we have all been *so well trained in* by our culture -- which, if we're honest, really amount to training in being *self-serving*, and *self-protecting*, as opposed to *self-giving* (think: Jesus) -- that every time there is some *meaningful, impactful* opportunity to do move **closer** to self-giving, it is actually **good news**, because it can liberate us to adopt the *counter-cultural* attitudes and practice the moral habits toward money Scripture teaches us.

In any case, I want the church to know this morning that I believe I may have found a **way around** our having to do any of this **hard work** -- of adopting new attitudes or moral habits towards money -- and **still** find the funds sufficient to **do all we need to do** at this -- *potential* -- "turning point" moment in the history of St. Matthew, all we need to do in terms of **permanently repairing our main church facility** *and* in terms of **transforming our ministry to youth** through bringing on board a new Full-Time Youth Director. And the truth is, it's so simple, and so highly effective, that I'm embarrassed about not having thought of this before now.

Understand that this strategy for fundraising in the church is not -- repeat, *not* -- original to me. It's a strategy I stumbled across years ago. And it's called the "**Lord's Lottery Sure Fire Fundraising Program.**" The **purpose** of the program

is *simple*: to get more money to find its way into the offering plates on Sunday mornings. And **the plan** for how you accomplish this is likewise *simple*, involving only the following three steps:

1) Every Monday morning, when the Sunday tithes and offerings are counted, and recorded into the **account** of this or that giver, a ticket with the account number of every giver that Sunday will be placed by the Counting Team into a large round tumbler (note to Bob Davis, our Church Treasurer: we will need to find somewhere in the budget to purchase one of these).

2) Our Church Office Administrator, Mrs. Susan Woods (who, as a non-member, can be counted on to be impartial!), will be asked to come over to the office where the weekly gifts are counted, and reach in, and draw out one of the tickets from the big round tumbler.

3) The giver whose account number is drawn will be that week's winner, and will receive back from the church **double** whatever the amount of their gift was for that week!

Needless to say, this program will – pretty painlessly -- increase both the frequency and the amount of our weekly offerings, and generate much excitement. I mean, once people hear about this, offerings will be pouring in from all over Greenville from people we don't even know! 😊

I hope that *most* of you were able to recognize *right away* "The Lord's Lottery" as a **bogus plan** for church fundraising, given that there are *at least two* major **problems** with the program. The *first* is that it **misses the real point** of Christian financial giving, which is actually *not* fundraising. The *second* is that this isn't the **Lord's** program. The Lord has already **had** a program in place, and for a long, long time. The Lord's program is called "**Tithing**" or the offering of a tenth back to the Lord, and it's been a core part of the life of the Covenant People of God from the very beginning, as is reflected in the reading from Dt. 14 this morning. The truth is that **there is no way around** our having to do any of the hard work of moving closer to Jesus' own self-giving on our behalf.

Now, if you've been a part of the Church any time at all, you've surely heard this discipline of giving called "Tithing" *mentioned* at least once or twice, and you may have actually tried doing this. I wonder if you might have done so, however, with a faulty idea in mind. E.g., that Tithing is something like the **11th Commandment** -- "Thou shalt tithe, *or else!*" -- **or** that it gives you some kind of **leverage** with God, in the sense of, "Okay, Lord, I've done *my* part, now you do *yours!*"

But, according to the Bible, the purpose of Tithing is not rule-following, or currying favor with God. The purpose of Tithing is to **create "rejoicing together" with others** (v. 26) or, i.e., to **create community** with **all** those around you -- **all those** generally *excluded*, for whatever reasons, from the experience of God's

generosity -- by using your Tithe to ensure that these, too, "may come and eat their fill" (14:29) -- at least once a year, the implication being that the **generosity of God** is only *truly celebrated* by seeing that **all** the people share in it, *all* of the time, "rejoicing together" in a way which would not be possible *apart* from the offering back to God of a Tithe.

Because, until *all* the people can rejoice, can *any* of the people really rejoice?

What you give to the church in the way of financial gifts -- e.g., the Tithe -- the IRS calls, on Schedule A, a "Charitable Gift". The IRS definition does not fit, however, the Church's understanding of what your gifts mean. We understand your gifts **not** to be "charity" -- which, by definition means that the strong give to the weak, but only to the degree that it does not diminish the strength of the strong. No, in the church, we understand giving very differently, because of Jesus, the "strong" one (cf. Phil. 2:6, "equality with God") who became "weak" in order to make the weak "strong", as he is strong (cf. Phil. 2:5-11). Your gifts, your tithes and other offerings -- in the Church we understand these to be instruments of God in bringing about the restoration of the human community, the kind of human community God made us to live as a part of, the kind of human community made possible -- again -- through Jesus' kind of self-giving.

That's really what "Beyond", this Generosity Initiative -- this invitation to expand our giving, financially, to a new level of commitment and then maintain it there: it's really an invitation for St. Matthew to continue to be used by God, but now in deeper and broader ways, to create community, the kind of community in which all can know, and celebrate with us the generosity of God.

Achieving this vision will require extraordinary efforts on all our parts. The Tithe -- if you're not already giving in this way -- can be a tool for achieving this. If you are already tithing, then it can be the base from which you launch your giving higher.