

SERMON 2009 Stewardship 2
September 27, 2009
Text: Acts 20:35
Theme: "MORE BLESSED TO GIVE"

"In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

A custom which has become a part of today's society started with a small China cup sitting on the counter of a butcher shop in England in the mid-1500's. On the cup were printed in capital letters the initials T.I.P.S., the abbreviation for the words "To insure prompt service". The obvious message was that, if you wanted to be waited on before others who were also waiting in line, you made a contribution in the cup.

We have seen the concept of tipping change a great deal since the mid-1500's. There has been a gradual increase from 5% to 10% to 15% and now 20% is expected in most of the nicer restaurants. In fact, if you have a group of eight or more, you often get zinged for 18% regardless of what the service was like. And there is no special bonus for tipping. It is just expected.

Most of us leave generous tips on the table at the restaurant even though the waiter or waitress usually spends less time than five minutes writing down our orders, serving our food, filling our water glasses or coffee cups, and bringing our checks. If my family goes out to eat, we almost always spend \$100 and leave a \$15 - \$20 tip for someone we have probably never seen before, do not know, and will seldom, if ever, see again – but we would be ashamed of ourselves and we would feel cheap if we did not tip the customary 15 to 20 percent and this for a total stranger!

Yet..., yet we wince at the painful thought of contributing only 10% of our income to our God who gives it all to us in the first place!

Fortunately for us, God doesn't give in percentages! He only asks a percentage from us but he gives completely and fully. What if we received only 20 percent of His sunshine or 30 percent of the air we breathe? How about 40 percent of our daily bread or and only 50 percent of His love! God chooses to give outrageously, extravagantly, generously. He gives us everything we have.

Finally he gave us Christ. By His lowly birth as a human His lonely death and the agony of hell, He opens for us the treasure stores of Heaven! His eternal love swathed in human flesh! Eternal life purchased with innocent blood! We are moved by Christ's love for us, and in response to his love we serve him, not with a tip, but with all our hearts and minds and souls.

Dänya and I have been doing quite a lot of gardening this year, with some meager success even. It always seems miraculous as we watch plants come forth from tiny, tiny seeds that seem so lifeless. But suppose one plump seed should say to itself at planting time, "No way! None of this self-sacrifice for me! I refuse to lie in the cold, damp ground and die!" So it silently slips through a crack in the potting shed counter and settles itself on the bottom of a dry cabinet, safely hidden away. Soon the other tiny seeds that are planted swell, and, from their bursting shells, green sprouts appear and thrust their way upward through the soil toward the sun. Back in the potting shed, how safe that solitary seed must feel, resting snugly in its dry cabinet, saved from the grave. But out in the garden, there is a waving sea of

green heads rippling in the wind, where once there had been a graveyard of decaying seeds. Then, at harvest time, in a dark corner of the potting shed cabinet, the one seed that had slipped out of sight is no longer plump and safe. Now it is only a dry husk caught in a cobweb, a hollow shell mildewed and lifeless in its musty grave of selfishness and idleness!

This is God's law of the soil – seeds must die to live. They die to give new life, to produce the fruits of harvest. This is God's law for people too: our sinful flesh is drowned in Baptism so that our souls become alive again in Jesus Christ through faith and love! This is what Jesus meant when He said, *"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."*

Like the seed, in our death, we find life and give back more than we ever could have before.

To live is to give. To receive only, to hoard and to hold, to be a taker, is to die and dry up into an old weathered husk. Why would anyone choose this path? Many have, even in Christ's day.

There were those who took the loaves and the fish and filled their stomachs and then left Jesus when the food was gone. There were ten lepers who took Jesus' healing, but only one who came back to give his thanks. There were the soldiers at the cross who took Jesus' robe and gambled to see who would own it. All they gave the dying Savior were jeers and sour wine.

We look around us today and see that our selfish natures are still with us. Our giving often hinges upon what we can get in return, whether it's power, praise, or just the good will of the recipient. Our excuses haven't changed much either. We have unexpected expenses. We just have to have a bigger house. The church shouldn't be asking us for money, anyway. What I do with my money is my business! And Jesus, Who gave His life for us, is lost among our excuses. His words, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive,"* fall on deaf ears, and, in our hoarding of our money, we can miss out on the blessings that God would love to give us and we can slowly wither into a dry, empty husk.

The cross reminds us how Jesus' work fills us with grace that overcomes our reluctance to live and to give for others. Through

faith strengthen by Word and Sacrament, we apprehend His grace and we learn to give not just money – that’s all His anyway – but we begin giving God everything along with our lives – **everything!**

We can begin to give only after we've received. We take all that Christ pours onto us, just like the tax collector and the thief on the cross: the forgiveness of sins, peace, joy, strength, courage, and then we begin to understand that Jesus’ words are true: It really does make us happier and more content to give than to receive.

Once we have received from the Lord Jesus Christ, nothing else satisfies. The riches, power, and status we can accumulate in life pale in comparison to the riches that Christ offers. As our faith grows, we no longer even need to be asked to give or reminded to share. Once our faith has grown large enough we reason like this, "My Savior loves me and has given me all things! I need nothing else except to give to others." As we reach the highest levels of faith, the joy of giving will completely consume us. Amen.