

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Reckless Giving”

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Mark 12:38-44

38 As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places,³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

In one of his Lake Wobegon stories, Garrison Keillor tells of a Sunday morning Lutheran church service that has gone on far too long. Clarence Bunsen, bored by the sermon, is checking out his wallet in preparation for the offering. He suddenly discovers he has no cash to toss into the plate. He takes out a pen and begins writing a check, all the while hiding the checkbook in the middle of a pew Bible. He begins to scratch out a check for thirty dollars, feeling extra generous because he almost had a heart attack that week and he wanted to thank God properly for his health. Clarence tries not to be obvious but the lady next to him sees him writing. She gives him a funny stare, thinking the poor man is actually writing in one of the pew Bibles! Clarence then tries to quietly rip the check out of the checkbook. Of course that only gets more people staring at him. Everyone in the sanctuary now knows that Clarence Bunsen has written a check to the church during the minister’s sermon.

Finally the sermon ends and the offering plates are passed. Clarence proudly puts his check in the plate, only to realize a moment too late that he has just written a check in the amount of three hundred dollars. He accidentally added an extra zero while the lady was staring at him. What was he going to do now? He could go downstairs to where they count the money and tell them about his mistake. Would they listen to him? With the miswritten check he had drained his checking account and then some. It was for a good cause, but now his family would have to eat beans and oatmeal for the rest of the month. Suddenly energy and excitement, interest and emotion, concern and passion poured through his body. In that one moment, Clarence Bunsen felt fully alive, in fact more fully alive than he had ever felt in church. He was in that moment, invested in the church.

One day, while sitting near the Temple treasury, Jesus calls his disciples’ attention to the actions of a poor woman, a widow. She was making her gift to the ministry of the Temple. There were others around offering much more extravagant gifts. She put into the treasury only two small coins. But in reality it was everything she had. Her giving was lifted up as the example of faith that should be encouraged in us all. Jesus said that we need to somewhat

reckless in our giving. Giving should bring life to our being. Giving should not leave us cold and distant.

That thought runs against our nature. When we give, we prefer deliberate examination and cautious reflection. When we give we want to consider all of our options. When we give we want to keep back a little in reserve. But when we follow Jesus we follow one who urges us to be reckless in our giving, passionate in our commitment, energetic in our response to the goodness of God.

This sermon is a difficult one to preach. I am not comfortable at all sharing what I have to say. I've thought about it all week, changed my mind a few times, but then decided what I will share is important enough to say. I would like to present to everyone the cold, hard truth about our church finances- at least as how I understand them. We began 2009 with a budgeted deficit of nearly \$20,000. After an appeal to the congregation in January, some people stepped forward to increase their pledges and the deficit was narrowed to around \$12,500. This was truly an empty cupboard budget. The boards were given nothing to spend and there were no salary increases given to employees. I would describe it as something less than a survival budget.

There has been some good news in 2009. Most of the year we have been pleasantly surprised as our giving has equaled or been slightly ahead of the needs of this bare bones budget. This was remarkable given the economic climate in which we live. You have been faithful and generous in your giving. Some of our members have been creative in developed fundraisers to support our ministries. You also have been faithful to your pledges to the capital campaign, The Bridge to the Future. Although we will not see the fruits of that effort immediately, paying our large mortgage down whenever we can is a wise thing that will benefit our church years from now. We now have a ten month building tenet in the Northville Coop Preschool. Our Board of Trustees has chosen at this time not to add that rental money with the general revenue but to set it aside for a rainy day, or for future emergency building maintenance needs. Given the fact that in the past two weeks our furnace in the Meeting House has needed repair twice, this appears to be a very sensible decision.

Now the not so good news. In the past three months things have been more difficult. Beginning in July, our giving has fallen below budget. Unless something changes quickly, it appears that we will not be able to cover our budgeted expenses and will be running a budget deficit for 2009. We may be much closer to the negative \$12,500 than we are to even. We do not have large reserves upon which to draw to cover this shortfall. If we end the year in the red, it could have a significant impact on our future. We can only maintain such a deficit for two or three years and then something major would have to happen.

The Board of Trustees is currently preparing the budget for 2010. They would like to restore some money to our boards so that these boards can spend their time doing ministry instead of raising money. They would like to give our employees a small increase in pay. They would like to plan accordingly for utility increases, adequate snow removal, parking lot and sidewalk upkeep, building maintenance, and office supplies. They would like to give all of us permission to dream and grow rather than worry about just surviving. Next year's tentative budget requests would demand an increase in revenue of around \$17,000 over last year. It is still a no frills budget. And Meadowbrook Congregational Church is worthy of more than just survival. To grow we need to reach out and be meaningful in ministry with one another and with our community.

Here's what all of us, you and I need to consider. First of all, please make certain your 2009 pledge is up to date. If you can offer an extra gift at the end of this year that would truly be a gracious thing. Secondly, even in this time of job and salary uncertainty, consider how you might respond to God's gifts in your giving to your church in 2010. If you have not

pledged, please consider how such an action makes a statement about your faith and can assist your church in planning our ministry into the future. All gifts are wonderful, whether they are pledged or not, but if the Board of Trustees knows that certain giving is planned, they can sleep better at night. Those who currently pledge might prayerfully and carefully consider increasing their pledge next year. I realize that we are not a community which has encouraged the concept of tithing. But perhaps many of us could examine increasing our commitment to God by 1% of our income. One percent of your income isn't much at face value but it taken seriously it is a big number. It would represent a step of faith. That small step of faith would bless our church abundantly. It would reflect a serious appreciation of God's place in our life. However you might be able to increase your gift, it would be appreciated. It has to start with each of us. We cannot let others bear the burden and assume things will work out well.

Finally, if you can't increase your pledge, make a commitment to help in other ways. The most important thing is to attend worship. Your presence here adds to the vitality and meaning of our worshipping community. When you walk through the doors you bring life and the presence of God to someone else who has come to seek just that. Attending worship is the most important gift of time you can give. There are of course more practical things. Attend the auction, bake cookies for the cookie sale, buy scrip for use at local stores, teach Sunday School, join an adult education class, volunteer to clean up a church flower bed, invite friends and family to church- do something that will creatively assist in the ministry of this church. Take your commitment of time and talent to the church seriously.

This is a wonderful church, the place where many have found the presence of God. Many of you are linked here with history and memory. When you walk in these doors you recall weddings and baptisms, funerals and Christmas Eve services. Some of you even recall the empty lot, the dream to build, and the intimate gatherings held in what is now our Fellowship Hall. Meadowbrook is where God touches your heart through worship or through a smile and a word.

I have been told that the people of Meadowbrook have always responded extravagantly when there has been an immediate need. I believe the need is there now- perhaps not in bricks or a furnace or flowers or a hymnal- but in the very basics of our everyday mission of responding to God's call us to minister in this place. For us to make a difference, we need your support. I pray that perhaps next week, when we bring our estimates of giving forward that we might feel a bit like the widow at the Temple treasury or even Clarence Bunsen of the Lake Wobegone Lutheran church- on edge, alive, and interested as givers. We need to offer our gifts, not from a thoughtful careful reserve, but from the passion and energy that is to be found here in our community of Christ.