

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

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Year C

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Text: Proverbs 11:24-25

Title: “A United Methodist Path: Gifts: Financial Generosity”

The last few weeks we've been considering what it means to be a Christ follower in the United Methodist tradition as we promise to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. The first week we addressed prayer, and I shared John Wesley's habit of meeting with his brother and fellow students as they tried to live holy lives. Prayer was a part of that weekly meeting. But it was lived prayer. After their time in prayer, sharing scripture and religious conversation, they acted. Wesley paired vital piety—prayer, scripture reading & religious conversation—with social action. Loving God began with prayer but that prayer empowered loving neighbor as they left the confines of their small group and engaged in social action. It all begins with that connection with God which is why prayer is the first of the vows when joining a United Methodist congregation.

Last week, Rev. Reisinger talked about the vow of presence. It's the vow of showing up and being intentional about staying connected with others on the same journey. She talked, too, about Wesley's classes and groups established in order for people to grow in their spiritual journeys with Christ and with one another. This wasn't just about interest groups or study groups but deeper than that, it was about sharing their lives and their walk with God and keeping each other accountable. The vow of presence means being an active part of congregational life and seeking to grow with others in our own spiritual lives, and with the early Methodists it happened in small groups.

This morning, we move to the vow of gifts. This vow is about giving financially. John Wesley did not hesitate to preach about money, and he followed faithfully in Jesus' footsteps who talked about money and possessions more than any other subject. Jesus taught many things about money, the chief of which was “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” which has resulted in those who study such things to proclaim “Show me your checkbook and I'll tell you what you really value.” Because it is true that the money we have is given to that which we value, what is important for us.

Let's begin by looking at giving in general. I have been thinking a lot about giving in the last several months because this is the first year in a long time that I actually purchased gifts for family members--besides my wife--for Christmas. Usually Lynn takes care of those details and the only involvement I've had is to ask the question, “What did we get him or her or them?” It wasn't always that way. I used to find joy in that kind of giving, thinking about people and what

would fit a need or desire and then making the purchase, wrapping the gift and joyfully watching the gift be opened on the appointed day. But somehow, Lynn and I shifted into a rut over the years in which she pretty much did all of that, and I was just there with camera in hand waiting along with everyone else to see what was under the wrapping. That may be a slight exaggeration but not far from it.

This last Christmas, though, we were celebrating with our son and daughter-in-law the purchase of their first home, and Josh said he needed tools. He wanted to do some wiring in their new home and knew I had put together a wiring kit that I've used for years with all the tools necessary to do basic wiring. He'd seen me use it and told Lynn that would be a great help. So, I bought wire nuts and staples and ground screws and a circuit tester, wire strippers and assorted other tools and supplies this year for Josh. Then I spent time researching the variety of boxes available to put it all in and Lynn and I found one just right at Home Depot. After that was done I received an email that Lowes had a great one-day deal on a cordless Porter Cable drill and impact combo. Oh, and he asked to borrow some Time Life home improvement books I've used for years for youth and Volunteers-in-Mission trips because I didn't know what I was doing and needed help. So I found a used set on Ebay and bought those. Lynn had to slow me down so we kept within our budget.

And then I was so excited about all this that I even wrapped the gifts. I haven't done that in years, but somehow this year because I was so involved in the process and I knew what was needed, I couldn't help myself. It was an exhilarating December for me. It was so much fun to actually know what was under the wrapping paper and watch each gift be opened. I was just feeling joy! That's all there is to it!

When I think about the vow to promise our gifts when we join the church, I wish we all felt the way I felt about this Christmas and previous Christmases when I'm excited about giving. I wish instead of feeling defensive or afraid or reluctant when it comes to giving money to God through the church we could all experience deep joy and satisfaction knowing that what we are doing together with these gifts matters and it's a great thing. I wish we could all be cheerful givers as the Apostle Paul wrote to the congregation in Corinth Greece: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)

But I confess that when I'm worshipping I don't always think, "Oh, boy, here comes the offering plate. I can't wait for that!" It's not the experience of watching someone opening a gift about which I am excited for him or her to have. So what are we to think of this vow of giving our gifts when we join a UM congregation?

John Wesley noticed that his Methodist societies began to accumulate wealth as their lives changed through living cleaner, better educated, and more disciplined lives which he modeled and taught. And so Wesley addressed the matter in sermons: "The Use of Money", "On the Danger of Riches" and "On the Danger of Increasing Riches". In the sermon on "The Use of Money" Wesley called money "an excellent gift of God". It's a gift! Therefore, it's okay to enjoy having money, which we do, of course. We enjoy having it and more is always welcome. Ask anyone who has received a promotion or worked hard to get a better paying job or received an unexpected raise or bonus. We experience joy when we receive money, which is why Powerball lotteries can get to over 1 billion dollars. People want to experience the joy of having money even if the mathematical probabilities of winning it are less than getting hit by lightning.

Even so, some will throw hundreds of dollars for the chance of experiencing the joy of having more money.

As a Christ-follower, Wesley was all for enjoying God's gift of money. It is a gift after all. However, as a Christ-follower, Wesley also listened to the voice of Christ who taught that "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." He knew the biblical model of tithing, giving 1/10 to God. He heard the prophets voices calling for faithful people to care for the orphan and the widow who were vulnerable people. He read of Jesus' care for the sick, the disenfranchised, and those who were victims of a judgmental system that would even take peoples' lives for sins committed even though "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". He read of Jesus' who taught that in order to follow him it was an "all-in" proposition. The rich young ruler who came to him asking how to attain eternal life, he told to "sell all you have and give to the poor. Then come and follow me." He didn't ask everyone to do that but he did ask this man, and it had to do with the hold money had on his life.

Wesley carried the biblical teachings about money and possessions within him and so he came up with three simple rules about money: "Gain/Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can." Let's to a brief look at each of these rules of Christian wisdom related to money.

THE FIRST IS: GAIN ALL YOU CAN.

Regarding this rule, Wesley told us to

Use all possible diligence in your calling. Lose no time.... Never leave anything till to-morrow, which you can do to-day. And do it as well as possible.... Put your whole strength to the work... Let nothing be done by halves, or in a slight and careless manner.... Do everything you have to do better to-day than you did yesterday... . Make the best of all that is in your hands.

Easy for him to say. Actually, this could sound a lot like the expectations some employers have of employees. Work, work, work. Do it better, faster, cheaper. Better, faster, cheaper. Work harder, better, more efficiently. Do not slack off. Stay focused. Always. But Wesley does not stop there. There is a caveat: Earn all you can "without paying more for it than it is worth." He put some boundaries around attaining wealth. There are three primary boundaries that are still applicable today.

1. Gain all you can without hurting your health. This includes doing the kind of work that has a direct effect on a person's health in the kinds of industries that pay no attention to workers' wellbeing like mining, for example. It would also include the problem of working ourselves to death for money.
2. Gain all you can without hurting your mind. This is a warning against earning money by lying, cheating, or engaging in behavior that his inconsistent with a person having a clear conscience. Avoid earning money in ways that leave us conflicted internally because we know it is not in keeping with Christian values.
3. Gain all you can without hurting your neighbor. This is about loving others as we

love ourselves. Earning money at the expense of our neighbor's welfare is not in keeping with Christ-taught values. As James Harnish writes in the study *A Disciple's Path*: "Wesley was emphatic that 'none can gain by swallowing up his neighbor's substance, without gaining the damnation of hell!'" (p. 49).

With these basic restrictions, Wesley taught us to gain all we can by hard work and by steady improvement.

THE SECOND RULE IS "SAVE ALL YOU CAN".

This rule is not about amassing huge savings accounts—Jesus' story about building bigger barns in order for the man to take care of his own needs only, dispels that idea—but rather is more about not wasting anything. It's more about frugality than hoarding. As Harnish writes, "He told his followers not to waste their money on unnecessary, overly expensive, or needless purchases, which led the early Methodists to a plain, practical, simple lifestyle. He warned them about what we would call 'compulsive' shopping—an addiction that pervades our culture today—when he said 'The more they are indulged, they increase the more.'" (p.50)

The purpose of this rule is not to support building bigger barns so we can store more, keep more, and amass more but rather the purpose is to experience the kind of contentment the Apostle Paul experienced when he wrote:

¹¹ ...I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13, NRSV)

THE THIRD AND FINAL RULE IS "GIVE ALL YOU CAN."

About this rule Wesley preached:

"Let not any man imagine that he has done anything, barely by going thus far, by 'gaining and saving all he can,' if he were to stop here. All this is nothing, if a man go not forward, if he does not point all this at a farther end. [Therefore] ...Having, First, gained all you can, and Secondly saved all you can, Then 'give all you can.'"

This gets us back to Jesus' claim that "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." We put our money where our values are. And so this rule is about learning to live in the Christian value of offering our gratitude for the generosity God shows us. It's about nurturing a lifestyle of being generous as God is generous. It's about giving with the kind of joy that reminds me of the joy I felt this Christmas, giving because we want to, not because we are told to, not because we are expected to, but because we love someone, because we love God and we love neighbor.

Do consider where you are in these Methodist's rules when it comes to money. Take an

inventory in this New Year. Take a step to grow in earning, saving and giving all you can. Where can you improve? If giving is drudgery or an exercise in reluctance, can you reframe how you give in order to experience it as joyful gift-giving to someone you love?

When we are able to be in that place of feeling generous and giving generously it's the kind of experience Jesus described in a parable told in the Gospel According to Matthew:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matthew 13:44)

When we live in gratitude for the generosity of God, we are able give willingly, joyfully, happily.