

07/24/11

LLT by Handling out Finances with Generosity and Integrity

- this morning I'd like to tell you about my very first Sunday at Faith...
- Kris, Bethany and I had been living in NJ while I finished my last degree at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia...
- I was 27 years old at the time... and I had been in school somewhere every semester since I had entered kindergarten...
- so you can be sure I was ready to be done with school...and even though in my final 3 years I was also on a pastoral staff as a Christian school administrator...I was looking forward to finally being in the ministry full time and enjoy/focus on what I believed the Lord had called me to...
- so Pastor Goode who was the senior pastor at the time had asked me to come join his staff, and we had gone through the candidating process that fall...and our family moved here to an apartment in Ashley Oaks during Christmas week...
- so I started on the first Sunday of January in 1988—and we participated in the services here and then went home to our apartment and we had barely gotten our coats off and the phone rang...
 - and it was Pastor Goode...and I can still remember the way that conversation started – he said, well—we've talked a lot about the good things at the church – do you also want me to keep you up to speed on the bad things?...
 - and he wasn't suggesting that anyone had been deceitful during the hiring process...
 - he was just asking me if I wanted to be in the loop when problems arose...
 - and I said yes – I assumed part of my role was to share those burdens to whatever degree he thought was appropriate...
 - so he launched into a story about some family that was upset with him and therefore leaving the church...
 - I remember putting down the phone and remember thinking---well, I'm glad I haven't been here long enough to have caused that one...but it was also an interesting wake-up call or at least a helpful reminder – this side of heaven there are going to be challenges and problems any time you try to bring people together into the church...
 - the residual fallout of the curse of sin still runs deep and strong even among the people of God...and it was interesting and instructive to have that reminder on my very first Sunday on the staff...
- 8 years later, we made a leadership transition here, which had been Pastor Goode's plan and desire all along but of course ultimately had to be approved by our entire church family...
 - and then about 1 ½ years after that in the summer of 1997, just a few weeks before he passed away so unexpectedly, we were sitting together in my office...and now I was in the position of senior pastor and he Pastor Goode was on our staff as pastor emeritus...
 - and he was in a reflective mood, and we were talking about his years as senior pastor and he said, "we had so many blessings and I'm thankful for that, but I wish we had been able to keep more people..."
 - and what he meant by that is – while we didn't have a tremendous amount of turnover, it always bothers a pastor when people choose not to continue to be part of the church family...
- after his funeral I thought a lot about that comment...even in what is generally regarded as a very good church in an incredible number of ways...there are still problems this side of heaven...

- now please don't think – what's going on here – what I just said has nothing to do with anything that is occurring currently here – I'm trying to prepare our hearts for a passage of Scripture that discusses a very sad day in the history of Christ's church...
 - the bottom line is...things aren't always the way they are supposed to be...
 - with that in mind, please open your Bible to Acts 5 – page 95 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...

- we're working our way through the book of Acts as part of our annual theme this year of **Living Life Together...**
 - Acts is the history of the early church and the idea is – let's examine the way they lived life together then to gain as much information as possible about the way we should live life together now...
- one observation we've made is that the way this story is told gives strong testimony to the historicity of the Scripture because God does not sugar-coat church history at all, or air-brush the bad parts out of the narrative...
 - even if it casts the early leaders in a bad light...or would make people think twice about followers of Christ...it's all there – the good and the bad...
- just think about some of the way that's true in relationship to Peter because he is the central leader of the church for the 1st half of the book...
 1. When Jesus announced that He would build His church, and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it...and that it would be built on the foundation of His death, burial, and resurrection...
 - immediately Peter said – Not so, Lord...
 - Jesus' discussion is not even one hour old at that point – and he's already having to say to Peter...Get thee behind me Satan...
 - and that rebuke is clearly recorded in the Word for all God's people to see...
 2. Then in the upper room --- there's much about that event that is majestic and beautiful...but it's set against sinful choices of Christ's followers...
 - so no one is willing to wash their feet before reclining for supper...so Jesus does it...
 - then Peter refuses to let him do it--then before the discussion is over he's asking for an entire bath...it's both sad and comical at the same time...
 3. Then Jesus tells Peter in front of everyone that he is going to deny him three times...and Peter argues back in pride...and again, all of that – about the key leader of the early church, is laid out clearly and comprehensively in Scripture...'
 4. The same is true about the denials themselves...and then even Peter's unwillingness to believe the report of the women that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead...
 5. That's followed by his hesitancy to obey the command Jesus gave to meet Him at the Sea of Galilee...and when he reluctantly obeys and finds that Jesus is not there – he just throws up his hands and says, I'm going fishing...
 6. Then you open the book of Acts and you hear the disciples, certainly with Peter among them...asking Jesus – are you going to establish your kingdom now?...
 - in other words, now that you're resurrected, can we focus our attention on overthrowing Rome so we can be the ones in charge?...
 - Jesus has to mildly rebuke them again – it's not for you to know the times or the seasons that the Lord has fixed by His own authority---you're worrying about the wrong things...
- the point is – anyone who wants to take the position that the Bible was simply produced by the leaders of the church as a way of spreading a false message has to answer the question – then why is there so much data here that casts the leaders in such a negative light?

- the only credible answer to that question is – because it's true...
- and when you bring that around to us, and the passage we're about to unfold...it really comes down to a question similar to the one Pastor Goode asked me on my first Sunday here?...
 - do you want to hear the bad along with the good?...
 - do you want a realistic understanding of what life for Chris is like this side of heaven?...
- to get a running start, let's pick up the story in Acts 4:32 – **read Acts 4:32-5:16**

- we're talking this morning about **Living Life Together by Handling our Finances with Generosity and Integrity...**
- from this passage, let's find **4 principles to help us use our money in a way that draws the church family together.**

I. Understand the Place of Finances in the Plan and Purpose of God.

- there's no question that this topic has been abused at the hands of televangelists and other religious hucksters...
- amazingly, that was true even in the early church...
- one of the characteristics of false teachers repeatedly called out in Scripture was their motivation to steal money from the people of God in ways that were selfish and manipulative...
- but if someone like me ignores this topic out of a concern to not ever be lumped with that extreme...then I've simply driven into the ditch on the other side of the road...because this topic is stamped all over the Word of God...

A. A regular theme in the Old Testament.

- just a random example – these are the verses that were scheduled for my personal Bible study time the morning I started preparing this message...
- it's from the book of Ezra, the story of the rebuilding of the temple after the Babylonian Captivity...[so this takes places in the early 500's, BC]
- **Ezra 1:5-6 - Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.**
- and what you notice is – no one is all uptight about this – or feeling pressured or uncomfortable...they have an opportunity to do something for God and they rally together and do it...
- and then there is a long list of the specific people and families involved...that goes all the way into the next chapter and then you read this...
- **Ezra 2:68-69 - Some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas and 5,000 silver minas and 100 priestly garments.**

- honestly, we could multiple passages like this all morning – it is just part of the way God drew people together was by giving them the opportunity to pool their resources and accomplish things for the Lord as group of men and women who loved Him with all their hearts...
- we saw the same thing...

B. On the day of the birth of the church.

- **Acts 2:43-45 - Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.**
- now, why was that?...was God hard up?...are things getting bad in heaven so the Lord has to resort to passing a tin cup?...
- apparently there is something beneficial to people like you and me to be able to demonstrate the genuineness of our faith by the condition and activity of our checkbooks...
- one reason for that is, contrary to a lot of things in the Christian life, what we do with our money is quite measureable...
- you or I could go home and within a few minutes add up exactly what we've given to the Lord so far this year and compare it to all the other ways we've spent our money and have a really good idea of our priorities and values...
- I would encourage you to do that if there is any question in your mind about that...and if you're a married couple, I would encourage you to do that together...
- this church has gotten to where it is humanly speaking because there are a lot of men and women who are the real thing – they are like Barnabus...they're not flashy, but they are the real thing, including the way they handle their money...
- but every so often some Ananias and Sapphira behavior shows itself – I remember one night, back when we had little business meetings for every expenditure – we needed something for the nursery, and it was an obvious decision...the nursery was growing [which was/is a good thing]—we needed to increase our supplies in a particular area...
 - it was a very straightforward decision that could have been made in 30 seconds...
 - but several guys wanted to get the church family in this huge bruhaha about buying these items...
 - and it eventually passed, but it wasted an incredible amount of time and left a sour taste in everyone's mouth...
 - and it's not that people shouldn't voice their concerns or ask questions...but I thought – you know, that's really not the tone of people whose hearts are generous and in tune with the mission that God has given us...why wouldn't we want to be sure that we are serving the growing number of children here properly?...
 - so I did what I think pastors ought to do in a situation like that...
 - I met with them and asked them this question – are you giving faithfully to this church in accordance with the Scriptures?...
 - and would it surprise you to know that the answer in all three cases was no?...
- and I went on to explain to them something I believe deeply...people who do not faithfully and generously give to the Lord's work have forfeited their right to ever influence what the church family should do with its funds...because selfish people make selfish, short-sighted decisions...
- so on the one hand, I don't talk about this issue a lot – but on the other hand – it shouldn't surprise us that it comes up so frequently in God's Word because it provides a measureable, objective way of thinking about the nature of your relationship with the Lord...that's what we mean by understanding the place of finances in the plan and purpose of God...
- here's what we also see in this passage...

II. Look for Needs and Opportunities to be Generous and Faithful.

- there were specific reasons why this came so natural to the early church

A. Setting of the early church.

- we know there were many people in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost who were from different places – that’s why they spoke different languages and why the gift of tongues was so important...
 - God wanted them to hear His Word in their own tongue, or language...
- but he also wanted their needs to be addressed...
 - there was also the issue of at least the beginning of a famine that would become so significant in Jerusalem that the apostle Paul would later lead the Gentile Christians to receive a love offering for their Jewish brothers and sisters and that went a long way toward bringing these two divergent groups of people together...
 - some people like to use these verses to suggest that the early church is a good example of socialism...that’s not the case at all – for one thing it was voluntary, they did it because they wanted to, not because it was forced upon them by the government...
 - and it was also in the context of rather unusual circumstances in the early church...

B. For us today.

- one of the ways we live life together is by being generous and faithful with our finances...
- because as we do so, we are able to accomplish the mission God has given us together...
- it binds us around a shared sacrifice and a marvelous mission...
- to what end?...

1. Regular ministries of the church.

- we want to have a vibrant youth group...
- we want people to be visited in the hospital if there’s a need...
- we want first rate children’s ministries...
- we want the Word of God to be faithfully proclaimed...
- we want ministries for singles and couples....for those who are older...
- there’s all sorts of activities that come under the mission of seeking to glorify God by winning people to Jesus Christ and equipping them to be more faithful disciples...
- and if that requires finances to fund those activities as we seek to be a bright light in the community to which God has called us, then we want to participate in that together—we would consider it a privilege to be involved...

2. Our missions ministries

- we want each one of our missionary families to be cared for properly...
- we want to take on new missionaries each year...
- we want our youth group to be able to take trips like the one they are just completing to work with the Watkins in New York City...
- and if that costs money to make that kind of thing happen – many of us would say – what better thing could you do with you money...
- and it does draw us together – and it’s not like we’re going to sit around and say – look what we did...but the fact is that by coming together and using our financial resources in a way that is very similar to the early church...we can accomplish important things together...

3. Our special ministry blessings

- our school, counseling ministry, VOH, seminary, community ministries
- the bottom line is – it takes additional resources to keep all of that going...
- but our view is – Lord, if you would entrust us with that [we realize you could have blessed anyone] – we'll try to be faithful to the trust, and we're glad we have it...

4. Our upcoming project at Purdue.

- one of the projects we agreed on together as part of our 5 year strategic planning process was to locate a piece of land and then seek to build a student ministry center and a biblical counseling center as close to the center of campus as we can...
- that is why we are purchasing the old Smitty's site...and if the sellers can't solve a few environmental issues before we close—we're looking at an alternate site...
- that's why our strategic plan also called for us to undertake a 3 year capital campaign...
- so we're asking you to consider special giving between 2012-2014 to help us cover the cost of the land and the construction of the facility...
 - now we are examining some other possible uses of those sites—and we'll discuss that when the picture becomes clearer...
 - but the capital campaign is for the land, counseling center, and student ministry center....and we're asking you to make a commitment to that this fall...
 - all of our leaders have already done so...and I'll tell you the way my wife and I decided...
 - we looked at what we did the last time around for the community center...where we asked everyone to consider giving the equivalent of what they give in a year additionally over a span of three years...and we did that and more because we think leaders lead...
 - this time around – we added 50% to that – because even though we're trying to figure out a lot of things right now including long-term provisions for our handicapped son – we believe it's time to step up and be like the early church when it comes to the issue of generosity and integrity...
 - we want to be part of this Purdue project – and we're asking everyone from the church now to plan to prayerfully commit to doing something...

5. Special community opportunities.

- I also want to explain one other decision we recently made...this isn't going to be a major push this fall because I realize we can't do everything at once...
- but you probably know that our local United Way has a fund drive each fall...they support 26 excellent non-profit organizations in our town – they don't support planned parenthood or other organizations whose missions we would find objectionable...organizations like the Red Cross, Big Brothers/Sisters. Meals on Wheels...
- Because of the economy, it has become harder and harder to meet our community's annual goal...
- I was looking at a list of the 100 largest organizations that give to the United Way to help support these organizations – guess how many churches?...none...
- **Matthew 5:16 - Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.**
- **Titus 3:14 - Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.**
- no churches willing to help shoulder the load to meet these important needs in our community – what's wrong with that picture?

- We think it's time for that to change...so we are going to be a Pacesetter this fall...
- I realize many give through work – but many work at places that aren't involved...
 - we're encouraging our employees to consider having \$1-2 deducted from their paychecks and sent to the United Way...
 - and if you don't have that opportunity to do it through work, we're going to give the opportunity to participate through our church...
 - it won't be a major emphasis, but it will be an opportunity for those who would like to participate...
 - that's just another way for us to live life together...and make a difference in the community in which God has placed us...

- so why are these verses in the Bible?...

- why did the Lord give us the story of Barnabus, followed by the shocking tale of Ananias and Sapphira?...it's pretty obvious, isn't it?...

III. Choose to be Like Barnabas.

A. Known for the way he cared for and encouraged others.

- **4:36 - Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement)...**
- generosity flows out of a compassionate heart...

B. Willingly sold an asset to help the church further its mission.

- **Acts 4:37 - and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money...**

C. Trusted the church family for the way the funds would be invested in kingdom use.

- **Acts 4:37 – brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.**

- that's living life together....which prepares us for the shock...

IV. Heed the Warning of Ananias and Sapphira

A. Their sin was not in withholding a portion of the proceeds.

B. The issue was the fact that they lied and said they did one thing when in fact they had done something else.

1. First give yourself to the Lord
2. Make giving a priority now
3. Avoid a consumptive lifestyle
4. Choose to lay-up treasure in heaven