



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Graceful Living

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

October 19, 2008

*Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*

Philippians 4:10-20

Here's our theme for this year's annual financial stewardship campaign at the church: "Stories to Tell, Gifts to Share." Over the next several weeks—and throughout 2009—we will tell the stories of how the ministry of this congregation has changed lives, beginning with our own, and we will invite one another to give gifts of energy, time, talent, and money in response to those stories of what God is doing among us. And believe me when I tell you—we have amazing stories to tell about the way God has used this congregation to transform lives with the power of the gospel. We have stories to tell.

But, let's be honest. Those stories have been silenced—or at least drowned out to where they can't be heard—because of another story that you are hearing or telling everywhere you go. That's the story of the economic crisis that is gripping our country, that is paralyzing our world.

It feels a little like the sky is falling not only in our country but across the globe. I wouldn't be exaggerating to say that the global financial picture is scary. As someone wrote, "The voices of the pundits, politicians and the experts have gotten so loud it seems like it is all we hear—a roaring voice over the airwaves and we have all had a crash course in credit, sub-prime mortgages, bailouts, rescues and we all know Freddie and Fannie aren't the cute couple that live next door."

We hear numbers that are staggering in their size—so big we can't even wrap our brains around them. And very close to home – right here in our midst – we have sisters and brothers whose lives and livelihoods are affected in real ways. I have lost count of the number of conversations I have had with many of you about your fears that you won't have enough money to get by, and you wonder about your job, and you wake up in the middle of the night with that overwhelming sense of dread and worry, and, even worse, you know that you're better off than many, perhaps most.

So today, when we start our focus on "Stories to Tell, Gifts to Share," we do so in the face of another truth: The economy has a story to tell as well, and that story makes us not want to consider our gifts to share, but rather our resources to conserve—or hoard.

And so, as we begin our emphasis on financial stewardship this morning, I think the Apostle Paul understands us better than most. What we have in this section of his letter to the Philippians—a congregation of believers whom he dearly loves—is a thank you note from the congregation. But, you've got to admit, it's a strange way of saying thank you.

Paul seems to be saying, "Well, thank goodness you finally got around to showing your concern for me. And thanks for the gift—not that I needed it mind you. And, by the way, I certainly didn't ask for it. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to

have a lot. So, since I've learned that secret, I didn't really need your gift. Or ask for it. But thanks just the same."

Of course, there was a deeper reason for Paul, and, as it always is for him, it's deeply theological. Paul was trying to get that congregation to know that their gift to support his ministry—as kind as it was—was ultimately not the gift that mattered. If it's true that nothing happens in the church until someone gives is true—and I believe it is—Paul wants us to know that it is not our gifts that make things happen, but rather God's gift.

God gave us grace, undeserved and unconditional love. God did not allow that offer to expire, but continues his covenant to give us grace, unendingly. God's grace comes to us through the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments. The Word is the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ. If we "continue" in this Word, we will "know the truth and the truth will set us free." Our response to that truth, and the freedom in which we respond, is stewardship. This ability to respond is also a gift of God's grace. God gave us the gift of being able to give, day by day. Stewardship is everything we think, say, and do as a response to God's grace. When we give, we are merely passing along, or returning, to God, what always has been, and still is, God's. When we speak of our possessions, qualities, or talents as gifts from God, we do well to remember that whatever God gives to us is still God's.

That is my story and yours. It is the story of our faith. We are loved by a God who has blessed us beyond belief. Our God provides for us the things of this world. Everything you have in this life is from the hand of our loving God. Our God provides for us the things of eternal life, the gift of the Son, and all that goes with having the Son. The gift of forgiveness, the gift of baptism into the family, these are ours. God's generosity toward you has overwhelmed you.

And those are the stories we gather here to tell, and those are the stories that are on our lips when we go forth from this place.

There is, after all, another voice sounding among those shouting of financial disaster. It is heard most clearly in this room which is appropriately called a sanctuary – a place of refuge.

Where the world says the sky is falling – this voice says – I'm the Lord of the sea and sky.

Where the world says – be afraid – this voice says – fear not I am with you.

Where the world says – hold on tight to what is yours – this voice says – open your hands and let me fill them.

Where the world says riches are measured by a bank account – this voice says - You are rich in everything—in faith, in speaking, in knowledge, in truly wanting to help, and in the love you learned from us.

All giving is grounded in grace and it is God who gives it – when God's grace is given it reveals itself in giving. Something extraordinary happens when God's grace appears.

This is the starting point for anything and everything that you have to say about your entire life – God's grace has been lavished upon us, and we are invited to join Paul

in living gracefully, in living the secret of trust in God's gift of the Son, Jesus Christ.

I have no doubt in the days ahead that you will continue to hear of the paralyzing global economic crisis. Unfortunately, that is the setting for today as we begin our financial stewardship campaign. The question to consider, however is this: "Who are you going to listen to?" There are plenty of voices out there screaming scarcity, crying out about all that we used to have that we don't have any more. And then there is Paul's voice, reminding us that God has always blessed us, and will always bless us. And behind it all is the biblical refrain which sounds from beginning to end— "Don't be afraid."

I want to invite you to respond generously to God's grace made known in your life. I want you to know the joy of the secret that Paul understood—that it's possible to be content with plenty or with little. After all, God has not so richly blessed us so that we might cling to those blessings, accumulating them to ourselves, as if God will never bless us again. God has so richly blessed us that we might use those blessings for others. The call is to be a blessing every bit as generously as we have been blessed.

The temptation, of course, is to forget that. The temptation, especially in these days, is to harbor the blessings, to keep them to ourselves and for ourselves. And that temptation can be strong.

The temptation is to let society's fear out-shout God's generosity. The temptation is to hang on to as much of your money as you can. But the call of our Lord is to share more of the blessings than you might dare. The call of our Lord is to be every bit as generous as God has been with you.

Jesus wants your heart – and so he calls on you to share generously of the blessings that God has so generously showered upon you. Jesus wants your heart. He wants your faith in him to grow. And so he calls on you to give generously to his work through your congregation – even now, even today. In fact, with all that is going on around us, maybe I should say, "Especially now, especially today."

There once was a monk who had decided to take a walk. While he was walking he saw on the ground something very shiny. He bent down to pick it up and found that it was a very valuable, precious gem. So he cleaned it off, put it into his bag and continued on his way. A little further along the way, he met up with a man who asked him if he could spare something to eat. The monk said sure and he opened his bag to get something out. When he did that the man looked inside and saw the gem. He asked him, "Could I have that?" and the monk said, "Certainly." The man took the gem and went on his way.

Later the man came back to the monk and returned the gem to him. The monk was very puzzled and asked why he was giving it back. The man told him "What I want is whatever it is that allowed you to so easily part with such a valuable gem, because that is what is most precious."

I suspect you know that monk's secret. It's what Paul knew as well, and what we are invited to take in deeply. In fact, it's what we'll say together in just a moment when we affirm our faith together.

Here's the secret: We have received God's grace—God's free gift of love that we do not deserve and cannot earn. And how do we thank God for this gift of love? By prom-

ising to love and trust God with all my heart.

That's why we worship. And that's why we tell stories. And, now that the secret's out, that's why we have gifts to share.