



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Cheerful Sacrifice

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 9, 2008

*Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

Today is the fourth week that we've been thinking together about our stewardship theme for 2009: *Stories to Tell, Gifts to Share*. We've considered information on bulletin inserts, heard testimonies from faithful givers, had the opportunity to read several newsletter articles, and most of you here today received a letter and an estimate of giving card from our Stewardship Ministry inviting you to plan your giving for the year ahead. We've had weeks to get ready, to prepare our hearts and our minds, to consider the faithful ministry of this congregation and what God means to our lives. And so today, at the end of service, we will make our commitments through this congregation in response to the blessings of God in our lives. By our commitments, we will be indicating our love for God and our awareness of and investment in the significant ways that God is using this congregation to change lives.

Throughout 2009, you will be hearing stories of the ways that our congregation's ministry is changing lives. I have invited our officers—our deacons and elders—to share some of their stories with me about how God is working in their lives, and then to describe a way that our ministry together as a community of faith is bearing fruit for the kingdom of God. (I also gave them the option of doubling their estimate of giving for 2009, which they could indicate by not returning their form. I'm happy to report several took that opportunity.)

As I have read their stories, I have been deeply moved by the ways they describe God at work in their life. They have talked about being seriously ill and how they have sensed God holding them, and a couple even included the words that opened our service today when they wrote that they were coming to a deeper understanding of how they belong to God—in life surely, but also in death.

Others spoke of a deepening faith as they went through Disciple Bible Study.

Others described how God spoke to them as they hauled debris from a flooded house or sat beside someone on the long van ride to the Gulf Coast.

Others wrote about serving as a mentor in confirmation class, or catching a glimpse of God in the care of friends.

There is no doubt that those whom you have called to be officers here are growing in their understanding of the way God is at work in their lives, and their lives reflect that growth.

And when asked about our congregation's ministry together, and how it is changing lives, I am thrilled to see that almost every one of them first described how their own life had been transformed by God through the ministry of the congregation here. Some talked about the care they had received during difficult times. Others mention a simple card they

received from someone who sits near them in the sanctuary. And a host of them listed the programs you would expect: our food pantry; Disciple Bible Study; Faith Village; Women's Circles; Small Groups—on and on the list goes. What we do together is changing lives, including our own.

Those are just a sampling of the stories of how God is working in and through this congregation, and I can't wait to see the response as we tell those stories throughout 2009 and beyond. They are, you see, stories of what God has done, and when we get a sense of that—really get it—really understand the depths of God's generous, self-giving, costly love—then our whole lives will become an offering and we'll never have to worry about whether we have enough money to fund God's mission through this congregation.

Today, I want to invite you to become a cheerful giver. Even more, I want you to take it a few steps further, all the way to cheerful sacrifice. That's what Paul was urging the Corinthians to do throughout his letters to them. Those who received Paul's letters were not exactly without economic concern, and yet Paul dared to invite them to give generously to the saints in Jerusalem because he understood the power of what God was doing there. And so, without apology, Paul laid out his case by reminding the Corinthians that all giving that we Christians do is always in response to the giving of God. Everything we have belongs to God anyway, and God was generous enough to give us the gift of the Son and to set us apart for ministry in his name. And so, argued Paul, when we give it is in response to what God has already given and in commitment to what God is even now doing through congregations gathered in Christ's name.

Now, here's where real Christian stewardship gets tricky. What we offer of the finances entrusted to us by God depends greatly on where we place our focus. Specifically, are we thinking about what the church needs to receive? Or are we thinking about what God is calling each of us to give?

Obviously, the church has obligations which must be met. There are bills to pay, salaries to offer, and buildings to pay for. And yet, when it comes to your giving, those congregational obligations should not be the first thing you consider. No, your focus should not be placed on the congregation's need to receive but rather upon your need to give in response to the blessings of God in your life.

And so I ask you: Which of the following describes your thought process when it comes to the commitment you will make today?

Is it, "How much of my money does the church need this year? How do I feel about how things are going at church these days? Times are tight, so can I really spare more?"

Or is it, "God has blessed me in so many ways. And God is doing amazing things in my life and in the larger world through our congregation's ministry. So how do I feel God is calling me to respond to those blessings?"

If you are like the vast majority of people in Presbyterian congregations, then you probably find yourself in the first category. Let me invite you to move from that fixation on "how much the church needs" to a question closer to the heart of Christian discipleship, namely "How is God calling me to respond to God's presence in my life?"

As I have thought about this over the last few weeks, countless images from what

your gifts have enabled us to do throughout this year keep springing to mind—images of lives transformed by our ministry. Thank you for those gifts. As we look into 2009, this is the day for us to consider anew the amazing blessings of God that come to us through the ministry of Massanutten Presbyterian Church, and I invite you to give of yourself in grateful awareness of the ways that God has drawn near to you.

Last Saturday morning my daughters were doing what most children across the country were doing. They had taken their trick-or-treat bags, dumped them out on the floor, and were busy sorting their treasures into categories ranging from much-coveted chocolate to the much-less-coveted “healthy alternatives.”

Alayne had been for her checkup on Halloween, and the doctor had given her strict orders not to eat even one piece of Halloween candy. Thankfully, she was upstairs and out of sight as the great sorting took place.

I, however, was not. I was sitting with Rachel and Sarah, just making sure that the candy was safe and rejoicing with them at their bounty. Suddenly—right in the midst of the abundance and chaos—a lesson in stewardship broke in.

As they looked through their candy, either Rachel or Sarah would see a wrapper containing something they knew their mother enjoyed (at least before the doctoral prohibitions had kicked in), and they would immediately say aloud with great joy and delight, “Mommy loves these!” And then, whether they themselves loved that particular candy or not—even if it were their favorite—they would jump up, grab a tissue from the box, wrap the candy with their loving hands, cradle it close to their heart and run all the way up the stairs to offer their gift to their mother. It was an amazing scene that played out several times as Rachel or Sarah or both ran with tissue-wrapped treasures for the one they loved so deeply.

Of course, there is more to the story. Remember, I was there too, but there was a measurable difference in the candy I received from them. I, you see, received no tissue-wrapped offerings that sprang from their hearts. Here’s what I got when they sorted through their candy and spied what ended up in my lap: “Oooo, yuck. I don’t like these. Here, Daddy.”

Not so much as a glance in my direction. No running up the stairs. It was the offering of something they had no need for, and I was as good a place as any to give it.

I received a lesson in stewardship that early Saturday morning. It hit me like a ton of bricks that my giving to God through this congregation was a lot more like their gifts to me than their gifts to their mother.

And I’ve got to tell you, what I saw in my daughters as they wrapped those calorie-laden gifts as a token of love for their mother was absolute joy, and I want to experience that in my own life.

Now believe me, Rachel and Sarah understood the cost of those gifts. It was costing them something they themselves enjoyed. But it was written in every ounce of their being that they were going to give their mother from the first fruits of their haul—they were offering the very best of what they had as an offering to the one they love so deeply.

That’s what we’re invited to do in response to what God means in our life. To give

of our first fruits—to give our very best—in response to the God who has given us everything.

One final word: your financial support is important to this congregation's ministry, but true stewardship of what God has entrusted to us also means a commitment of your time and your talent. If you are looking for a way to serve, please, please, please let someone know.

In just a minute, we will offer our commitments together. And while we may not wrap them in tissue, we can still offer them with loving hands and committed hearts, in deep awareness of the ways that God continues to bless our ministry together.