

Oh No, a Sermon on Money!: *Ephesians 3:14-21*

Norwalk Christian Church, October 30, 2016, Branching Out - Stewardship Series, Year C

I know what you're thinking. Not a sermon on Money. I'm with you. I don't like listening to sermons on money. I don't like preaching sermons on money.

I've been to those churches that loooooove to preach on money. I've seen the plates passed, and then passed again. I've even heard of churches asking members for their W2s, to make sure they're tithing at the right amount. Usually, sermons on money are filled with guilt and emotional appeals: if you don't give more, these poor children will have no youth group! Or desperation: we need you to up your contribution, or else we'll have to stop paying the light bill, and fire the ministers! Or if not guilt or desperation, then fear: give more, or God will judge you!

It's no wonder that we all hate sermons on money. Guilt and fear and desperation, these aren't the kind of themes that fill churches with joy.

Well, I have good news for you today. Do not fear, there will be no guilt-filled, desperate pleas for money today. In fact, we already passed the plates this morning, and I guess we could send them around again, but that's a lot of work for the deacons!

But we are going to talk about money...just in a different way. Because no one wants or needs to hear those sorts of sermons.

Our text today gives us a better lens to look at our church life together. It's written by the apostle Paul, who, you remember, is a missionary church planter. Paul traveled around the region, visiting cities around the Mediterranean, meeting people, sharing with them about Christ, and then organizing a church, as he set up leaders to keep things going after he left.

As he went from city to city, he would keep up with these churches by writing letters to them. Most of our New Testament is made up of these letters from Paul, and we read from one today. But really, what we read today was a prayer, which is typical Paul style. He loves to stop, right in the middle of a letter, and start praying.

And this prayer is Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus--and, I think, for us, too. He asks that God would give us the great riches of God's glory, so that our inner being will be strengthened with power from the Holy Spirit. In times like ours, with so much division in our country, with the church moving more and more to the margins of society, with so many worries and cares of life--we need our spirits strengthened with power.

Paul prays that we will have power, and that Christ will dwell in our hearts, through faith, and that our life together will have deep, deep roots--be well-grounded--not by having everything right, or having large cash reserves, or a great building, or great programs--no.

Paul's prayer is that the church would be rooted and grounded in love. That's the foundation of a church, that's what keeps us steady, and that's how we grow. Not through guilt or gimmicks, but love. Love is the source of our life together.

And Paul doesn't stop praying there. He prays that the church will have a greater vision. That we may have the power to begin to understand the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ's love--which is never-ending, and surpasses all knowledge--so great we will never fully comprehend it.

And knowing the greatest of Christ's love, he prays that we will wake up to the reality of our life together. That with the power of God working through us, we can do immeasurably more than anything we could ever ask or imagine!

Now, isn't that amazing?! Paul doesn't preach guilt, fear, and desperation--Paul prays for power. Paul prays that the people of God will have a grand vision of all that God can accomplish through us, greater than anything we could ever dream up or imagine.

But you've been in those church meetings before, haven't you?

But we've never done it this way before.

But if we do that, someone may leave, and then we'd have less money, and then we can't pay the bills.

Well, giving's been down the last few years--and if we don't pick it up, well, we're going to have to close the church.

That doesn't sound like something the Apostle Paul would write to one of his churches, but more often than not, that's how we deal with money in the church.

We look at what we have, and then decide what we can and cannot do with the money we have. We don't take risks, we don't rock the boat--too much--because if we do, then giving may go down. We treat the offering like a weekly opinion poll on church life.

I've been in those meetings before, and, really, they're spiritually exhausting. You can feel the power of the Spirit, that Paul prayed we'd be filled with, draining out of us as we realize all that we cannot do.

But I've also been in other church meetings. Meetings like our Board has been having all year. Inspired by the exciting World Café they put on in June, the Board has been envisioning together all the things we could do in our life together. They've been imagining what God's great power at work within us could accomplish.

Our Outreach Committee has been meeting extra in the last few months. Inspired by things you shared at our World Café, they have been dreaming up ways to encourage more outreach in our community while we grow in our relationships with one another. They've been working with AMOS, a coalition of churches in the metro-area, who is helping us learn how to be more effective in our outreach to our community.

A couple weeks ago, they set a goal of organizing small group conversations in our church and talking to 200 Norwalk Christian Church members the first of next year, so we can all get to know one another more as we share together the issues and pressures affecting families in our church. Then they want to take the conversations outside of the church, and hear from people in the community what families are struggling with. Then, taking all that is learned from those conversations, this group of inspired leaders plans to lead us all in action in our community around the issues identified through these hundreds of conversations, as we bring positive change, so that all families in Norwalk and Warren County can thrive, our city can be the best it can be, and our schools can have the support and resources needed to serve our children and families.

I've also been in Stewardship and Finance meetings this past year which, I'll admit, is not really my favorite meeting to attend. I look at a spread sheet, and I feel like I'm reading ancient sans-krit. But over the last few months, these meetings have been exciting, as the Stewardship and Finance group has been planning a Stewardship Campaign for this year, and finding new ways to talk about money in our church, that get us all excited about growth. They've presented a budget that requires more money than we gave last year, because they're hopeful for your commitment to our ministry together.

They dreamt up the theme, "Branching Out", because they're not interested in continuing business as usual, where they cut ministries and build a budget out of fear. They want to operate with power, and want to encourage our church to not cut back, but to branch out--all of us. Because there is more growth we all can do, in our own spiritual lives, and in the ways we give to our church, through our time, talents, *and* our treasure.

That's why, this Sunday and the next two Sundays, we are having an intentional focus on Stewardship in our church life, around this theme of "Branching Out". It's something we haven't done in a long time here. Next week, after worship we will have our annual congregational meeting, which our Stewardship and Finance Committee decided to rebrand a little, and call it our congregational celebration! See how exciting and creative these money-folks have become. ;-) Because that is what it is, really. It's a celebration

At our annual meeting we do the business of our church, things like appoint leaders for the next year and approve our annual budget. But it's a celebration of our life together, all that we have accomplished in our last year of ministry, and all that we hope to do in the next year, as even more people step up to serve in a leadership role and we commit our financial resources for another year of ministry. How exciting!

Then, the following Sunday, we are having a commitment Sunday. We are asking everyone *who wants to participate* to prayerfully consider ways you feel God calling you to make a greater commitment to our church life together. That commitment could be financial, by you pledging your generosity to our church mission, committing to giving with greater intention and regularity. It could be you saying that you want to commit to do more ministry, to get more involved in our church life together in new ways.

It's will be an opportunity for us to challenge and inspire one another, as we come together as church to commit again to our lives together and all God is calling us to branch out and do.

So, I'm not interested in just talking about money. That's boring and, I believe, counter to the mission of Christ. It really doesn't matter if our collection plates are full and our budget in the black, if we have no vision--no imagination--for all God could accomplish among us.

Church is not about money; church is about the mission of Christ.

And if we are a church, rooted in Christ's love--which we most certainly are--then out of those strong roots grows a great power. A power that is beyond comprehension. A power that leads us to do amazing things, things we never thought we could do, in our own lives and in our life together as church.

If you believe in what God is doing here--and want to see even more done through our Church--than let us join together in a congregational celebration next Sunday and then prayerfully and joyfully and boldly commit to doing our part so that we can branch out in our life together and our mission to the world.

If you believe that God has blessed you, if you believe that God is at work in our church, and if you believe that with God's power we can do more than we could ever ask or even imagine, then let us proclaim together--enthusiastically--Amen! Amen!