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You're Doing Great

A sermon on 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (OT passage Malachi 3:7-12)

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In our second scripture reading from 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, a church that he cares about deeply. He has been urging the Corinthians, as well as the other churches, to contribute to a gift of money for the church in Jerusalem, where the Christians there are suffering in a state of poverty. Apparently the church at Corinth had started to participate very generously in this effort, but then they stopped. So Paul writes this (read 2 Cor. 8:1-15) . . .

There is much to glean from this rich passage, but today we focus on verse 7: “Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

We are a church that likes to excel. We are proud of our excellent music, our beautiful building, and the rave reviews we receive for events like our Noon Noels and Silver Wings Suppers. When we held our first Trunk or Treat a couple weeks ago, I confess to feeling a ridiculous sense of pride when I overheard a little trunk or treater tell his friend, “Wow, this Trunk or Treat has twice as many trunks as the last place.” When we do something at First Presbyterian Church, we strive to EXCEL. When it comes to giving, however, what exactly does excellence look like?

I think excellence looks like the fact that so many of you are already contributing to the mission and ministry of this church. That when you see a need, you step up. That sometimes you even give without being asked. It also looks like the fact that half of our session members are giving away ten percent or more of their income. They are at or above a tithe. The letter

included in your stewardship packets, says 5 session members, but it's actually six. Five session members are giving ten percent or more TO THIS CHURCH—the sixth is giving more than ten percent away, with a large portion of that coming here, and some of it going to God's work outside this congregation.

We talk about tithing because that is the standard for giving going all the way back to the days of Moses and the ancient Israelites. It's mentioned in scripture over and over again, and always with the promise that tithing leads to blessing. We read from Malachi today so you could hear that wonderful challenge from God, when God says, "Test me!" Bring the full tithe, the first tenth of the produce of the land, says God, and "see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

Now, for some of us, the word tithing makes us cringe. Maybe we're on a tight budget right now, and we simply cannot see how we could possibly come up with ten percent and still survive. Or maybe we question why the standard of tithing still applies in this day and age, and why it should go to the church, when there are so many other worthy causes out there. We'll talk about that more next week.

Meanwhile, your session's commitment to tithing is a clear mark of excellence. And not just those who are already tithing, but those who wrote down a smaller percentage. You see, we are still following the guidance of our consultant, Tom Ehrich, who was with us a couple of years ago. So every year, each of us writes down on a slip of paper the percentage of our income we plan to pledge to the Lord's work through this church. We put those in an envelope, and then I look at them and calculate an average, which was 7% this year. Higher than last year, and higher than the year before that.

Even though everyone's privacy is protected and nobody knows what percentage anyone is giving, it takes courage to look at your income, to make a commitment, write it down and to start that journey towards or beyond ten percent. All of you who are on that journey are on a journey of excellence, wherever you start, even if you are starting at 1%. Whether you are able to increase the amount by ½ a percent a year, or one percent a year, way to go. Keep up the good work!

[When I think about excellence, I always think back to my musical days as a piano student first as kid and then later on in college. Couple things I learned about excellence. First, excellence means always giving your best. So whether you are playing on a beautiful concert grand, in a recital hall full of attentive listeners, or playing on an out-of-tune spinet for a small chapel service of elderly people who are hard of hearing and talking through your whole prelude and couldn't care less if you forget to crescendo or mess up a trill. . . you give them your best.

Second, you're always want to be growing in your abilities. You stretch yourself by learning pieces of greater difficulty. And you don't learn those longer, more difficult pieces by sitting down and playing them all the way through over and over again. You start with maybe 8 or ten measures, and work on those for a while, and then when you get them down, you add some more. And if you don't practice, you won't get better.]

Giving is not that different. We give our very best, wherever we find ourselves, and we become more excellent by practicing, and adding more as we go.

I remember the offering at a church in Kenya, watching how the people come down the aisle to the front of the church, patiently waiting their turn to place their gift in the offering basket. Everybody puts in something. And everybody sees you—there's no secrecy about it, perhaps because in a village, everybody knows your circumstances anyway. I'll never forget

how one woman came forward, and rather than putting money in the bag, she placed a jar of beans on the table. Another woman heaved a sack of dried peas next to it. And yet another woman carefully placed two eggs. At the end of the service, the worship leader took the microphone and auctioned off all the food items. The church got the money, and the auction winners donated the food to the pastor.

That church had 100% participation in its offering. Every family in the room gave something. And every gift was honored, because that church knew that every gift no matter how small MATTERED. That is excellent giving.

I had a lot of clever points I wanted to make today, but I think it might be better if I just tell you about my daughter Madeleine. As I've shared before, Madeleine works at a Great Clips in Johnson County. People from all walks of life come and sit in her chair to get their hair cut. Half of Madeleine's income is from the hourly wage that Great Clips pays her, and the other half comes from the tips she receives. She has some regulars who she can count on to tip her \$12 for a \$15 haircut. Sometimes people tip more than the cost of the haircut, partly because they know \$15 is pretty low for the quality they are getting, partly because they like Madeleine, and partly because they can. It isn't a lot for them, and they know that for people who cut hair, good tips make your day.

Madeleine also gets her share of \$2 tips. Some are from grandmothers who are raising four school-age kids because the mother is in jail and the father is home passed out drunk on the couch, and Madeleine knows that a \$2 tip is a real sacrifice for that family. Other times the \$2 tips are from people who work for Garmin and can probably afford quite a bit more. The funniest are the engineers and finance people who carefully tip a certain percentage every time,

rather than rounding up to the nearest dollar. They aren't trying to be stingy. They are thinking about meeting an obligation, not making somebody's day.

Occasionally, Madeleine gets no tip at all, and it's usually the case that a teenager has been given \$20 by mom or dad and decides to pocket the change rather than leave a tip, or it's someone from another culture that just doesn't know you're supposed to tip.

Yesterday, Madeleine told us about a crusty, grumpy old guy who has been coming to Great Clips for something like 18 years. When Madeleine cuts his hair, he always says something rude about her purple hair, and he always leaves \$2. One day during their haircutting chatter, she mentioned the house she and her husband recently bought in North Kansas City, and this crusty, grumpy old guy squinted at her, and dug around in his wallet, and after a while, managed to fish out a third dollar. And because she knows him, Madeleine understood what a big deal that was.

I say all of that because we are made in the image of God, the most generous giver there is. We are created to be generous. We are our best and truest selves when we give abundantly. And as any hair stylist, server, tour guide or housecleaner will tell you, every gift matters. But just as developing excellence in other areas of life requires an honest evaluation of where we stand, we need to regularly ask ourselves some pointed questions if we want to be excellent in our giving.

For example, in 2 Corinthians Paul mentions the Macedonian churches who voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means. He stresses that people should give according to what they have, not according to what they don't have. He talks about giving with eagerness and out of abundant joy. I interpret this to mean that Paul doesn't want to see anybody

borrowing money in order to give, or putting themselves in a situation where they give generously to church but have to use a credit card to pay for groceries.

At the same time, if the amount we pledge to our church doesn't challenge us a little bit, we're probably not giving with excellence. If the number on our pledge cards is less than we spend on a year's worth of golf, or our vacations, we're probably not giving with excellence. And here's the thing—it's really not that much fun to give when we're not giving generously. Somehow there's just a lot more joy in giving a gift that requires some sacrifice than there is in giving gifts where we really don't miss the money. I think I can hear God saying, "Test me."

As we consider our pledges for 2019, I ask us to ask these questions: what does God think of my giving? Am I giving with excellence? Am I giving my very best? If not, why? If everyone else gave like me, what could this congregation do?

Above all, as you reflect, please PRAY. [I read a neat story this week about a man who had decided on his own to give \$10,000 to project at his church. That is a very nice gift, but he was capable of more. The leaders of the church invited people to pray about their gifts, so the man started praying in the shower each morning. After a while, his wife threatened to turn off the hot water because after all that prayer he ended up giving \$50,000 instead of ten. We don't all have that ability, but maybe some of us will be led to pledge a percentage of income if we've not done that before, or maybe some of us will realize we can give more with more joy than we ever thought possible.] And notice—the grace of God wasn't that God suddenly provided a ton of material resources to the churches of Macedonia. The grace of God was that during a terrible time, the people overflowed with generosity, so much so that they begged for the privilege of giving. To have that attitude flowing in this church would be the best gift of all.

