

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** 2 Corinthians 9:6-9

**SERMON SERIES:** Challenging Needs, Expanding Opportunities

**SERMON TITLE:** Meeting Needs by Making Commitments

I may be wrong, but my instincts tell me that this is a pivotal day in the life of our church. On this Commitment Sunday, we face challenging financial needs that have been shaped by our past: Over the last 4 years, our membership has grown 19%; our average worship attendance has increased 9%; and yet in 2010, the identifiable income that forms the foundation of our operating budget from year to year, is nearly 3% less than it was in 2007, my first full year at this church as one of your pastors.

To meet the expanding opportunities for mission and ministry in this growing community in 2011, we are looking to the financial commitments we receive today and over the next two weeks, to cover a projected 4% increase in the 2011 budget, plus make-up \$60,000 of 2010 income from a one-time gift that will no longer be available in 2011. To meet this challenge, our 2011 income needs to increase by \$86,776.

Does this sound like an impossible challenge to meet? Well, it does seem a daunting challenge, but not an impossible one. With God, all things are possible; and God is at work here. In 2007, this congregation raised in excess of \$90,000 in 1 ½ weeks to avoid drastic cuts to staff and ministries. We've made commitments to purchase land and build buildings to enable future growth. And God has blessed us with one-time gifts of extravagant generosity to help our annual church budget through difficult times. In other words, in the strength of God's Spirit, we've done it before, and we can do it again!

So on a day such as this, let's turn again to Paul for encouragement and counsel. Our scripture reading this morning is from his second letter to the church at Corinth, chapter 9, verses 6-9. Paul is attempting to raise funds for an offering he's collecting

from the churches he founded to support the poor in the church at Jerusalem. The Corinthians have made a commitment to the offering but over time, their enthusiasm has waned. So Paul writes them a letter to spur them on. Listen to the word of God.

### **SCRIPTURE READING.**

One of the things I find interesting about Paul's approach to fund-raising is his combination of bold challenges that seek to prod his people to increased generosity, with a realistic attitude that recognizes that people will give what they've made up their minds to give. He does encourage them to give without reluctance or out of a sense of compulsion. He encourages them to give cheerfully—because *God loves a cheerful giver*. The phrase might also be translated *a hilarious giver*!

Listen again to the challenge Paul places before the Corinthians: *The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully*. Is there any doubt here which course of action Paul is recommending to the Corinthian Christians? I don't think so. Paul is encouraging the Corinthians—he's exhorting them—to sow bountifully so that they may reap a bountiful harvest. Paul wants this offering to be successful—he wants the Corinthians to give generously—so he uses this agricultural image to spur the Corinthians on! After all, what wise farmer expects to sow sparingly and then reap a bountiful harvest? It doesn't work that way. If you sow sparingly, you reap sparingly—and who wants to do that?

But here's the deal: Today, we get to decide what we will do. If we sow sparingly through our commitments to give in 2011, we can expect to reap sparingly. This could potentially mean cuts in staff, additional cuts to ministry and mission, and a diminished capacity to make an impact in our community and the world for the sake of

the gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, if we sow bountifully, we can expect a bountiful harvest. We can anticipate an increased capacity to address the expanding opportunities for ministry and mission in this community and around the world. And today, we get to decide what we will do!

But let's be realistic: Is it guaranteed that we will meet the challenging financial needs we face? No. All that we know for sure is that we're going to give what we've made up our minds to give. Will that be enough to meet our needs? I don't know.

But there are several things I'm certain of: No one in this congregation is compelled to give a thing. We're left to make up our own minds about these matters. So there is no need to give from compulsion.

And there's no need to be reluctant in our giving. It seems to me that giving for a good work, no matter the amount, has its source in the Spirit of God. Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit. So why would any of us be reluctant to give—no matter the amount—if that giving comes from our connection and cooperation with the Spirit of God?

And besides, Paul reassures the Corinthians—and each of us—that whatever we give, we don't have to fear being without for God will provide us with every blessing in abundance. This means that we will always have enough of everything so that our capacity to give—to *share abundantly in every good work*—will not be diminished.

Now it seems to me that these are the reasons for hilarious giving—for joyful giving—no matter how large or how small the gift. And I suspect that God loves a cheerful giver because God is a cheerful giver. Can't you just imagine God laughing in joy at the creation of the universe? Can't you just imagine the divine delight when God

breathed into us the breath of life? Can't you just imagine God celebrating the birth of Jesus with unspeakable joy? Can't you just imagine how much fun God must have had in giving the gift of the Holy Spirit? I pray that all of us will be infused with such joy each and every time we give!

So that's enough from me. We know the challenging needs we face, and the expanding opportunities that are before us. We've received encouragement and counsel from Paul. Now we get to decide; we get to make up our minds as to how much we intend to give in 2011. We have the opportunity this morning to make a commitment and to offer these commitments as an act of worship.

So I invite you into a period prayer. I invite you to fill out a commitment card—not reluctantly or under compulsion, but cheerfully—and bring then card to the altar rail and leave it as an offering to God. Feel free to kneel here and be in prayer as you make this offering. May God be with us.