

## **Together: We Give 2 Corinthians 9:6-12**

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I want to tell you a little story about our life together as a church. Last Saturday morning, I glanced out my kitchen window as I was making coffee, and there, standing in the middle of the Green Wood parking lot, was a single man with his wheelbarrow and shovel. At first I was perplexed. Who was this guy and what was he doing in the middle of the Green Wood parking lot at 8:15 on a Saturday morning? It was cold out, and he was all bundled up so I couldn't tell if I knew him. I was just trying to decide what to do when I remembered - oh right, the Trustees are hosting a work day to fill potholes in the parking lot before winter begins. And that thought, of course, warmed my heart.

But then I realized, there's only one person out there and my heart sank. We had expected at least a few folks would come and help. Maybe this person had just arrived early? Maybe others would still show up? I said a quick prayer for God's spirit to blow up at least a couple more people so this one lonely guy wouldn't leave discouraged. I decided I would drink my coffee and then check to see if anyone else had arrived. Not long after, I got a text from Shonagh saying, "I'm hanging out here at Green Wood with a bunch of guys working on the parking lot". I looked out the window and sure enough there were now eight men - some Green Wood regulars, some downtown regulars - hard at work with shovels and gravel and the camaraderie of people who come together to get a job done. Within a couple of hours, the parking lot was patched! Together, we can do great things!

Here is another story. Between the spring and fall, for various reasons, our children's ministry staff members each resigned, and we were faced with the question of how to continue to connect with children and families when kids were not yet vaccinated. One idea was to have a special outdoor event, a fall family fun fest that the children's ministry staff had put on the calendar but not yet planned. I was sure that this was something that we, as a congregation, could do for our families. I called for volunteers to hand out treats, build a campfire, oversee games, tell stories, organize s'more supplies, and people of all ages jumped in to help. Shonagh suggested we also open the event to neighborhood kids. In the end, it was a great multigenerational event that brought together families who hadn't seen each other in months as well as visitors from the neighborhood. Together, we can do great things!

These kinds of stories happen in our church all the time. A group signs up to serve meals at Alpha House. We all buy gifts for the giving tree. Youth serve at Hope Clinic. A group of volunteers takes Advent boxes to every household in the church. Over time, we gather enough donations of money and time to build a school in Kenya. We donate spices and cookware. A bunch of middle-aged guys gather on a cold November Saturday to fill potholes in the parking lot. And on and on. Because, together we can do great things!

For the last few weeks, we have been talking about what it means to be in community together as a church here at FUMC. We are, as Rev. Shonagh put it last week, doing life together. Through this sermon series, we have explored growing together, loving together, and last week, welcoming together.

Now we have arrived at the weekend before Thanksgiving, the weekend when, traditionally, we dedicate our financial giving commitments for the coming year to God. So, naturally, our theme for today is Together: We Give. Just as those eight men out on a chilly November morning were giving their time to repairing the parking lot, we are all called to give to the church with our time, talents, and money. And, of course, when we give of those things together, our church community can do so much more to embody and to grow the kingdom of God.

Yet, giving not only transforms the world and those to whom we give, when we give, God also transforms us. That is the message at the heart of our scripture passage for today in which Paul is again addressing the church he founded in Corinth. You may remember that a couple of weeks ago, I told you that the Corinthians were a rebellious bunch and there was a lot of in-fighting among them. By the time Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians, things had calmed down, and Paul's intent was to deepen their understanding of the Christian path including the transformative power of giving. At the time, Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were suffering from a great famine. Paul encourages the Corinthians to not only give to support their own church but also to help their siblings in Christ in Jerusalem.

Giving, for Christ-followers, has two faces. Just as God has made us stewards of the earth, God has made us stewards of God's church. As we talked about in the Creation Care sermon series, a steward is one who cares for, nurtures, watches over, and protects the belongings of another in the name of the owner. We take care of First United Methodist Church in God's name so that have this place where we can grow and love and welcome and give together.

Yet, giving is not only about caring for our church but for the world. God does God's good work through us. The work of healing the broken, lifting up the marginalized, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger. That is God's kin-dom work, and the purpose for which God created the church in the first place.

What Paul wants us to understand is how giving is a spiritual act. He uses a harvest metaphor to make a few important points, saying the more we give, or the more seeds we plant, the greater the impact of our gifts. When we give, our hearts are softened to understand the needs and challenges of others. When we give, we inspire others to give and so the harvest is greater. When we give, we learn to trust God that there is enough - enough love, food, money, clean water - and we will be okay if we give some away. And when we give, we grow in humility and willingness to accept gifts from others. Paul says Christians should not give because they feel pressured to. Rather, God celebrates when we give from our hearts, when we give because we feel compelled to create a better world.

When we give generously from our hearts, giving leads us to thanksgiving, which is why we dedicate our annual pledges on this particular weekend. The more we give of ourselves, our time, our energy, and our resources, the more we realize how blessed we are and how much we have to be grateful for.

Ultimately, giving is an act of hope - an investment in hope. We give to the church because we believe in raising thoughtful, moral kids, and we believe that good is stronger than evil, and we believe in the power of love, and we believe that all of God's children should have

enough to eat, shelter, a chance to not just survive but to thrive, and a community that welcomes them unconditionally.

So, yes, today I am asking for your financial gifts to support FUMC for another year. You have been incredibly generous during the pandemic, and our church is in a strong financial position right now because of that. Thank you! Your gifts are helping to build the kingdom of God!

But, let's get back to those eight guys in the parking lot for a minute because I want to remind all of us that giving takes many forms, and the transformation God works in you and in the world when you give isn't limited to when you give money. Transformation happens when you give of your time, your love, the work of your hands, the smile on your face. Transformation happens when you listen to a member of your small group share a challenge they are facing, when you reach out to a newcomer in our church, when you read a story to children, when you go on a mission trip, when you work with others in the church to keep us healthy and safe and vital. Transformation happens when you give of yourself.

So, today, as you prayerfully consider your financial gift to the church for the coming year, I also encourage you to think of how you might give of your time, your skills, your strengths. There are always so many ways to be a part of what is happening here, and they change fairly often. Here are a few examples of ministry needs we have right now at FUMC.

We're looking for people who are willing to be ushers or greeters. Ushers welcome people to worship, help them to get oriented to the sanctuary, offer them a bulletin, and generally oversee the operations of the worship service. Greeters keep an eye open for newcomers and make a point of saying hello so they feel comfortable and welcome. If you're interested in ushering, see Lee Featheringham or Carole DeHart, and if you're interested in greeting, see Helen Ryan.

We are also looking for people who will help us with ministering to children. Would you be willing to keep an eye on children in the downtown church playground on Sunday morning so their parents can worship without worrying about their kids' safety? Would you be willing to record yourself reading a story or presenting a message for children that we could put on our YouTube channel? Or perhaps you could help plan the next outdoor event for children and families. If you feel God nudging you toward doing any of those, contact me, Spring Jackson, or Kathy Macdonald.

Another way to give of yourself is to be a small group leader. Debbie Houghton, our Director of Adult Faith Formation, is actively recruiting small group leaders to start in January. You can choose what you'd like your group to focus on, and Debbie will provide you with training. Small groups are one of the most powerful ways we can grow in faith together! So many people have commented on how meaningful their small group experience has been.

We're also looking for people who would like to help us prepare for live-streaming each week and learn how to do live-streaming so they can be part of our tech team. If that interests you, see me or Oliver Kripfgans or Bill Houghton. Soon, we'll need people to learn how to livestream from Green Wood as well.

Finally, we are always looking for members for our administrative committees. These include our Leadership Council, which oversees all of church life, the finance committee which cares for our budget and finances, our board of trustees which care for our buildings, our staff-parish relations committee which is the HR team for the church, and our committee on lay leadership which recruits leaders and nurtures leader development. Contact me or Shonagh.

God is calling you and me and all of us - together - to invest in hope. To put our time, our skills, and our money toward God's vision of a safe and just and loving and peace-filled world. We can do the work of healing and justice in partnership with God - and, well, together we can do great things!

May it be so. Amen.