

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“What Difference do I make with My Giving?”

Psalm 121
Luke 12: 22 – 34

November 9, 2014

Well, it’s November 9th and our annual stewardship campaign is just around the corner. So you know that this morning I’m going to preach about... **money!** Now, just hold on a minute! Relax! Don’t panic! It’s going to be okay! I promise that there is not the tiniest little bit of dunning, brow-beating, nagging, begging, or guilt-tripping in this entire sermon! I’m not going to try to embarrass you, or shame you, or criticize you, or reprimand you. I’m not even going to tell you that, if you send us a check, God will give you whatever you want!

Nope, we’re just going to spend a few minutes calmly looking at the straight biblical dope about what our money is, why our money matters, and how what we **do** with our money can make a big difference here (sanctuary)... and also, here (heart). So, there’s no need to try to sneak out the back door before I get started! Besides, the ushers have locked all the doors, and they’re not gettin’ **unlocked** ‘til this sermon is over! So just sit tight, and pay attention!

Now, before we get started, I want to offer a brief disclaimer... so we can hopefully avoid some misunderstandings and distractions which often crop up whenever we talk about money at church. First, I want to acknowledge, right up front, that we do have members of our church family who are on fixed incomes, or who have limited incomes, and who are **right now** already doing the best that they can with their financial support of the church.

So, if that’s **you**, and you’re already doing the best you can... know that this sermon is **not** saying to you: *“You should be doing better! You’re not doing enough!”* No, what I’m saying to you is: *“Your support of our church family is deeply appreciated; and your financial gifts, no matter how large or small they may be, are making a great difference for good in our congregation.”*

Second, I also want to acknowledge, right up front, that we do have members of our church family who, no matter the level of their financial support... also give generously of their time and talent in the service of our congregation. In fact, without the skill, wisdom, creativity, passion, dedication, and effort of all our volunteers, every aspect of our church’s ministry would be greatly diminished: from our music program, to our Sunday school, to our maintenance of the building, to our mission work, to our church administration, to every other thing we do!

So, if that’s **you**, and you’re graciously giving of your time and talent to make our church **go**... know that this sermon is **not** saying to you: *“Your gifts of time and talent don’t matter... all we care about is your money!”* No, what I’m saying to you is: *“Your gifts to our church family of time, talent, energy, and effort are all deeply appreciated; and without those gifts, we simply wouldn’t be able to exist as a congregation.”*

Okay, so, keeping that disclaimer in the back of our minds, let’s move on and talk for a few minutes about money, and what it means to the life of our church, and to the life of our personal faith. And, to use an image that I’ve used before, what I want us to do is to think of our financial

support of the church as a kind of “three tiered pyramid.” A pyramid... with three distinct levels: the bottom, or base; the middle, or body; and the pointy top. And each of those three levels of the pyramid represent something that happens, something that we accomplish... when we give our money to the church. You with me? Three levels... three things we accomplish by giving our money to the church.

Now, the first level is the *bottom*... the *base* of the pyramid. And that represents the very mundane, earthbound, day-to-day expenses which are part and parcel of having a church. On this level, our giving is all about “paying the bills;” and “balancing the budget;” and “keeping the doors open;” and “keeping the lights on.”

Which is a very unglamorous, inglorious, and uninspiring dimension of our giving-money-to-the-church. But, of course, it’s an absolutely essential, necessary, and *important* dimension of our giving-money-to-the-church. Because, as a human institution, which operates in the real world of accounts payable, and bills due, and staff salaries, and leaking roofs... the church needs *money*, and plenty of it, simply to exist. On that very human, nuts-and-bolts, bottom of the pyramid level... the church is no different than any other business, or organization, or even our own households; which require money in order to function.

So, on this level, when we give our money to the church, we are, in fact, taking care of this beautiful, historic building. We’re providing an Education Wing for our children to learn about Jesus, and what it means to live as a Christian disciple. We’re cutting the grass, and pruning the shrubs, and maintaining a wonderful house for the pastor and his family to live in. We’re paying for insurance; we’re paying for utilities; we’re paying for curriculum; we’re paying to make sure that our beautiful stained glass doesn’t get blown all over the sanctuary, the next time a hurricane makes landfall on Long Island.

We accomplish all that, when we give our money to the church. And, as I said, that’s all very important. But, friends, we cannot, and we *must not*, allow our understanding of our financial support of the church to stop *there*... at that lowest level of the pyramid. Because, if we do, that’s when *our giving itself* is going to feel like a “business.” That’s when our support of the church is going to feel like a “duty,” like an “obligation,” like “paying my dues” and “doing my fair share.”

And with that attitude, that mindset... our giving is going to feel more like a “job that we *have* to do;” and less like a “privilege to do something that we *want* to do.” It’s going to feel more like an onerous burden to keep the *institution* alive... and less like a joyous opportunity to keep the message of the *gospel* alive. And nothing will kill the spirit of generosity quicker than that... which is where the *second* level of the pyramid comes in. And that level represents *what we make possible*, through all that mundane, day-to-day, paying of bills and keeping the place from falling down on itself.

And what we make possible is: changed lives. Hearts and minds that are open to Jesus and the love which He offers. Comfort and hope to people who are sick, or grieving, or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges and pressures of life. We give our money to keep this place functioning; but we don’t keep the place functioning *just* for the sake of having a really cool and historical building on the corner of Main Street and Meeting House Lane. No, we keep the place functioning so that what *happens* here, *can happen here!*

We keep the place functioning so that we can *do what we do...* and what we are doing is proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, in word and deed, to a world in desperate need of an *anchor*

of hope, and meaning, and purpose. We are proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ so that *we, ourselves*, can hold on to that anchor... when our *own* faith and hope are put to the test. We are announcing God's Truth to a culture that's been mesmerized by lies and distortions as to what life is really all about... and which is searching for some answers, to the really big questions of life.

We are, as the mission statement on the front of your bulletin says, "*A welcoming beacon of light that inspires people of all ages to seek a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.*" *That's* who we are... and that's what we do. And it's our giving that makes it all possible.

Back when we were trying to get our now-defunct cell antenna project off the ground, you may recall that there was abundant hand-wringing and gnashing of teeth by all the people in the village who were so worried about our poor, "iconic," clock tower. I mean, you could sit in on village meetings, and read the letters in the Press, and assorted articles in every other newspaper on Long Island... and you would think that the only reason First Presbyterian Church exists, is to keep that beautiful landmark pristinely standing in the middle of town!

Well, I love our clock tower as much as anyone... may it stand for another 375 years. But, if somebody thinks that that clock tower has anything to do with the mission and ministry of this church family... they need to stop writing letters, and stop going to meetings, and *start* coming to church! And they will learn very quickly that, while we're proud of our beautiful clock tower, we are *here* to serve the Lord! We are *here* to make disciples! We are *here* to proclaim the gospel, and to be about the business of the Kingdom of God! And it's *that* mission that we accomplish, in the middle of the pyramid... when we give our money to the church.

So, this past summer we had a marvelous Vacation Bible School, which proclaimed to our children the love that Jesus has for each and every one of them; and that proclamation continues, as we speak, in our wonderful Sunday school. That's your giving, making a difference for Christ. Our Youth Director, Kelly D'Angelo, is meeting every week with the young people of our congregation, helping them to find their place in God's world, and their place in our church family; that's your giving, making a difference for Christ.

For more than a year now, upwards of twenty of our older members have been enjoying a great time of weekly fellowship at the "Meals on Wings" dinner in our church Parlor; that's your giving, making a difference for Christ. Last night we began our eleventh year of sheltering homeless members of our community, through our Maureen's Haven program; that's your giving, making a difference for Christ. Every Sunday morning we're here in this beautiful sanctuary, offering prayer and praise to God, and having our spirits lifted by wonderful music and the message of Scripture; that's your giving, making a difference for Christ.

Fourth graders preparing for their First Communion; eighth graders preparing for their Confirmation; a Board of Deacons and a Mission Council working to meet the needs of others, in our community and beyond; a church family committed to serving God with heart, mind, and body; that's *your* giving, making a difference for Christ. And I could go on and on. All of which makes it crystal clear that, when we give our money to the church, it's not just to keep the doors open; it's to make possible what happens *inside* those doors! And *that* is downright life-changing!

And that leads us to the very top level of our pyramid... and the third, and final, thing that we accomplish by giving our money to the church. And what our giving accomplishes at this level, is to strengthen our faith... and deepen our *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ. In other words,

when we give, we don't just pay the bills... and we don't just enable the church's ministry; **when we give, we... grow... spiritually.**

And how does that happen? Well, we got a beautiful explanation in our gospel lesson today, from Luke. In our text, Jesus was expanding with His disciples on some of His earlier teachings and parables... by telling them that their true hope doesn't lie with the things of this world, the possessions of this life. In essence, Jesus was saying,

"Sure, we have needs in this life... you gotta eat, you gotta dress yourself, you gotta live. Your Heavenly Father understands all that, and He's promised to provide for you, just as He provides for everything in His creation. But your ultimate hope, that rock-solid joy and peace that can't be taken from you, is never going to be found here and now... in the things of this world which are so fragile, and temporary, and unpredictable.

"It's only in God's Kingdom that that sure, unshakable, hope and joy and peace can be found; and you will find it, if you seek it... and set your hearts on it. So, don't worry so much about the things of this life; and pay more attention to the things of the life to come. Do that, and you will have a lasting treasure... the kind of treasure that only God can give!"

Now, what does all that have to do with giving the church our money, and growing in our faith? Well, just this: when we give away our money, which is **valuable** to us, it is a tangible, meaningful, expression of our trust in God's promise to take care of us. When we give away our money, for which we have **labored** long and hard, it is a concrete, real-life, statement that our relationship with Almighty God is more than just words, or talk, or a matter of what we believe. It's about who we **are**, and what we **stand** for. When we give away our money, which we are free to do with **whatever** we want, it is an undeniable proclamation that, along with Joshua, at the time of the Exodus, **we** say: *"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!"*

Now, you put those things together: trusting God's providence, making our faith more than just words and beliefs, vowing to serve the Lord no matter what... put all that together, and you have the recipe for: **spiritual growth!** A stronger and more meaningful faith! A life with God that's truly life-changing! The blessed assurance that our lives **matter**... to the loving Lord who made us, and who's promised to keep us in His care forever!

So, that's what we accomplish, with our financial support of our church family. We pay the bills and keep the doors open. We enable life changing ministry that will shape hearts and minds for Christ. And we point ourselves in the direction of our true treasure... the one which only God can give. And finding that treasure, our life with the Lord, and our life with each other, will never be the same!

May we keep these truths in mind, as we make our financial commitment to the church for 2015. May we keep these truths in mind, all the days of our life! In the name of the father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!