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Giving .vs. Investing

2 Samuel 24:18-25

Mark 10:35-45

2 Samuel Intro: Near the end of David's reign as the King of Israel, Scripture recalls David as a man capable of great faithfulness and great sin. Because of his faithfulness, the nation has been united and is strong. But, also here – in 2 Samuel - near the end of David's life the nation is suffering under the consequences of David's sin. That might seem unfair, until we remember that this is how things always work. Nations both benefit from the wisdom and faithfulness of their leaders, and they suffer the consequences of their sin and lack of faithfulness. Here in 2 Samuel the people are suffering from an illness and David realizes that some of the people's suffering is due to his own Sin, and just before the passage we read, David confesses his Sin and claims responsibility – quite a remarkable thing for a leader to do. David says to God, "I alone have sinned, and . . . have done wickedly; but these sheep (his people), what have they done? Let your hand I pray, be against me and against my father's house." And then a Prophet, named Gad, comes to tell David to go and worship God in a particular place. Tradition has it that the particular spot David purchases in this passage – the threshing floor that belonged to Araunah – in order to worship God became the site of the Jerusalem Temple under David's son, Solomon.

On October 31, 1571 in the small town of Wittenburg, Germany, a Roman Catholic Priest, named Martin Luther, mailed a list of 95 theses or propositions to his Archbishop, that he wanted to discuss with the leadership of the church. In the practice of the day he also posted those discussion points on the door of his parish church. It was a list of theological affirmations that described how Luther disagreed with the teaching and the practice of the Roman Church in that day. And among the disagreements were Luther's deep discomfort with the practice of buying indulgences. In the Roman Church of the day, Pope Leo X was busy building the Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome. To do that he had to have a significant plan to raise money for the building campaign. So, one of the practices of the day was to go throughout the country and have priests sell indulgences. An Indulgence was an assurance from the church that if you gave money you could shorten the time you – or someone you loved – spent in purgatory and suffered for your/their sins. It was a very effective fund raising technique – one of many – in which faithful Christians gave money in exchange for peace of mind about the afterlife. In this way the Church hierarchy was assured of a steady stream on income to complete their building campaign. It was an "investment strategy" – if you will – a very effective way to raise money.

The problem was – according to Martin Luther – that it promised something that was not within the power of the church to give or to promise, and the practice also contradicted the belief that Christians are saved by Grace through Faith and not by our ability to earn or to purchase salvation.

It seems easy, from this historical distance, to see that Martin Luther was right on this point. And his 95 Discussion Points proved to be the flash point for a smoldering discontent that was present all over Western Europe and became one of the events by which we mark the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Today is both Reformation Sunday and Stewardship Dedication Sunday. And it is a logical and great time to talk about the difference between Giving and Investing.

Human beings are wired for investing. We -rightfully so – want to support causes and events that have a worthwhile outcome. We want to give our money, time and support to things that are effective and successful and well managed. That is a good instinct. What God has given to us we are to invest in wise and faithful ways. And we are rightfully happy when our investments result in a successful outcome. This is true on every level. We invest in our children's education with the expectation that it will result in both a higher quality of life and a job that will enable them to be financially independent. We give money to charities with the expectation that our gifts will feed more hungry people or provide compassionate care for animals. We like to give to things that appear successful. Clemson University has experienced a surge in both student applications and donor gifts since winning the College Football National Championship. Investing is an important way we live out our Christian Faith. But, investing also has dangers. We like to give in ways that bring security and success and recognition to us. We are motivated to give when we can have control over the outcomes, or when our name can be put on something public. Investing money or time comes with an expectation that we will GET something back. If I give you money or time, then you will give me some “return on my investment.”

In essence, what James and John are doing, in Mark's gospel story, is investing in the Kingdom of God. James and John approach Jesus to ask for a return on their investment of time, energy, support and loyalty. They don't say it quite in this way, but we recognize (at a deep level) what James and John are doing. They approach Jesus and ask that he reward their loyalty, service and investment in his' work by rewarding them with high profile, powerful positions in the Kingdom of which Jesus had been speaking. They want a return on their investment.

The other Disciples get angry. But, I bet that they are mad because they didn't think of doing that first. They don't want James and John ahead of them in the dividend line. But what they all miss is that what Jesus is asking for is not an investment. What Jesus is calling them and us to do is to GIVE themselves completely and without the promise of a reward to the work of God in the world.

There is a fundamental difference between INVESTING and GIVING. Giving responds to a need often without even being asked. Giving does not require control over the outcomes. Giving

does not expect to have recognition or accolades in return. Giving happens when we remember how God and others have been generous with us and is motivated by gratitude and joy. Giving is a one step process. I give. Investment has two parts: I give and then I get.

One other key mark of giving is that it actually costs us to do it. Investments provide a return. Giving is just that – a one-way transaction. King David claimed his own Sin and admitted that it had cost him much suffering, and that his sin was actually also causing innocent people to suffer. And when he admitted this Sin and its related suffering, he is instructed to go and offer worship to God on a particular spot. But when he arrives on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite to give God worship, Araunah tries to give David both the land and the animals and even the wood for free. But David, that most real and human being, says a remarkable thing. He acknowledges Araunah's attempt to give him the land, but he says that he will not and cannot offer to God that which cost him nothing. David has come to give, and giving means that it costs us something. His worship is not to be transactional. David comes – with all of his faults – to GIVE God worship.

Investing is a good and important thing. Don't misunderstand me. We are all to be in the practice of investing what God has given to us. We are responsible to make sure that we are wise stewards of what we have and that we support the organizations and causes that work in the world for God's priorities. And we are right to hold those organizations and people accountable. We should be informed about how well charitable organizations manage their money, and we should demand financial accountability from this Church and from any organization to which we entrust time or money. We are right to be outraged when our tax dollars – our investment in our country – are mismanaged or used wastefully. But we must also watch ourselves that we don't turn our investments into tools to serve ourselves. Spiritually it is very easy to become James and John. We want our investments to serve us, to make us look good, to benefit us. We want to sit at Jesus' right hand and be recognized for our faithful service. We want to feel good about our congregation and we want to see a significant return on our investment.

All of that is very human – and as such it can be both good and bad. This church and all charitable institutions do a lot inviting people to invest in them. I am never ashamed to ask for your investment. Our youth group is asking that you invest in them through their fire fly fundraising drive right now. They ask that you give them money and in exchange you will get the satisfaction of BOTH having needed cleaning chores done around the church and helping to send our youth to Conferences where they live out and learn more about their faith. That seems to me to be a good investment.

But, that is very different from GIVING. And I am convinced that it is GIVING that changes us much more and much faster than Investing. When we give – in ways that cost us and in ways that express a humble generosity – we are doing something entirely different from investing. When we give, we model ourselves on Christ. When we give we grow in our capacity to be generous (one of the values we focused on in our Officers Retreat in September). When we give we do so without expectation of return, in humility and obedience. We give because Christ

gave – his very life for us. The Good News of the Gospel is that Christ came into the world to GIVE Life – not death, and to GIVE love – not hate. After the horrible events of this last week – the mailing of pipe bombs to political foes and the murders motivated by race and religion – I don't even really know what to say. I am not wise enough to know what to say that will make sense of such evil. But this I do know, that perhaps the most radical and helpful thing we can do is to GIVE Love – even in the face of hate. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. And hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. When we give love – even in the fact of hate - we live as Christ lived and GIVE as Christ gave. Investing is good. But, giving is transformational. Both giving and investing can change the world (a good thing). But only giving can change us (a better thing)!

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther rightly challenged an Investment Drive theology gone awry. In that day, the Church was promising returns on investments that were not theirs to give. If I gave money, the church would promise me that I would get into the Kingdom of God sooner. Martin Luther rightly said – that gift – the Kingdom of God- belongs to God alone to give. And God is remarkably, wonderfully generous and gives out of God's own nature of Grace and Generosity and Love. We do not gain access to God by investing in the Kingdom of God.

But when we give ourselves completely and freely to God's purpose – Scripture says that God comes to us and claims us. Giving – ourselves and all that we have – is the only way to know God – the only way to access the Kingdom of God. It will cost us. Giving always does. But it is the model of faithful living – a life of generous and reckless giving - that Christ gives us. Investing is good. Giving is the only way to the life that God intends for us to live.

Today we bring our financial pledges for the work of this congregation in 2019. I hope that if you did not come prepared to make a pledge to the work of this congregation that you will consider doing so. The Session of this congregation has worked hard to be wise stewards of the money you entrust to our use. We do try to produce a faithful return. We do try to use the time and energy that we all give to change the world for the purposes of Christ.

But today, I don't invite you to invest in the future of Forest Lake Presbyterian Church. I invite you to give – our time, our money and our hearts. That is what changes us – when we give what we have and what we are to Christ. Give.