

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Can We Count You In?

Sunday, September 15

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

Have you heard the one about the \$1 bill that was talking to the \$20 bill? The \$1 bill said to the \$20 bill, "You know, I haven't seen you around in a while. Where you been?" And the \$20 said, "Oh, you won't believe where I've been. I was on a cruise liner. Then I found myself in a big baseball stadium. And then I even went to Disney world. Where have you been? What about you?" And the \$1 replied, "You know, same old, same old. Church, church, church, church, church."

That'll preach, baby. And we laugh because it's true. Amen. Yeah. Can I get a witness? Today I'm going to be talking about the subject of our stewardship campaign, Count Me In. And as you can see, I've got my flair today, my required nine pieces of flair. Somebody will get that reference. It looks good. I may add to them. And we start a campaign today and we're excited about that and I've got great news. We've got all the money we need to cover this campaign, because it's going to come from your pockets. Amen.

We're excited about it. This is going to be a great campaign because we have a great church and we want to be our best.

Now first, let me say a word to those of you who are guests and visitors today. I'm sure you wandered into church today and you were hoping and praying for a sermon about money, right? No I know some of you were like, "Great. The first time I come here and the preacher's preaching about money." Well, before you leave, hold on. Before you go to lunch early, let me say this to you. You are off the hook. You have no obligation whatsoever. In fact, you are our guest and we hope you feel the warmth and the grace and the strength of this church. In fact, as you overhear my message on stewardship today, I hope you say to yourself, "Now, that's a church I want to be a part of. That's a church I want to be invited in. That's a church I want to be involved in. Because that's a church that's proud of giving to the Lord. That's a church that's proud of giving all of its resources to be the best it can be for God." So if

your guest or visitor, don't worry, you're off the hook.

This message is aimed towards those who are committed to this church, those who have decided to commit their prayers and their presence and their gifts and their service and their witness to the church. This is a message about accountability. Now folks, as a preacher, I preach a balanced diet, okay? Some of my sermons are dessert and you always love those. Some of my sermons are carbohydrates, we all love those. Some of my sermons are protein and those are great. But sometimes you got to get your vegetables. We don't always like it, but we know they're good for us. And so today you're getting vegetables, okay? And hopefully as I preach it, I can put a little butter on it for you. But you're going to get your vegetables, okay?

And today I want to get to why we give and why we pledge. Because I imagine you hear all kinds of sermons that give the what and the who and the why and the how and all that stuff. But I bet you hear very few sermons that give you the why. Why in the heck do we give? Because if we don't know why, what's the point?

I mean, say you brought a visitor to church today and you took them out to lunch later and they saw you writing out a check or filling out a pledge card for the church and say they asked you, "Why do you do that? Why do you give your hard earned money to the church?" What would you say? What would be your response? Would it be meaningful? Well, today I'm going to give you a response. I'm going to tell you why. And after this sermon, after you hear why you should pledge and why you should give, many of you are going to pledge for the first time. In fact, some of you are going to up your pledge intent

So one of the main reasons why we give, one of the main reasons why we pledge, and hear me closely, because when the world is at its worst, the church needs to be at its best. As a preacher the last 25 years, when I get around to these kinds of stewardship campaigns, I

get moans and groans and emails and letters from people. And they say, "You're not going to preach about money, are you?". And I say, "You better believe it." Yes, you have a preacher here who's not afraid to talk about money. I say, you better believe it, because when the world is at its worst, the church needs to be at its best. And I don't know if you've seen the news lately, I don't know if you've picked up a paper lately, but I'll tell you it's a dark world. If there ever was a time the world needs the church, it is now. And how in the world can the church be at its best if it's not equipped with the right resources? We need to hear that. I mean folks,

Many folks have the wrong picture of the church. They do. Many folks think the church is like a Carnival cruise liner, just catering to everybody's whims and fancies and desires. And if somebody complains, they're pacified. If somebody has this need, well we just give it to him regardless. No, that is not the church of Jesus Christ. The church is more like a battleship battling evil and transforming this world. The church is more like a supply ship supplying the needy. The church is more like a medical aid ship healing the broken and saving the lost. People complain with money has mentioned from the pulpit, but I'll never apologize for it, because I feel privileged to be part of the church that you and I are all a part of, that needs my money and resources. Because we give, lives are transformed. When we don't give, the naked don't get clothed and the hungry don't get fed. When we don't give, missionaries don't have their resources to spread the gospel. And more locally when we don't give, our children and our youth don't have the resources to grow. When we don't give, we don't have this wonderful choir. When we don't give, the lights don't get turned on. It's as simple as that.

That's why in this campaign, each of the 27 Sundays. Just kidding. The next few Sundays we will be focused on specific ministries within the church that are concrete for you, so you can see what your money translates into. So you can see all the ministries you benefit from. All the ministries that help you grow. All the ministries that save you. It takes money to do that. This is the truth. We want to grow as a church. We always want to grow as a church, but you need to hear in order to grow, it takes more money.

Now the gospel is free. Oh yeah, I preach the gospel is a free gift from God and Jesus Christ. We don't pay membership dues. We don't have monthly minimums. It is free. Now, sometimes I wish I could send all of you a

monthly bill. That would be awesome. That would be the last campaign I would ever do, because that would go over like a lead balloon. But no, it's free.

But I'm not an economist. I'm not a financial expert, but I do know a few things. I can't call up the power company and say, "Listen, we're nice Christian people. Can you just forego the bill?" I can't go to our bank and say, "Listen, can we exchange prayers for our mortgage payments?" I can't call the utility company and say, "Listen, if I go over there and lead a Bible study for you, would you decrease the bill just a little bit?" No, that's not how it works. I mean, the Bishop doesn't come around once a week and give me a big check. Although now she might. And in staff meeting on Tuesday, an angel doesn't show up with wads of cash. We're the only bank account God has. We have to remember that. And I know. I know some of you don't like this kind of sermon. I get it. Aren't you glad I don't preach about it every Sunday? But again, it's your vegetables. We need to hear it. And I'll tell you this, in 25 years of ministry, I've learned this. Those churches who struggle financially, one of the big contributing factors to that are preachers who are too afraid to get up here and say what I'm saying

I'm also a biblical preacher. I like to preach the Bible. And we all want that, right? We love the Bible. We talk about we want to be biblical. We want to preach the Bible. Well, let me tell you this folks, if you want the Bible preached, you've got to have the whole Bible preached. The whole Bible, not just the part you like.

And let me tell you this, you may want to write this down. The Bible consists of four main doctrines: God, sin, salvation and stewardship. Everybody loves the first three. Many people don't like that fourth one, which is fascinating to me because universities and nonprofits and charities ask us for money all the time and we don't care. But yet some people have a problem with the church, and that's ironic. Because let me tell you this. Jesus preached more about money and stewardship than he did any other thing. You write that down. Jesus preached more about money and stewardship than he did prayer, than he did love, than he did salvation.

And the modern church finds itself at a time where this needs to be underscored. Because in this day and age of consumerism, the church unfortunately has to get in line with a long list of charities. I'll give to that charity. I'll

give to that charity. And listen, I give to charities. Charities are great. Yet the church is more than a charity. Way more. Because the church is the only institution in the world whose job it is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and make disciples. And if the church is not equipped to do it, no one else is going to do it.

This is why it's important that we tithe. Bible is very clear on this. We are to tithe 10% of our income. Now I know many of you can't do that. I understand that. Just give what you can. It's your commitment that matters. Whether you give a dollar a week or \$10 a week or \$100 a week, just give.

I practice what I preach, and you need to hear this. Brandy and I give over 10% of our income to the church, and we have forever. And the reason why I'm telling you that is I have no credibility whatsoever if I get hit up here and tell you to pledge and I don't do it. Just give what you can. Now, I'll tell you this. And I got permission from Brandy to say this, so I'm not in trouble, so don't worry.

But when Brandy and I first got married, I explained the idea of tithing because she really didn't grow up in the church. I mean she wasn't that active in the church. Boy, when she married me, she got more than she bargained for, didn't she? And when I explained the idea of the tithe, you should have seen her. She went white. What? But you talk to her today. She's a believer. She says, "I'll never go back because I experience the generosity, ecstasy of generosity." So why do we pledge? Why do we give? Because when the world is at its worst, the church needs to be at its best.

Here's another reason why we should give and why we should tithe. Because God wants us to put him first in our lives. Now I need some water. Preaching is hard work. Okay. That's what many people forget about tithing and stewardship. It's a spiritual discipline that puts God first. I recall making a hospital call in another church I served and I was fairly young in the ministry. And I'll never forget this particular guy I visited, because he was a very colorful character. He tried out just about every sin there was. All kinds of escapades. He was fairly active in the church, but he had a very colorful lifestyle outside the church.

I'll never forget when I walked in to see him, he was

dying. And shortly after I got there, the family left. People left. People have a tendency to do that when the pastor shows up. It's not very fun, but sometimes it happens. And I got in there. I held his hand and he was crying. And he looked at me and he said, "Pastor Charley, why didn't someone tell me sooner?" I said, "Tell you what sooner?" He said, "That I wasted my life." And then he said something I'll never forget. He said, "I've gone to church all my life and all the preacher did every single Sunday was just tell a bunch of cute stories. Never once did the preacher challenge me not to waste my life."

And I'll tell you at that moment in my ministry, I committed that I would be the kind of preacher that would boldly proclaim to not waste your life for God. So here is your notice. Don't waste it.

Shane Claiborne is a great Christian writer who I love. Theologian, really. And recently he has this quote, listen closely. "If we lose a generation of young people in the church, it won't be because we didn't entertain them. It will be because we did not dare them to do something meaningful in the name of the gospel in light of this dark world." And that is the truth, folks.

Young people today, millennials today, they don't care about being entertained. They don't care about entertainment in the church. They want to be challenged, to be fulfilled, to do something significant in this world for God. They want more than cute stories.

Jesus said, "Do you want to keep your life? You'll lose it." Many problems go away when we start to put God first in our lives. That's what seek ye first the kingdom of God means. And how do we do that? We give what's most important to us, and for many of us, it's money. You want to find fulfillment. You want to find joy, which all of us are hungering for. You start giving your life away. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "If you want to find your life, you have to lose it." That's not some Zen statement. That basically means this. You want life happiness, and joy? Start giving your life away because we were made to be generous. And our text for today, I don't know if you heard it. Oh, this is important. The apostle Paul is explaining a law that's just as important and real is the law of gravity. It's the law of increasing returns and this is what it is. Listen closely. The more we give for God, the more God gives to us. The more we give to God, the more God increases our

capacity to give. And that is the truth that you can take to the bank. That's why you see people in this church and they're all over the place, who are giving, who are serving. They always have enough to do it because God is always supplying for them something more to give. But it's the selfish ones that are most unhappy.

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Do you know what that means? Maybe you've often wondered, what did Jesus mean by that? This is what it means in plain English. You want to see somebody's devotion to God? Don't look at their prayer life. Don't look at how often they go to worship. Don't look at how often they read the Bible. Look at their bank account. Because Jesus knows the direct route to our hearts is often money. Jesus knows that unless we give up the lie of consumerism, our lives are going to decay. Jesus knows that if we have a saving plan and a spending plan, but no giving plan, we will waste our lives. It's just too important an issue.

We give and pledge because when the world is at its worst, the church needs to be at its best. We give and pledge because God wants us to put him first in our lives.

We also give and pledge because God has been generous to us. Isn't that the truth? I mean we love John 3:16, don't we? We love to quote it. For God so love the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. But what is the theme of that verse? God gave. God loved. God gave. God loved. God gave. God loved.

So that means God gave us the ultimate example of generosity. So we are never more like God than when we are generous. That's why the text says today for God loves a cheerful giver. As an aside, I'll say this. Yes, God loves a cheerful giver, but the church will take a grumpy one. I don't care. Get mad at me. Send me letters, send me emails, bawl me out. Just give, okay?

Most of you remember the story in the gospels of the time Jesus went into the marketplace and acted like

Chuck Norris. Turned over tables and messed up the money changers. And always remember that, when people say, "What Jesus do?" Remember he did that too. But what most miss in the gospel of Mark is what happened the day before. The day before Jesus did that, the text says, and it's interesting the Bible mentions this. The text says that Jesus wandered into the temple and just walked around. That's all it says. And I've often wondered when Jesus was wondering around in the temple, what was he thinking? What was going on in his mind?

What if Jesus wandered around throughout our church today? Our Sunday school classes. Our worship service. What would he think? What would he say? Imagine if Jesus was sitting next to you right now in worship, and you see his scars, and he turns to you and said, "I gave myself to you. I gave you my church. What are you going to do about it?"

You may know the story about the man who lived on earth in a big mansion, huge house in the best neighborhood, but he was stingy and selfish. He had a friend, though, that lived across the way in a little shack. Just a little house. But he was giving and loving. Well, they both died. They both went to heaven and they both met Saint Peter. And first Saint Peter guided the man with the small house and guided him to the biggest mansion in heaven. I mean, it was glorious. And he said, "You have your reward." But then Saint Peter guided the man who had a big house on earth through a dark alley, around a muddy corner into a dingy little shack. And he said, "What is this? I had all the resources in the world on earth. Why this?" And Saint Peter said, "Well, sir, we could only build your house on the materials you sent us."

What could heaven build for you on the materials that you have sent it or given to God?

We give, we pledge, because when the world is at its worst, the church needs to be at its best. We give and we pledge because God wants us to put him first. And we give and we pledge because, gosh, all mighty Lord has been generous to us. Can we count you in? 