

Sermon 10.23.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Stewardship Sunday 2 – *God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor does!*

Deuteronomy 15:7-11 | 1 Chronicles 29:10-16 | 2 Corinthians 9:6-13 | **Luke 9:10-17**

March 25, 1922

Early in September, the Misses Gorgia and Ruth Hoffsten, teachers in the High Schools of Philadelphia, but residing in Narberth, called up the office of the Synodical Superintendent of the Synod of East Penna. Rev. S.D. Daugherty, and asked whether it would be possible to have a Lutheran Church organized in the town of Narberth, inasmuch as there were a goodly number of Lutherans of whom they knew, living in said place.

By the end of December about 150 Lutherans had been found, and 85 had signed their names for Charter membership in the organization of a Lutheran Church.

The first public service was held December 18, 1922 in the YMCA building. Sixty-three persons were in attendance. The constitution was adopted and the name "Holy Trinity" decided upon; after which Holy Communion was administered. This was a very impressive, and at the same time enjoyable service.

These words come from the first entry in the handwritten journal of the founding members of our congregation. We re-discovered this journal last year when we were cleaning. It has all the details of how our congregation came into existence and what happened over our first few years. Even if you're not a person who appreciates history, I hope you can see that these words are valuable.

This journal tells the story of a group of people who believed that a Lutheran church had something to offer the town of Narberth. They were right. And we still do.

During this month, we're taking a few weeks to talk about *stewardship* in worship. Stewardship is how we care for and use all the things that God has blessed us with. And I share these words from our church's journal, because they remind us that out of all the things we have received from God, together as a community, we've been blessed with two very special

things: this congregation we call Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, and the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For 94 years this congregation has existed, and we have inherited it, all of us, together. For nearly 2000 years, the Gospel of Jesus has set people free and proclaimed God's love and care for everyone, and we have inherited that message, all of us, together. God has entrusted these things to us, and we are stewards of these precious gifts.

Over the past few weeks, I asked some people in our church to answer a few questions, including this one: "Do you think it's important to give financially to the church – and why or why not?" I suspect that some people had a hard time answering this question. One honest person said, "I guess I was just brought up to fill an envelope with money and put it into the plate. I really don't think twice or anything about it." Another admitted, "It is hard to articulate why I think it is important to give financially to the church. We give because we have always given. Our parents gave before us and our grandparents before that."

For a long time, most congregations have talked about giving to the church and about stewardship in some really poor ways, ways that have made people feel guilt or inadequacy or pressure. People have been told to give so that the church as an institution can continue. But if the best reason we can come up with for giving to the church is so that the church can simply continue to exist, then we need to dig a little deeper. We need to ask: *Why should the church continue to exist?*

And I think the answer to that is simple: our world needs the church. We have something to offer that no one else has. This is why 94 years ago people came together to create this congregation. Because you can give money to thousands of civic groups, you can donate to multitudes of charities and relief organizations, and that money makes a difference.

But the church is the only organization on this planet entrusted with the mission of sharing God's love and grace, with declaring the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ, with boldly proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom, the promise of eternal life, and the hope of a better future that is held in God's caring hands.

And when we give to the church, we're joining in that mission. One member of our church wrote, "Holy Trinity is where I renew my faith every week. It is a place of fellowship and gives me the opportunity to work with others in serving God. By giving financially to the church we are committing ourselves to do God's work. Every Sunday as our envelope is placed along with others into the offering plate it is a reminder of that commitment." Giving to the church is a way of supporting the work that God is doing on this earth, joining in, and committing ourselves, becoming part of that work and mission.

So why do people choose to give to our congregation? I got some great responses when I asked. On one hand there are practical reasons. One person – whose identity shouldn't be too hard to figure out – said that giving is important because "it pays my husband's salary." Another said, "You have to. Pragmatically churches are spiritual education. Schools needs tuition and grant money to pay for professors and facilities, and churches are no different." Someone else wrote, "for an organization to thrive financial support is necessary."

But there are other reasons people give to our church, too. Spiritual reasons. Emotional reasons. Reasons that show the church is worth supporting not just so it can continue to exist, but because of the difference it makes. One couple wrote, "We love the mission and character of Holy Trinity. The community seems so much more friendly, genuine, and compassionate than other churches we have attended over the years. We feel more connected to the church when

we give. Giving money to Holy Trinity is our way of appreciating that community, as well as wanting to help the church continue to spread that positive community.” Another said, “I choose to give because what’s ours is God’s, and Holy Trinity is a place we feel is doing what God is calling the church to do and I want to support that. Helping a church do what it’s supposed to do is a good way to reach out to the community and spread the word.” Someone else wrote, “I give because our church means a lot to my family and me. We have found and renewed our faith because of Holy Trinity and if I can contribute so the church can continue to be part of my community and neighborhood, I want to do so.”

People shared with me that work our church does *matters*. They said our church provides a place where people can feel like they belong. Our congregation is now the only church in Narberth that intentionally affirms and accepts LGBTQ individuals, and I can tell you people have come here because of that, looking for a safe place to belong.

People said the work our church does matters, because this is a place where they feel connected to Jesus, through worship services and Bible studies and community.

People said the work our church does matters, because it’s a place where people can hear the Good News of Jesus and be forgiven and set free, setting down burdens they have carried for years, and finding new life. Because it’s a place where youth and young adults can bring their questions and doubts. Because it’s a place where God’s love is shared through the harvesting of hundreds of pounds of fresh produce and the packaging of thousands of meals to feed those who are hungry.

We give to the church, not just because it’s good and right, not just because God commands it, not just because it’s a way of honoring God and giving thanks – though all these

things are true – we give to the church because by doing so we are better able to share Jesus with others and to serve our neighbors together. And those are things our world needs.

I've served as your pastor here at Holy Trinity for a little over two years now, and as we talk again about stewardship and giving, there are a few things I want to tell you. First, I want you to know that I actually believe what saying. Every month Annie and I give 9.5% of our income back to the church, in addition to the children that we sponsor through Compassion International. This upcoming year, we'll be increasing the amount we give to Holy Trinity to just over 10% of our income, because we believe it's essential to our faith, that God will provide for us, and that the work God is doing through Holy Trinity is important. And I tell you this not to brag, but simply so you know that as your pastor I practice what I preach, and mean what I say.

Second, I want to tell you that this is a special time at Holy Trinity. In the past few years we've welcomed twenty new members into our congregation and there are more on the way. We started new education and music ministries this fall, we're serving our community more through meal packaging events and our Giving Garden and the Dickens Festival and the Food Bank. We've started offering scholarships to students again, we're involving our children more in the life of our church, we have a youth group, we've grown in faith and in our understanding of mission, and our congregation has become more and more generous. This is the Holy Spirit at work among us! And people have noticed. When I asked people what excites them most about Holy Trinity, this is what they said:

- *"I love all the outreach. I love the giving garden, the partnerships with other churches."*
- *"I like that when I mention what church I am attending I get, 'Oh, the church with the garden out front,' and not, 'Where is that?'"*
- *"The energy level excites me! The congregation is alive, hearts are opening and we are welcoming all. Our love is extending to others, further than ever."*

- *“The thing that excites me most is how much others – including new members and the community – are getting involved with Holy Trinity. The more people share their time and talents, the more others want to do so, also.”*
- *“I like that we have a Youth Group, that we participate in Narberth events and that we are making our church music more modern and hip.”*
- *“When we first came to Holy Trinity, we came back a second week for these reasons: a wonderful community, a youthful and committed pastor, great music, and last, but certainly not least, the incomparable communion bread. We love meeting new friends and finding new ways to get involved.”*
- *“I have loved the community outreach. The work with Grace Lutheran has made volunteering ‘real.’ Much of my life growing up, it was about ‘what can church do for me?’ But to have church now be about ‘how can it help [do] something for others,’ to me that is more powerful. I’m excited to see new and different faces gradually becoming ‘regular faces’ over time. We are out in the community. We are welcoming to any and all. Those are the things that excite me.”*
- *“I am excited by the fact that Holy Trinity is growing, so that others can continue to take good care of the church in the future. I am excited that I can be proud of what Holy Trinity is doing in and for the community.”*

This is why we give. Through our generosity, by giving our time, our talents, and our resources to the church, we make a difference, we grow together, we welcome people longing to belong, and we share the Good News that in Jesus *all* people are loved and forgiven by God.

In our Gospel reading this morning, as the day was coming to a close, the disciples told Jesus to dismiss the crowds who had come to hear him teach, so they could go and find food. But Jesus said to the disciples, *“You give them something to eat.”* The disciples felt they didn’t have much – just five loaves of bread and two fish – but for Jesus, it was *enough*. He *made* it enough to feed everyone there. And then he looked back at his disciples and told *them* to go and feed the crowds. To use what they had gathered for him to serve a world in need.

Holy Trinity, our church is not too small, we’re not too insignificant, we’re not struggling. God has given us what we need to be who he is calling us to be. To do what God is calling us to do. To be good stewards of this congregation, and good stewards of the Gospel. May we use and share what we’ve been blessed with and given. May we live generously. Amen.