

SERMON TITLE: "Renewing Our Resolutions: Gifts"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 16, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

How are you doing with your New Year's resolutions? We're now two full weeks into 2022. Are you still watching what you eat? Are you still exercising? Hopefully you haven't already given up on your goals to a new and improved you.

As I started this series on renewing our resolutions, I read quite a few articles on how to maintain our efforts to change our habits. Most of them boiled down to something like this. 1) Make sure your resolution is relevant to your life. 2) Make sure it's specific, so you know exactly what you're trying to achieve. 3) Make sure it's attainable, not something totally unrealistic. 4) Make sure you surround yourself with a supportive community that will cheer you on. And, last but not least, 5) make sure you plan for trouble. Think ahead about what might trip you up, demotivate you, or sabotage your goal, so that—when such a thing inevitably happens—you'll be able to take it in stride, pick yourself up, and keep moving in the right direction. Whatever personal goals you set for this New Year, I hope you are, in fact, making some desired progress.

Here in worship, we're spending this month of January talking about renewing the resolutions or vows that we make when we join a United Methodist church. As we stated earlier, in our unison reading, those vows are that we will participate faithfully in the congregation through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Today's topic is renewing our resolution of gifts.

1—DEFINITION OF GIFTS

Let's begin, first of all, with a definition. Often, in church and in the Bible, the word "gifts" is used in the context of spiritual gifts that God has given people for service in the church and the world. For our purposes, we're going to save that concept of gifts for next week, when we talk about our vow

of service. Today, we're going to focus on the other definition of gifts, which is our financial contributions. As wonderful as volunteer labor is, and as appreciated as our talents are, they won't pay the church's mortgage, utilities, or staff salaries. The ministry of our church is limited and shaped by the amount of tithes and offerings we receive. And that's why every United Methodist member is asked to make the promise that they will faithfully support the local congregation with their financial gifts.

That said, then, we look to scripture to guide us, and our text for today comes from the Apostle Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter eight. In those verses, we see right away that our gifts are inspired by the generosity of others. Paul was writing to the Christians in the city of Corinth and telling them about the churches in Macedonia which had given so generously. From various references in the Apostle's letters, we know that Paul and his helper Timothy were collecting an offering from the new churches around the Mediterranean region, and they were planning to take that offering then to Jerusalem to help the Christians who were living in poverty there. Two thousand years later, we don't know all the details of why the Christians in Jerusalem were suffering economic hardship, but Paul knew they were, and he was trying to stir up some help. Obviously, Paul was glad for what the Macedonian churches had given, and now he was using their generosity as a motivator for the Christians in Corinth. Verse 10 tells us that, in the prior year, the Corinthians had indicated a desire to participate in this great collection, but apparently they hadn't yet followed through on their goal. Maybe the generous example of the Macedonian Christians would be an inspiration that would stir the Corinthians to action.

If the Macedonian example didn't inspire them sufficiently, in verse nine, Paul also pointed out the generous example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, though he was rich, yet he became poor, as a means to transfer the richness of God's blessings. Obviously, Paul wasn't speaking of dollars and cents here, but Jesus' act of spiritual generosity was something that the Corinthian Christians had experienced themselves, so Paul hoped that it would touch their hearts and catalyze a monetary response. As we

too have experienced the grace of Christ and the generosity of those around us, we too are prompted to do our part and renew our resolution of gifts.

2—WHAT ARE ACCEPTABLE GIFTS?

Once we've felt inspired to give, then we might wonder, "What are acceptable gifts?" How much should we give? In the Bible, there are a number of references to tithing, which suggest that 10% of our income is the right amount. In this passage from 2 Corinthians 8, however, the focus is on some other aspects of giving. For example, in verses 3-5, Paul says that the Macedonians gave joyfully, generously, voluntarily, and earnestly. Their desire to give was so great that they begged for the opportunity to do it. Since this collection was a big coordinated effort, you could also assume that the Macedonians gave cooperatively. They didn't want to be left out of this mission project. They saw this as a way to respond to the grace of God that had come to them.

Another description of acceptable giving is that it involves spiritual growth. Notice in verse seven that Paul indicates that the Corinthian Christians were already excelling in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in eagerness, and in receiving Paul's love. Now, he challenged them, it was time for them to grow also in this aspect of giving financially to help others who were in need. Giving financially is a spiritual discipline that requires thought, prayer, intention, and a heart of love toward others. It was a question whether or not the Corinthian Christians would rise to this higher level of faith and spirituality.

In verse 11, Paul mentions another trait of an acceptable gift. It's a good intention that is actually fulfilled. It's one thing to have a desire to be generous and maybe even make some promises. But an acceptable gift is more than a nice idea. An acceptable gift is one that is actually given.

This does not mean, however, that one can never adjust down one's pledge, if financial circumstances change. As Paul wrote in verse 12, if one's heart is in the right place, if "the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have."

Neither the Apostle Paul nor I want you to bankrupt yourself or cause yourself financial harm. For our

giving to be joyful and sustainable, it has to be a reasonable amount that doesn't unfairly burden our budget. But we who have abundance should always be mindful of those who have less, and especially of those who are living in poverty. It's a matter of balancing out the resources. As Paul writes in verses 13-15, we—out of our plenty--should offer care for those who are in need, so that no one has too much, and no one has too little.

This need for financial balance goes along well with the Paper Plate Challenge that we're doing today. Up until last year, it was an annual tradition for some of us from our congregation to go to the state capitol for Faith Day during or just before the legislative session. We would rally with other United Methodists and people of other faith traditions and try to persuade our state legislators to be mindful of the needs of the poor. We had hoped to be able to go again this year, on January 20. But, due to COVID, that rally has been cancelled. Instead, we've been asked to get as many people as possible to write NO FOOD TAXES on a paper plate, hold it by your head, take a picture, and send it in to Bill Tibbitts, who is the leader of the Coalition of Religious Communities. The plan is for Bill to release all those pictures at once at 11:00 a.m. on January 20. We're hoping that the message will reach our representatives, senators, and governor—and that they will eliminate this regressive grocery tax that disproportionately hurts those with low incomes. With multi-billion-dollar surpluses in state coffers, even the politicians are talking about reducing taxes this year. But we want to make sure that the tax cuts they make benefit the poor, and not just the wealthy. For the gift to be acceptable, there must be a balance between those who have abundance and those who have need.

CONCLUSION

If you've been paying attention to the news here in Utah, you might be aware that the founder and board chairman of an internet technology company in Lehi recently made some horrible remarks about Jewish people. Fortunately, for his company, he quickly stepped down from his position of authority, and other company leaders rapidly distanced themselves from his vile and false conspiracy

theories. In an effort to limit the damage of his remarks and demonstrate their own good faith, representatives from that company quickly met with Jewish leaders in Salt Lake City and offered their synagogue a generous donation. The company wanted to make what they called a “transformational gift,” so there would be no doubt that their company did not stand for anti-Semitic hatred and bigotry.

In the field of philanthropy, a “transformational gift” means a single gift large enough to make a transformative difference. Such a large donation is enough to breathe new life into an organization and open up new potential for the recipient’s mission.

While some of us might have the capacity to give a transformational gift through a bequest when we die, most of us will have to leave it to corporations, foundations, and the extremely wealthy to give single gifts that are of such magnitude. Yet, when we “regular people” do our part, even our smaller gifts add up to make a positive and sustaining difference. You may not realize it, but, in 2021, our very own First United Methodist congregation members and friends gave nearly \$256,000 to our General Operating Fund. If you would count the additional tens of thousands we gave in designated funds or passed through our church to other mission organizations, the total giving was closer to \$300,000.

I can’t say often enough how grateful I am for your generosity. Most of us, at least, have clearly been practicing the United Methodist vow to participate faithfully in the ministries of this congregation through our financial contributions. But it never hurts to rededicate ourselves to something important. So, as this new year of 2022 begins, let’s renew our resolution to give generously of our gifts.

<https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2022/01/08/tears-flow-entrata/>