

“UNCLE GEORGE AND THE BEAR”

First UMC of Pasadena

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You would have loved Uncle George, a short, stout German heritage man with a mischievous smile, great laugh and wonderful sense of humor. But before I do that I want to tell a story about Aunt Chintzy - not my Aunt but maybe someone's Aunt. As the story goes she would always sit in the front pew of her Baptist Church and respond to the sermons. Her one bad habit was that she chewed snuff. One Sunday, during a hell-fire and brimstone sermon the minister condemned swearing and she said “Amen”. He then condemned adultery and she said “Preach it brother”. He condemned liquor and she said “Praise the Lord.” Finally he condemned the evils of tobacco and snuff and he heard her say “Now wait a minute - now you're meddlin in other persons' business.” Some people think if you talk about money and stewardship in church that you are meddlin so I guess, if you believe that, I'll do a little meddlin today. But guess what, Jesus was a meddler - he taught more about money and possessions than any other subject. He taught about:

- Beliefs, believers, believing 272 times
- Prayer 371 times
- Love or loving 714 times
- Possessions, money & giving 2,172 times
- 17 of 38 parables deal with money, stewardship or possessions

So today I'll meddle a little bit and talk about our motivation to give and focus. This could be called my sermon on the amount. Back to Uncle George. Years ago we took an extended family trip to Yellowstone Park. Packed into several cars, we pulled up to a meadow with a bear close enough for pictures. Uncle George jumped out with one of those old cameras you held at your waist. As he looked down into the viewfinder he turned the focus knob but couldn't keep the bear in focus for a picture. As we all rushed back to the car, George remained trying to get the bear in focus. Finally he looked up to see the bear close to him. He couldn't get it in focus because it had been walking toward him. The problem for Uncle George was his focus was down and inward, not to the world around him.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians in 2nd Corinthians, Chapter 8 also speaks to focus, and he gives them the example of the Macedonians. Paul talks about the desperately poor Macedonians suffering Roman persecution who responded to Paul's call to aid the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. And here is an important insight - first they gave themselves to God, (*verse 5*) then they were graced **by** God and they begged to give. Their giving in spite of their poverty was abundant and in some cases beyond their means. Eugene Peterson in "The Message" terms it this way: "The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives."

Then Paul talks about generosity, asking the Corinthians to remember Christ who had it all but gave everything, his whole life, so that all could experience the richness of God. And then some advice from Paul - finish off the task of collection they began last year and do what they can, not what they can't. It's a

question of balance according to Paul - their present abundance verses the need beyond Corinth. The Macedonians first were disciples and gave themselves to God, then the Macedonian's giving came as naturally as breathing.

So where is our balance today here at First Pasadena between our own needs and the ministry needs beyond our church in the community and our connectional system. That leads us to ask "What is balance?"

Now Paul doesn't say everyone gave equal amounts. If we had an offering or stewardship moto at this church it might be "not equal gifts but equal generosity." The widow in the passage from Mark 12:38-44 gave from "her poverty" and received a special acknowledgment from Jesus for the significance of her sacrificial offering and generosity. She also demonstrated for us what the writer in Deuteronomy 26 was expressing - that is to take the first of the fruit, the tithe, and give it as an offering back to God for further compassionate ministry. In fact, she went beyond and gave it all. Jesus also taught the principle of graduated responsibility when he said "from those who have much, much is required." So if that's the expectation what about our gratitude to God for our gifts? The Stewardship of giving is a faith stance - a recognition that God gifts us with abundant life. As Christians, our motivation to give is gratitude, not fear or guilt. And then we must follow through - we must practice stewardship, not just talk about it.

A few years ago, Debbie was asked to join in a mission trip to Africa University in Zimbabwe. During the first Sunday worship at Africa University the worship

leader asked the students, the majority of whom were very poor and on scholarships, to make an offering to help the brothers and sisters in the United States who had just suffered a major hurricane known as Katrina. It was announced the following Sunday that the offering was the largest of the year. We would say that those students have little compared to us, but they have learned about giving. They “get it” and I think Paul and Jesus would be very proud of them. Their example should humble us.

Later on in the 9th Chapter of 2nd Corinthians, Paul reveals a wonderful surprise - he says after you give generously and cheerfully “you will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.” That is not our motivation but it is God’s response to our actions expressing our gratitude and faithfulness for all that God has given us.

I will close with two stories. One is about two lakes in the Middle East. One has water leading into it but it has no outlet. The water has nowhere to go and the lake is so filled with salts and minerals it is called the Dead Sea. The other lake has an inlet and outlet. Its waters are the source of abundant life in the region. It is the source of life because it “gives up” and shares its source of life. How ironic that the Dead Sea receives its water from the Sea of Life, the Galilee. How are we like those waters?

And finally we are back to a story of focus. In the L.A. Times on November 24, 2005 there was a story of the life and death of John Rice, who along with his twin brother, was 2ft. 10" tall. Abandoned at birth, he was adopted by a couple who died when the twins were in the 10th grade. John became a self made

millionaire, ran a motivational company, was a television pitchman, was a devoted civic booster, spoke at schools, was an elf who handed out Christmas toys at hospitals. He and his brother founded a motivational company called "Think Big" and a plant nursery called "Tree Feet Tall" that specialized in dwarf citrus trees. John flew planes, made stained glass and played harmonica in a band. His quote about life sums it all up. "A person is not measured from the top of their head to the bottom of their feet but from the shoulders to the sky. It all depends on how big you think." How big do we think today? Where is our focus - inward and down toward our feet like Uncle George or up to God like John Rice. Do we focus inward or do we give beyond for the ministry Christ's Church, joyfully like those Macedonians and the students at Africa University. Only you can answer that question and what better day than today to take a step forward with a new focus. To catch up on this year's financial giving commitment and pray about the commitment for next year that we will make on Consecration Sunday. I know God will be with you, will multiply your giving and you will be blessed! That is a promise you can rely upon.

AMEN.

