

“Do You Have a Plan?”

Date: November 17, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Mark 14:3-9; Genesis 41:41-57

Theme: Stewardship, giving

Occasion: Extravagant generosity, series

There is a contemporary proverb that says: “Those who fail to plan, plan to fail.” Surely this did *not* apply to Joseph. After his prophetic interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream, in which Joseph saw seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, Joseph developed a plan for the Egyptian people, so they could eat during the years of famine.

What was his plan? Well, Joseph told the farmers and the members of the agricultural department of the Egyptian government to store the extra harvest during each of the years of plenty. Then, during the years of famine, there would be enough not only for them to eat, but also enough to assist their neighbors as well.

How did they go about doing that? Perhaps he asked the nation to eat a little less so they could save a little more. Or, maybe they designated a certain amount to be set aside by each family in the land, so there would be enough later. In either case, they were planning for the future.

Think about a time in your own life when you embarked on your own savings plan. Maybe it was to buy a car, or your first house. I can remember, as a youth, setting aside my weekly allowance for six months so I could buy a radio that I really wanted. It was hard to do. I wanted other things during those six months, but I knew I couldn’t have them, because I was saving for that radio.

Families often save for a big vacation trip they want to take. Specific amounts are set aside for months in advance so that a larger goal could be

achieved. A Christmas savings club is another way we plan for the future so we're not hit with huge bills in January.

Here's the point I'm trying to make. Financial planning involves thinking ahead. It means coming up with a strategy and not leaving things to chance. It's a matter of discipline. We see this kind of discipline and planning in Joseph's food management program. It is that same kind of strategic planning that is necessary as we plan our personal Christian stewardship, deciding what we will give to God in the coming year.

As we draw near to the end of the calendar year, it is not too soon to begin thinking about what we will give to the church in 2020. Some people think whatever we give to God is okay, after all, God understands, right? Well, yes, what we give to God through the church is a personal decision between that person and the Lord.

But let me ask you a question. Why should we give more discipline saving for a family vacation or Christmas spending than we do for the support of God's work?

Joseph had a plan. He didn't leave things to chance, but methodically worked out a way to provide for the future. He didn't say, "If you feel like it, would you contribute to the Egyptian storehouse?" No, he asked people to give – both regularly and systematically. He had a plan. And it paid off.

What about you and me, can we create a system of giving to support the Lord's work? Sure we can. It's call "proportional giving." It involves choosing a percentage of your income that you will designate to the Lord. Take a look at the weekly giving chart that you will find in your bulletin.

Not all of us earn the same amount of money. One person may earn only \$100 a week, while another person might earn \$1,000 a week. If they both gave 2% they would not be giving the same amount of money. One

would give \$2 and the other would give \$20. The two gifts are not equal, but they're not meant to be. God doesn't expect all of us to give the same amount.

But we do need to make a plan, make a decision, to give regularly and systematically. Maybe we start with 2%. Next year maybe we can raise it to 3%. Maybe the next year, a little higher. Very few people start at the biblical 10% right away. But the important thing is that we have a system, or a plan for faithful giving.

That way, whether we're in church or not on a particular Sunday, we know that the church will receive a gift from us. We plan to give a percentage of our income, and we do so even if we're not in church that week. Faithful giving: it's a spiritual discipline.

I invite you to take this chart home and prayerfully consider what your gift to the church next year will be. Find your income on the left-hand side – you can find it either by noting your weekly, monthly or annual income. Then look to the right of the chart. Prayerfully ask God to guide you to the amount you feel God is calling you to give each week.

Then, decide that you'll do it. Bring your offering envelope to church every Sunday. Have your bank send us the check. You can honor your decision with a weekly check, a bi-monthly check or a monthly check. The point is not how often you will give, but what percentage of your income are you willing to commit to God's work. We're striving for faithful giving.

One pastor was asked to define what faithful giving means. His eye-opening answer was simple. "All I ask is that you apply the same standards to your church giving that you would to other areas of your life. Consider the following:

“If your car starts one out of three or four times, do you consider it faithful? If the newspaper carrier skips your delivery on Monday and Thursday, would you miss it? If your refrigerator quits for a day or two, every so often, do you excuse it and say, “Oh, well, it works most of the time.” If you miss your mortgage payments, or your car payments, would your bank say, “Oh well, 10 out of 12 payments isn’t that bad.”?

If we contribute financially to the work of the church only once in a while, are we being faithful? Why not try to apply these same standards, to giving to the Lord, as we do in all these other areas of our life?”

What I’m suggesting is devising a plan, developing a discipline of giving. The key is to be systematic. Your giving to the church should be a regular part of your personal budget. Whether you keep a budget on paper, or on your computer or in your head, you need to have a plan for what you will give.

Otherwise, you will only be giving to God your left-overs. Proportional giving says, “I will give to God 2%, 5%, or 10% of whatever income I receive. It will be the first check I write before any of the others.” That way, God receives the amount you promised him. God receives the first fruit of the harvest. That’s biblical.

Now, in years past we used to pass out pledge cards and ask people to tell us what their giving will be in the coming year. We haven’t done that here at Lakewood for many years. Why? - because we trust you. We trust that you will prayerfully consider your gift to the Lord, and you will do your best to keep your promise to God. You don’t have to tell us what you plan to give, because we trust your promise to the Lord.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, the woman at Bethany broke open a jar of oil and anointed Jesus’ feet, using her hair to bathe them. The

disciples got angry with her for wasting the oil, telling her the money should have been used for more useful things, like feeding the poor.

But Jesus didn't seem concerned about that at all. Her gift was an act of worship. The amount of money involved wasn't the issue. It was her intent, it was her heart. She was worshiping Jesus. The disciples were all hung up on whether that was the right use of money.

And so it is, when we get hung up on the size of our gift, we miss out on the opportunity to worship and praise our Lord. Giving to the church, giving to God, is a matter of the heart more than it is a matter of finances.

If we love the Lord, we will find a way to worship him, with our systematic plan for giving. We won't leave it to chance. And we won't give out of duty or obligation. We will give cheerfully, as an act of worship. Amen? Amen.

Please turn to the front of your bulletins and let us pray together our opening prayer:

"You but open your hand, o Lord, and all our needs are met. This beautiful and bountiful earth provides for our physical and aesthetic needs. We praise you, Lord, for the privilege of being able to worship, and to give, because it is in sharing our gifts that we find worth and joy. Accept, therefore, our spiritual and financial offerings as we express our gratitude for all that we have and all that we are in Christ Jesus our Lord. In His name we pray, Amen."