

**Sermon**

**“Just a Little Bit (More) Can Make All the Difference”**

October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

STEWARDSHIP COMMITMENT SUNDAY

Based on 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:1-13 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8:1-14

**SCRIPTURES:**

**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:1-13**

<sup>1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. [NRSV]

**2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8:1-14**

<sup>1</sup> We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; <sup>2</sup> for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup> For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, <sup>4</sup> begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—<sup>5</sup> and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, <sup>6</sup> so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also

complete this generous undertaking among you. <sup>7</sup>Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. <sup>8</sup>I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. <sup>9</sup>For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. <sup>10</sup>And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—<sup>11</sup>now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. <sup>12</sup>For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. <sup>13</sup>I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between <sup>14</sup>your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** By your Spirit, O God, still our restless spirits and unstop our ears. Let us hear your Word, that it may be at work in us; for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

### **Grace and Gratitude**

If you have ever received or exchanged emails with me, and particularly if you have read far enough down an email to see my signature line, then you may have noticed that I have a habit of sharing a thoughtful quote. For the past few months, I’ve been sharing a simple, yet powerful quote from St. Augustine, “God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.”

But, for many years prior, I had been sharing a couple quotes from two of our great theologians. The first quote was from the father of our Reformed faith, John Calvin, and it said, “We are surrounded by God's benefits. The best use of these benefits is an unceasing expression of gratitude." And, the second quote was from the 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian, Karl Barth, and it said, “Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning."

Indeed, the entire Christian life is shaped by gratitude—gratitude for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy

Spirit. For it is by God's grace that we receive the gift of our own lives, and so we are called to shape the *whole* of our lives by our grateful response.

### Our Grateful Response

I have been here with you for over a year now, and in that time, I have seen with my own eyes how deep your grateful response to God's grace can be. Last year you were asked to look toward an uncertain future with a sense of fearlessness—to live more fearlessly as God's people at this particular time and in this particular place—to love more fearlessly, to pray more fearlessly, to serve more fearlessly, and to give more fearlessly. And, you did so, and you have continued to do so during this season of transition—living and loving and serving with every breath you take and every step you make, with a mixture of eagerness, excitement, and expectation, looking forward to *what* God has in store for FPC and to *whom* God is calling to lead you. Even more, you didn't know me all that well at this point a year ago, but you were asked to trust and to dream about how God would lead you into this uncertain future. And so you made your pledges and shared your resources with this church, and *through* this church, with the whole world.

And, as a result, by what I have seen, God has graced us with many things this past year. First, I have seen an increased *strength of living* in everyone here—people come here for Sunday School and Bible Studies and PW Circle meetings; you come for fellowship events and committee meetings and much more, and then you go home with a renewed understanding of God's presence in your lives, a realization of why you are here and what you are called to do, and a knowledge of Scripture that helps form a foundation and an anchor against the pain and uncertainties of this world.

Secondly, I have seen how vibrant and meaningful *worship services* have changed the mood of this congregation—people come here on Sunday mornings and are filled with inspiring music, touched by God's Word, united at the Table, and are uplifted by the renewed and increased energy of this body of Christ.

Thirdly, I have seen how many opportunities we are given to *make a difference*—people come here to volunteer and share their resources because we

enable each other to step out of our comfort zones to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, heal the sick, and give eternal food to the empty in such a way that at the end of the day we can say that because of God’s grace, “We have made a difference!”

Finally, I have seen this congregation *change lives* time and again—people come here and bear witness with their own eyes and their own ears that sinners have discovered grace, persons who were lost are found, families are restored, children and youth are nurtured, people are served, and God’s children of all ages know they are loved by our Creator.

As a result of all these things—as a result of your generosity and grateful response to God’s grace and love—we are gaining confidence and momentum, from God’s Spirit moving among us, that we can indeed do even more! After all, there’s always room to grow, right?!?!

### **Faith, Hope, and Love**

So in the mindset of doing even more in the coming year of 2020, this year’s stewardship theme is *Stretch ... Just a Little Bit More*, because honestly friends, as we learn when we are children, a little bit goes a long way. And, in the context of faith and scripture and the life of this church, just a little bit of faith, hope, and love goes a very long way when our good and gracious God stretches and multiplies them in countless and amazing ways! Because of its beauty and spiritual power, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is one of the most remarkable texts the Apostle Paul ever wrote. It offers a poem to, what I maintain, is the most important core value of the Christian faith—love. Christian love—more appropriately “Christ-like” love—involves both commitment to, and concern for, the well-being of others. And, so Paul provides us with some context for how and why a “Christ-like” love is so important—that without such love we are nothing and we gain nothing; that without such love we are not rightly motivated; that without such “Christ-like” love we are not complete; that even with faith enough to move mountains and hope enough to trust God’s promises, without such love we miss the point.

But, here at First Presbyterian, I have seen how such faith, hope, and love do abide. How else could we have come so far from where we have been? How else might we have been strengthened, renewed, and energized? How else could we have managed to change lives and make a difference in Christ's name? How else can we continue to do all these things and more this coming year and beyond?

**Just a Little Bit (More) Can Make All the Difference in the World**

As I've said in other sermons and conversations, I personally believe that stewardship is about way more than just money and a budget. Stewardship is much more than an annual program or campaign. But, financial stewardship is very real and very necessary because the way that we run our church must be very responsible and very faithful.

The reality is that our giving struggles to keep up with our budgeted expenses. That much is obvious every time you look at the stewardship numbers in your monthly newsletters—in *that*, we are the same as most other churches. But, because our staff, our Session, and our committees live faithfully, spend faithfully, and lead faithfully, our expenses stay fairly close to our income. I believe this is the outcome of being responsible stewards and showing our gratitude to God to the best of our ability all at the same time.

This congregation as a whole, and the people here that make up the body of Christ in this place, have done great things—YOU HAVE DONE GREAT THINGS!!! 😊 And, I have strongly felt that it was more important to acknowledge that this year than beg and plead for money yet again. But, I do ask you (I have to ask you)—all of you—look deep within yourselves, and imagine and dream about how you can take what you already pledge and commit, and then “stretch” and share just a little bit (more!) of your faith, hope, and love with your family of faith and this community in the coming year. Because it is so very true that just a “little bit” can make all the difference in the world.

*[As I did on this same day last year, I'm going to stop talking in a minute and sit down, and provide you with a few minutes to think, to pray, to imagine, and to dream about how you can stretch and share just a little bit (more!) of your faith, hope, and love. Complete your*

*pledge cards and Time & Talent forms. Even if you brought your completed cards and forms, take time and hear God's voice again. And, then during the hymn following the sermon ("Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"), I ask that everyone come forward to offer your commitment to God by placing your cards into the basket in front of the table and then return to your seat to keep singing the song.]*

A year ago, you made your pledges and commitment based largely on who and what you didn't know yet. But, now we know that it's been a most blessed year together. And, I'm asking you to combine the gratitude you have shown to me with your gratitude for God's grace, and to express your commitment to what and who God has planned for FPC during the coming year and beyond by using your pledge cards and your *Time & Talent* forms. The Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, "It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means." Remember, there's always room to grow, and just a "little bit" more can make all the difference in the world. Amen.