

“TOP OF THE LIST”  
Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
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I Corinthians 13:1-3

Luke 12:13-21

The great writer Leo Tolstoy once wrote a story entitled “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” It was about a man named Pakhom, who farms the land he had received from his father, who had received it from his father before him. Well, Pakhom wants more, so he saves and saves until he can buy more acreage, and even then he’s not satisfied. He wants more. He hears about an area where you can get more land for less money, so he sells his farm and moves his family there, and buys a much bigger farm. Still, he is not satisfied.

Finally, he hears about a place where the king is offering an extraordinary deal. If you give the king all of your money, you can take possession of all of the land you can personally encompass by walking around it in a single day. Pakhom is a walker, so he knows he can cover a great deal of ground in one day, so he goes for it!

He sells his farm, takes his family to that country, and gives all of his money to the king. A stake is hammered into the ground before sunrise. All Pakhom has to do is return to that stake before sunset, and all the land that he circles before that time will be his. As soon as he is given the signal, Pakhom takes off running, determined to cover as much ground as possible. After a while, though, the sun's heat intensifies and Pakhom is forced to slow down, but still he motors on. At one point, he was ready to circle back, but just ahead he saw lush pastures, so he extends his path to include them. Late in the afternoon, he comes to a lovely stream ahead, and it's so tempting, he wants to make sure it's included in his new farm, so he walks ahead to get to it.

Suddenly, he realizes that the sun is getting lower in the sky, and he may have miscalculated how far he has walked, so he quickly turns around to head back to the stake. Watching the sun going down, he begins to panic, and starts to run as fast as he can. He pushes himself so hard that, sadly, within sight of that stake, he collapses and dies – never getting all he had so wanted, all he had so coveted.

(Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, "The Grace of Giving," p. 122)

It's a sad story, but even more sadly, it portrays a deep truth. We live in a world that tells us we don't have enough, we need more, we'd better be careful or we

won't have enough. We get that message in so many ways. Right now, probably because I think about retirement coming down the road, I seem to notice how many ads – on TV, in print, on social media – want to scare us into thinking we won't have enough money to live on for the remainder of our days. Other ads bombard us about insurance – especially to make sure that our families will be able to pay for our funerals.

We're constantly being wooed into buying bigger homes in better places, fancier cars with more bells and whistles, prescriptions and medications to keep us looking younger, living longer and keep our brains sharper.

And while some of these things are not bad in and of themselves, the cumulative effect of all these messages is. They invite us to think only of ourselves, of getting more for ourselves, and keeping it for ourselves.

The Gospel message, of course, is quite the opposite – it's not about scarcity – no, the Gospel message is one of abundance. From the beginning of time, God has given. God has provided.

And we have been the recipients of God's generosity. We have life and health, we have family and friends, we have meaningful and fruitful lives, most of us have everything we need or want. If you doubt that, let me invite you to do something I told you about a long time ago – go on your computer and Google “how rich am I?” and enter your annual income, and you'll see how rich you are compared to everyone else on the planet.

Let me just tell you – that if your annual income is \$30,000 – you're in the top 1% of income in the world! And if you're making above that, well, you get the picture. We have enough, and more than enough!

What we do with that is what we're going to be considering over these next few weeks as we look toward making our financial pledges to the church for 2020. What will we do with the gifts God has given us? Will we hang on tight to them, giving what we have left over, after all our other spending? Or will we give with joyful abandon to the God who has given so much to us?

I hope it's the latter. As I've told you year after year, I love talking about stewardship and pledging to the church, because I'm inviting you to know joy. I'm inviting you to give to God and see the amazing things he will do with your gifts.

The evidence is all around us. Let me just take you on a little journey to show you what your giving this year has brought about.

Your giving did some very practical things that brought about amazing spiritual moments. Your giving, for instance, helped buy music for our Chancel Choir, and helped pay the salaries of our Suzette and Sharon. And that, in turn, brought us moments in worship that made our spirits soar. I think of one particular Sunday, the day the choir sang "How Can I Keep From Singing Your Praise?" – so moving that I had tears streaming down my face and I saw how you were moved as well.

Your giving helped us hire our new Youth Director, Jason, and helped our youth group begin anew. Which led them to have a wonderful experience just last Sunday feeding the hungry at the Paris Foundation, where Jason told me, they got

to experience what it's like not just to give money to the hungry, but to look at them face to face and know they are just like us – children of God.

Your giving has paid for books and materials for the many small groups that meet in our church – Sunday School, support groups, circles, retreats – the list goes on and on. In those small groups, brothers and sisters in faith grow closer to Christ and one another.

Your giving has kept this building running, day after day, week after week, by paying for utilities and maintenance. While that may not seem exciting, what is exciting is the sheer number of people who come here every week. People from all parts of our community use our building for meetings and gatherings that change lives. From our Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts, to Alcoholics Anonymous and Nar Anon, to the Cecil County Choral Society, the Blood Bank – oh, the list goes on and on. And every time someone comes into one of those gatherings, they know that Elkton United Methodist Church cares about them, and wants them to have a place.

Your giving has helped fund the amazing technology we now have in this church. It surely helps us every Sunday in worship, but perhaps more than that, it reaches out to those who can't be here and includes them as well. I can't tell you the number of people who thank me for us keeping them connected through our video ministry on You Tube.

Your giving to this church has enabled us to reach out to the community in so many ways, it's hard to count. Ask an elementary school teacher and he or she will tell you, that our gifts of supplies, our gift of opening day breakfasts, our gift of prayer, means the world to them. Or ask a person in Kentucky or North Dakota how much it meant to them to have members of our church visit this summer and lend a helping hand. Your gifts made that happen.

Oh, I could go on and on. Your gifts tell our children how much they matter – because you pay for the salary of a dear woman named Miss Yolanda who loves our children and cares for them in the nursery; your gifts pay for the supplies and curriculum for Sunday School and Vacation Bible School; your gifts help send them to Camp Pecometh or the Conference Youth Rally. Your gifts present them with their very first Bibles.

Oh dear friends, none of these things, these life-changing, faith-growing things could have happened without your giving. You, working with God, made them happen. And you have the opportunity to continue to make it happen in the year ahead, through the pledge you'll make next week.

Before you do that, I'd like to ask something of you. Pray about it. Really pray about it. Ask God what he would like you to give, and then step out in faith and do it. I can promise you this – it will bring you joy!

You know, some of our favorite people in the world, Virginia and Gifford Biles, recently celebrated their 70<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. I will never forget them telling me about their giving. They have tithed from the very first day they were married. Gifford told me that way back then, when they got paid, they would put the first 10% in a mayonnaise jar before they did anything else, and that went to the church. It was at the top of their list – giving back to God out of the abundance he had given to them – even though what they were making at the time didn't look like abundance – they saw it that way – and gave first to God.



Is giving to God at the top of your list? I hope so, because if you make it first, you know that you are partnering with God for a better world. You know that you are giving so that God can do marvelous things in and through this church that we so love.

So I want to finish today with a story of infectious joy brought about through giving. It's the story of a 17 year old girl named Katie Fisher, who entered the Madison County, Ohio Junior Livestock Sale hoping that the lamb she had for sale would get a good price. For months, Katie had been battling cancer. She had endured hospital stays and been through chemotherapy a number of times. Before the lamb went on the auction block, the auctioneer told the audience about Katie and what she had been through, hoping that would push the price-per-pound above the average of two dollars. It did, and then some!

The lamb sold for \$11.50 per pound. But then, something amazing happened! The buyer gave it back, and suggested that the auctioneer sell it again. That started a chain reaction. Families and businesses bought it, and then gave it back over and over again. Katie's mother said, "The first sale is the only one I remember. After that, I was crying too hard."

Do you know that they ended up selling that lamb thirty-six times that day, raising more than \$16,000 in the process?! Oh, friends, the joy of giving!

When we give to God freely and fully, when we put giving to God at the top of the list, God can make amazing things happen! Lives will be touched and changed, those who are hurting will be helped, the world will be made a better place.

I want you to know that joy. So take this week to pray and then come back next week with your pledge card filled out, letting God know how you will work with him through our church to make great things happen! May it be so!

Amen.