

IT'S A PRIVILEGE!

LUKE 6:38

NOVEMBER 21, 1987

22

Page 1

The other day I had an unusual experience by paying attention to where I was going. Usually when I drive, especially in familiar territory like to and from the church, my mind is far away from Middlefield Road. But the other day, I watched where I was going, looked at the surroundings, and had a religious experience. The sun was shining. It was a crystal clear day. There was a patch of blue above the mountain, and I exclaimed to myself in the car, "It's a privilege to live here! The climate is ideal. The scenery is outstanding. We are close to the ocean, the Sierras, and San Francisco--the tourists' favorite city. What a privilege to live here!" I passed the Lucie Stern Center and thought, "The cultural advantages of this area are unbelievable--the children's museum, the children's theater, certainly among the best in the nation. The caliber of plays and operas that are presented in the Lucie Stern theater is first-rate. It's a privilege to live here. Even our football team won the Big Game!

Then I turned on Hamilton, approached this magnificent edifice and marveled, "And I'm a minister here! It's a privilege to work here. Look at the impressive people on our staff with whom I get to work. Look at the lay people in this church; rarely can you find such a large number of persons who love God, serve in and outside of this church, give of their time, money and resources to the extent of our lay people. It's a privilege to serve God through this church." Wouldn't your days be brighter if you lived each day with the attitude: It's a privilege to be alive! It's a privilege to live today in these exciting times of change, and not just to observe but to influence. It's a privilege to be given the resources to do God's work as well as care for personal and family needs.

I realize that some of you may not share this exuberance. Perhaps your health is not the best. Perhaps loved ones have died. Perhaps you have had setbacks. But, stop and reflect on your life. Wouldn't your days be brighter and better if you reflected on your privileges, rather than on your problems? In no way do I intend to put down your problems, or simplify them, or not give them the respect they deserve, but I'm talking about your outlook on life. A minister was approached by a dirty, ragged street person. Noticing that the man only had one shoe, the minister said, "I see you've lost a shoe." "No," the street person replied with a cheery, toothless smile, "I FOUND one!" It's a matter of perspective. He felt he was privileged to have one shoe, rather than deprived because he only had one.

When the gospel lesson was read this morning, what was your response? Can you remember? When you heard the familiar words, perhaps overly familiar--"I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me,"--how did you respond? Did you think, "Here we go again with another appeal for money." Or did you rationalize, "In our society, if people were willing to work, then they would have food and shelter." Or did the picture of the hungry, sick and homeless, touch your heart and you felt sorry for such folks? Or did you feel guilty and wish you could do more? Or did you feel it is your Christian duty, your Christian responsibility to give? Or did you feel glad you brought some foodstuffs this morning, and planned to participate in the Thanksgiving special offering? Or, did you feel it's a privilege to be able to help the hungry, homeless, sick and imprisoned?

This fall in our church we are discussing covenants--the covenants of prayers, presence, gifts and service we make with God. We have heard lectern testimonies, read New Outlook articles, and have heard sermons about prayer, service, and attendance. Today we are considering giving, covenant giving. We make covenants--pacts, agreements, contracts--with God in response to God's covenant to be our God. Alvin Meier, a minister friend of mine, wrote,

God chose to be our God, we did not choose God. Grace is God's choosing to be our God, instead of ignoring us, instead of playing the cruel joke of giving us limited life and then giving us no hope. Grace is God choosing us as God's people. This means that grace is a gift and not the result of any effort on our part. There is nothing we have done, or will do that can cause God to choose us.

But choose us, God did. Even though you have done little, and can do nothing to be acceptable to God, God chose you to be one of his. It's a privilege to be chosen by God. You and I are among the privileged.

We are privileged to be the church. A job applicant went through a long questionnaire which included everything, including his grandmother's maiden name. When he came to the question, "church preference," he wrote, "red brick." He may prefer a red brick church, but the red bricks are hardly the church. A university built a new library. It was a monumental structure with tall white columns and beautiful marble and ornate furnishings. As students and faculty took visitors around the campus, they proudly pointed out that "this is our new library." Finally the librarian could stand it no longer and posted a sign in front of the building which read: "This is not the library. The library is inside." Similarly, the church is not a red brick building, nor is the church the magnificent structure in which we now worship. The church is inside. The church is the people. The church is you!

Stephen Rose defines the church, "The church is not a repository of the saved, but a community of people, no better than anybody else, but who are trying to be the light of the world." The church is not the saved, the perfected, the righteous and holy. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said, "The church is a fellowship of sinners seeking to be saved." We are no better than anyone else; sometimes we are worse. You can always find examples of secular persons who seem to be more loving, kinder, and more concerned about the world than some church people. You can always call church people hypocrites. You can always accuse church people of not living up to the high expectations of Jesus. Yes, we are no better than anyone else, but we are trying to be the light of the world. We are trying to make this world a better place. We are trying to serve God. We are trying to be a moral force in our country. We are trying to provide a refuge and shelter for the lonely, the distressed. We are trying to guide those who are struggling and looking for direction and purpose in their lives. We are trying to be God's people, and it's a privilege. Can you imagine! Out of all the people God could call to do his work, God chose you and me. I find that thought unbelievable. Who am I ever to think that I have the knowledge and the wisdom to stand up before you week after week and proclaim the word of God. I don't have the wisdom, I don't have the knowledge, I don't have the ability, but I do have the privilege! It's a privilege to preach the best I can and share the little I have and know. It's a privilege to be the church.

And it's a privilege to give. When you hear a sermon about money, about your giving, how do you feel? When you are approached for your commitment to support God's work in 1988, what is your response? The winter had been especially difficult in the mountains of North Carolina. Heavy snowfall and cold temperatures had allowed the snow to accumulate to several feet at the higher elevations. The people who lived in the small mountain village located in a valley became concerned about an older couple who lived in an isolated cabin up on the mountainside. No one had seen either the husband or the wife for several weeks. Realizing they were snowed in, the villagers watched for smoke coming from the cabin chimney.

One day when smoke was no longer apparent, the people of the village decided to call in the Red Cross. A helicopter flew over the cabin but no sign of life could be seen. Two Red Cross workers equipped with medical supplies and food parachuted into a clearing some distance from the cabin. The two young men made their way through the deep snow, clearing a path to the door of the cabin. One of them knocked. An old man appeared at the door. The young rescuer said, "We are from the Red Cross." The old man looked at him and said, "Well, you know it has been a right hard winter up here and I just don't hardly see how we can give anything this year." There are occasions when it's time to receive!

I doubt that many of us have as legitimate a reason why we can't give. When you receive the covenant card in the mail probably this week, and are asked to complete it and bring it to the worship service on December 6, what will be your response? Will you ignore it? Even though the covenant this year is between you and God, and the envelope will not be opened by the bookkeeper, do you feel it is no one's business? Do you give out of a sense of duty? Do you give because of your commitment to God? Do you give because you are a church member and you feel it is your responsibility to give? Do you give grudgingly or joyfully?

I suggest that we look at giving this morning in a new way. Consider giving your privilege. It's a privilege to give. According to the standards of the world, because you are an American you are wealthy. Why has God made you wealthy? So you can give, so you can support God's work. It's a privilege. A minister friend of mine told me last week about a lady in his congregation who won't sign a commitment card in the fall because she wants to wait to make her pledge after she learns if she is going to receive an increase in her social security check. You see, she tithes; she gives 10% of even her social security check, and she waits to know the amount of the check, so she can give her 10%. She knows she is privileged to give. She can hold up her head. She knows she is doing her part. She knows she is fulfilling her covenant. She is privileged!

It's a privilege to give so that the hungry may be fed, the homeless sheltered. It's a privilege to be able to respond to human need. Every day United Methodist Americans feed, support and educate 1,000,000 children in the world. 9,000 mission projects and programs are kept alive and growing throughout the world, 900 of which are hospitals and schools. It's a privilege to give. Yesterday a turkey dinner was prepared by Dan and Suzanne Williams, and served by 31 workers to 166 senior citizens in Fellowship Hall. It's a privilege to provide a local mission of food and fellowship. It's a

IT'S A PRIVILEGE

LUKE 6:38

DOUGLAS NORRIS

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

NOVEMBER 22, 1987

privilege to provide the staff, facilities, materials, equipment, so that trained, encouraged, supported lay persons may teach our children and youth. It's a privilege to give!

Not only is it a privilege to give, but it is a joy as well, because giving is rewarded! You have Jesus' word on that, Luke 6:38, "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." That is God's promise. That is the law of giving. You get back what you give, only more so. You get back joy, satisfaction and pleasure because it's a privilege to give. In other words, give until it feels good. When you make your covenant giving pledge for 1988, give until it feels good; give until you experience joy. Give until your giving comes back to you--generously, abundantly, pressed down, shaken together, running over, overflowing your hands, and falling into your lap!

Children and youth--you who yet live with your parents--have you discovered the joy of giving? Do you know that you are also privileged? You also may give. Adults, have you made a covenant with God to give until it feels good? Try it. It's a privilege to give.