

“That's the Least I Can Do”

Psalm 138:1-5; II Corinthians 8:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 8, 2015 – 24th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

I was reading the other day about a fund-raising campaign for a certain hospital. In that effort the consultant took the canvassers through all the steps of receiving contributions. His parting suggestion to the volunteers was this: Never suggest to the prospect a sum as a minimum contribution, for a minimum has a funny way of turning into a maximum.

This article reminded me of my time in non-profit management. Often we would send out mailings describing our current work, with the hope that a certain percentage of those who received the appeal would make a response.

Good work was being done and, to continue those efforts, we were dependent on funds from the public. If you don't ask, you surely are not going to receive; so we went to people with our cause. We explained the pending opportunities and the resources needed. Naturally not everyone responded, but enough did to make the mailings cost-effective.

We're all acquainted with solicitation forms where several suggested contributions appear. You usually find something like ten, fifteen, and twenty-five dollars with another category marked "other" with a blank line beside it. Of course if you put in your own amount it's hoped that it would be more than any of the suggestions.

To help assure this in mailings, "other" usually appears after the highest amount rather than being placed before the lowest number. The intent of "other" is to encourage more than the printed amounts, not less. Look at the next mailing that comes to you and see if this isn't true.

In our mailings we set our suggested amounts by determining how much realistically we might receive from the general public in a mass mailing. We were in full agreement with the hospital fund raiser when he said, "Minimums have a funny way of turning into maximums."

So let's say we sought to have twenty dollars be our average contribution, we would put that figure as our least of the suggested choices. We did this because we knew that most people would select the lowest one, which is what we were looking for in the first place. Highly motivated individuals might be willing to give even more than our suggestions, so they offset those who didn't respond for one reason or another.

Minimums have a way of turning into maximums. Many churches have adopted the policy of never publishing the average contribution level of their parishioners. What they're concerned about is that people will look at that average and compare it with their own giving. If they've been contributing more than that, it's possible they might pare it back, satisfied that adjusting downward still right on the median.

On the other hand few, if any, are likely to raise their pledge if they notice they're under the norm. Their rationale is often that others of greater means are able to balance out the smaller

amount folks like them will give. So it's not necessary. Someone else will make up the difference.

This goes along with how children commonly approach life. Certainly one of the basic premises that kids operate on is "What's the least I have to do to get by?" What's the least time I have to spend brushing my teeth? What's the least effort I have to exert in picking up my toys? What's the least amount of study time I have to put in? What's the least acceptable effort I have to make in dusting the house or trimming the grass? Children aren't dumb; they test the waters continually. They want to see just how high is the standard, just how far they'll have to reach.

The same thing happens when they get to school. If the teacher says they must do at least 20 arithmetic problems for homework, how many do you think they'll probably do? If a term paper has to be a minimum of 10 pages, do you think it's likely to be much more? My high school English students always asked if they could double-space instead of single space and still meet my requirements. They were usually disappointed in the answer.

Doing just what you're told and no more is the minimum standard by which all too many operate as they grow into adulthood. What's expected, even amusing in child, is irritating once it's brought over into maturity.

We all know how frustrating it is to be waited on by clerks or servers who approaches their job in this way. And you find such people working also for the government, and insurance companies, and banks, and in most other positions, too. Only the bare minimum and no more. In hospital visits I often hear tales of those doctors who whiz in and out before the patient can ask any questions. As one patient said of his specialist, "He didn't stay long enough to introduce himself, but he sure won't forget to bill me!"

Here's one thing that I've noticed over the years: the people who approach life from the standpoint of doing the least required are often the unhappiest people. Those who expend effort in a minimum way' also seem to experience joy in a minimum way. And they get downright surely when they have to do or give even one little bit more than what they deem is absolutely necessary. Anger is the only thing they'll give you in unlimited quantities.

Biblical faith, on the other hand, challenges us to live life to the maximum. Paul, in his second letter to the church at Corinth, lifts up the desperate needs of the poor in Jerusalem. Previously Paul directed the Corinthians to put aside some money on the first day of every week to go for the relief of impoverished fellow believers. Now he gives the example of the churches in Macedonia. They have little money but, what they have, they are willing to share. Within their own poverty, the Macedonians have reached out willingly to those in even greater straits.

"Don't misunderstand," Paul says. "I'm not trying to tell you what to do and I'm not pitting your generosity against another's. Ultimately none of us can be generous in any way that matches the giving of Jesus himself for our sake. For you he became poor so that, by his poverty, you might become rich. What I want to tell you is this: offer what you can, be as generous as you are able, and approach the obligations of your faith with eagerness. For if eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has— not according to what you don't have."

Paul makes a strong case that faith encourages us to enter life to the fullest, to live it to the maximum. There are rightly some things you may want to be tentative about or where you need to limit your participation; but, in really important things, there should be no hesitancy. When it comes to living a life of faith you have to jump in completely if you are going to really experience what it has to give you. If you only step in halfway, you are going to find only part of the transforming power God holds in store for you and others.

Most congregations have a certain number of members who are "minimum people". True in Paul's day and true in ours. Their attendance is minimal. They volunteer for the minimum work. They take part in the fewest number of studies. They spend the least time in personal meditation. They make a minimum financial pledge. Then when days of adversity come their way, as it does for all of us, they are surprised that their faith doesn't offer them more as a resource and strength.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to excel in their faith, to approach all of life with eagerness and a sense of generous giving. He says look at how you live in terms of the most you can be rather than the least. This approach is also echoed in our Old Testament reading today from the Psalms where it says: "I give you thanks, O Lord, with all my heart." It doesn't say, "I give you thanks up to a point or in a reserved way or at only the minimum level I must."

No, the psalmist conveys a natural enthusiasm, a willingness to respond to God fully. "I give thanks to you, O Lord, with all my heart; I sing your praise. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul; great is the glory of the Lord."

What you give, you will get. That holds true in almost every aspect of life. And that certainly characterizes faith. If you only believe and act at the level of the least you have to do, you'll surely fail to find the greater extent of what you're seeking. It's when you bring your total self to faith, when you participate at the high end rather than at the low, that you discover the full strength and power and joy that God wants to give you.

Wise are those who understand this and build their lives accordingly.