

Letter from Macedonia
Oct. 20, 2012
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

When you arrived this morning, you were handed a worship bulletin with a big dollar sign on the cover. Unless you are completely delusional, you knew at that moment what we would be talking about today in worship. You're still here, which I deeply appreciate.

So, let's go ahead and talk for a few minutes about money. The body of Christ depends on your financial stewardship. There is no way around that. Your faith and your discipleship is not complete without it. No way around that, either.

Jesus the Christ was fully divine and fully human. The church is the same. The church is a place where the divine Holy Spirit reigns and, on a regular basis, does things that far exceed our expectation, our imagination and, even sometimes, our faith. But the church is also a human institution that exists in a fully human world, where it cannot serve God through your time and talent alone. God needs your money, too. There is no shame, no apology in saying that.

Your pledge provides the ministerial and support staff that is here six and often seven days a week. Your pledge enables ministry to those sitting to your right and your left and to others you will never meet, across the city, every day of the year. As scripture says of God almighty, the church neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Your pledge stretches the arms of this church across more than 15 zip codes and into multiple counties in two states. It provides blood-flow and cash-flow for ministry partners and service agencies that house the homeless, feed the poor, welcome and assimilate the immigrant and educate the child. Your pledge is Holy working capital as nearby as our vegetable garden, the bilingual preschool and Caldwell House and as far away as Common Hope in Guatemala.

Your church pledge provides comfort to those in your own church family who are sick and suffering, those who are recovering from surgery, those grieving death and those facing financial crisis. It cools, heats and holds up these cherished buildings and grounds, our inheritance from a century of predecessors who left them to us debt free. Your pledge is the means of building friendships and fostering racial reconciliation within

this church family and elsewhere, through picnics and fish fries and justice forums and Sunday school classes.

In 2013, your pledge will need to go further. By God's hand, we will bring on a new music director and a new colleague in ministry. We also need to supplement our administrative resources to keep up with the pace and the energy of your discipleship.

Your pledge needs to reflect your priorities and your values. Your pledge demonstrates the integrity of your faith. Where do you put God in your budget?

The plaque on the exterior front wall of the sanctuary bears the words of Matthew 6:33, which reads: "Seek ye, first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness will be given to you as well."

Seek ye, first, not second or third Not tomorrow or later. Not with whatever is left over after all our wants and needs and pleasures have been covered. Yes, we all need to pay to put a roof over our head, food on our table, gas in the car or buy fare for the bus. We all need to have something to wear and, if we can, to put a few dollars away for retirement. Those, you might say, are essentials in living and that living has a cost. Granted.

But what is more essential to your living than the love, grace, comfort and provision of your God, your Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, there with you in the valley of the shadow of death, there with you on the mountaintop and there with you on the plain of every-day life.

And, in this, our year-long centennial celebration and reflection, haven't we all been newly awakened to this preciousness of this gift we have been given, this church, this faith and this church family?

Do you tithe? If not, why not? If not, can you move closer to tithing in your pledge? In your bulletins, you should find an insert. One side bears our scripture and some narrative for thought. The other provides a chart of a range of income levels and percentages. When we clean up the church after worship today, I hope not to find *any* of those inserts left behind in the pews or elsewhere on campus. Instead, I ask that you take it home. Study it. Think about your household budget. Then, go to your God in prayer.

Without hesitation or apology, I ask that you find a way to move your pledge up, from the left to the right of that chart ... because we can and should do more with you, for

you and through you ... to be the body of Christ in our city ... to be the liquid church ... reforming, reshaping and responding to the good news of the Gospel ... provoked by the Holy Spirit, through whom and by whom we all live and move and have our being.

So, if you haven't already, take time this week to ask yourself two simple questions: Do you have enough? How much is left over? Then complete your pledge of your time and talent and treasure and bring your pledges to be dedicated in worship next week.

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Now before I sit down I also have some exciting news to share.

Last week as Beth Van Gorp and her homecoming team were breaking down Belk Hall after the big luncheon, something amazing happened. Diane Mowery was putting something away in a closet when she found a secret compartment. In it, she found an ancient scroll. It was filled with writing in ancient Greek. Together the resident brain trust of Rev. Veronica Rogers, Rev. Jeff Mitchener, Rev. Elizabeth Hyland and Intern Will Davis, translated the letter.

Tomorrow we will alert the news media to the discovery of this historic treasure. But we wanted to read you the letter first. It reads:

To the Presbyterians of Charlotte gathered at the corner of Park and Fifth: Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God of ages, who lives and reigns forever, in the time of our writing and in the time of your reading of this secret epistle.

We are sisters and brothers in the faith living in a place called Macedonia in the year 60. We are an assembly of Jews and gentiles under the guidance of the Apostle Paul, who visited us and shared the remarkable news of the man named Jesus, the many miracles he performed and the truth of his message to the low and the high, the mighty and the downtrodden.

We want you to know of our abundant joy and overflowing generosity in the service of this Jesus, who was sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Ruth and Sarah, of Mary and Elizabeth. This Jesus who had much to say, but who spoke about money more than any other topic.

When a rich young ruler asked this Jesus how he could receive eternal life, Jesus told him to sell all he had, give the money to the poor and follow him. The young man walked away in shame, because he had become too attached to his possessions.

On another occasion, Jesus took his disciples to the Temple. There people of means were putting large sums of money into the Temple treasury. Then a poor widow came and she gave her last two copper coins, leaving her with nothing. And Jesus said: "Truly I tell you this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing ... out of her poverty she has put in everything she had."

We want you to know, sisters and brothers in Charlotte, of the transforming power of Jesus' ministry and teachings; how, one day, Jesus stood on a mountainside and described the kingdom of heaven. He changed our hearts as he portrayed the kingdom as a place where those who mourn will be comforted, the hungry will be filled, the pure in heart will see God, the peacemakers will be called children of God. Then he said what we in Macedonia found to be the most remarkable thing of all – "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

You see, friends in Charlotte, we in Macedonia have very little. We live in extreme poverty and are sorely afflicted. Yet, inspired by our new faith in God in Christ, we begged the Apostle Paul for the privilege of sending money to help spread the movement that is now being called Christianity. We gave because Jesus helped us see that, with his help, we are the ones who are to build the kingdom of heaven on earth. So, we gave according to our means ... and even beyond our means. Because, you see, we have given ourselves first to the Lord.

Friends and Presbyterians, we want you to know the excitement we feel from giving ourselves to this new movement modeled after Jesus. We wish you were here to watch how the Jesus Way is spreading across our region. It is not that our times are easy. The Romans seek to oppress us at every turn. The religious authorities feel threatened by us and we are afraid that, as with the Romans, they are conspiring against us. But we know that Jesus said it would be difficult to follow him and we are unafraid.

Yet we want you to know how we are changed and how honored we feel to be on this new adventure in faith. We are renewed, revived and resurrected. Do you know what that feels like in your assembly there in Charlotte? We hope you do and we think you might.

We want you to know how richly blessed we feel to be helping to build the kingdom of heaven on earth, how energizing it is to know that, in Christ's life and resurrection, we are assured that our efforts will not fail.

So we call on you – as we did with the Corinthians – to join us in this divine endeavor of faith and trust. In your time and place, transform this world into a place where, as it is written, “the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”¹

So, friends in the faith, we implore you to act boldly and to give generously to God, as we have, for as the Apostle Paul has written, “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.”²

Now the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all of you,

Your friends in Macedonia

And that is where the letter from Macedonia ends. Amen.

¹ Ex. 16:18

² 2 Corinthians 8:9