

October 28, 2007

Christians Giving to the World  
Faith it Forms

Hebrews 11:1  
David Digby

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

We sang "On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand."

We know about sinking sand that sucks us down.

We trust the solid foundation where we can stand, no matter what.

"**Faith** is the assurance of things hoped for,  
the conviction of things not seen."

Sometimes we put faith out on the fringes.

We think faith is what we have when we don't have anything else.

We think faith is what we go on when we run out of facts.

But we know better.

Faith gets us on solid rock and out of sinking sand.

Faith forms our hearts so we transform our world.

UH OH. IT'S TIME FOR A COMMERCIAL BREAK.

We are in the season of Christians Giving to the World.

On our way to giving to the world, however,

we have to pay Alliant Energy, and the City of Ames, Qwest and Chitty

Garbage Service, and the insurance bill, the snow shoveling bill,

and the upkeep on the building,

and the salaries of Karen Ewalt and Gary Kane,  
Mary Jane Button-Harrison and Vicki Whitman,  
Sherri Khan and Lois Miller or Rose Holbrook and me.

The church is caught in the same double bind as the rest of us:

our income doesn't go up but our expenses do.

The church has trouble paying the bills.

I wish we didn't have to come to you to talk about money, but we do.

We are careful with expenses. We need help with income.

When you look at your church, what do you see?

- Do you see all the people waiting, wanting our help in feeding their children or putting gas in the car so they can get to work?
- Do you see your church friends joining with other people of faith to press for some solutions to the healthcare crisis in this county?
- Do you see us struggling with how citizens of goodwill who read the Bible relate to the twelve-million undocumented people living in this land?
- Do you see church friends studying our education system: from the way we pay our teachers to the number of students we put in our classrooms as we prepare them to succeed in the complex, global economy of the future?
- Do you see us taking on the problem of poverty, where people in Story

County working full-time minimum pay jobs still cannot pay their bills?

- Do you see us praying for the rest of us: lifting us up in our tribulations - so we may know God's abundance in the midst of our trials?
- Did you see us helping get some of the predatory lending stopped because we believe God cares about economic justice?
- Do you see us giving each of our high school graduates \$500.00 as seed money, continuing the blessing we gave them as babies?
- Do you see elders and deacons taking communion bread and wine to our homebound members, listening to the stories and praying with our mature and stalwart saints whose bodies are slowing but whose hearts beat to the rhythms of heaven?
- Do you see us feeding the world on Thanksgiving, throwing open wide the doors and hearts of the church that all may find a welcome here and a feast which is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet?
- Do you see people coming for Bible study and Christian education, for small groups where grace flows like balm and tender hearts grow strong?

November 18 we'll come singing our way into this sanctuary to give God our grateful praise - and our pledge cards.

Between now and then please take a look at your church.

Think about what you can do to make us stronger, more vibrant, more fit as God's instrument to transform the world.

THAT'S THE END OF THE COMMERCIAL.

Christians give to the world because we have a part to play in God's great drama of salvation.

Churches are part of that plan.

Churches work and witness because we are part of the way God provides for the world.

We are assured that Christ Jesus is the solid rock where we stand.

Faith and finances flow together, hearts and treasure follow hope.

We find God trustworthy

in sickness as well as health,

in prosperity as well as poverty,

in hours of ease as well as well as days of toil.

We give to the world because God cares about people crying in poverty and sickness and ignorance. Our faith forms us into persons of compassion and generosity.

It's about **conviction** and **assurance**.

"Conviction" and "assurance" are strong words.

You can smell the sweat on them and see the power rippling through them.

They are building-block words.

When we are formed by conviction and assurance

we don't give up on God's work  
and we don't give in to the pressures of the world.

When we are formed and informed then the work we perform  
is powered by faith and lubricated with love.

Assurance is what faith **HAS**.

Faith has assurance of things hoped for.

Faith already possesses in the present what God promises in the future.

Bible scholar, Thomas Long, says that faith is partly an inward reality  
and partly an outward force.

The **inward reality** is tranquil spirit despite the strains of living...  
like the calm at the eye of the hurricane which is quiet in the center  
despite the storm swirling on the periphery.

Faith is assurance in God's trustworthiness.

Our inward reality is knowing that God provides.

Faith, hope and love abide, these three.

Faith holds hope and love together.

But faith is also **outward force**.

Faith is the advance team moving on a mission behind enemy lines.

Faith sings "We shall overcome" because God overcomes,

then faith goes marching in the streets for justice.

Faith claims the vision of Revelation that mourning and crying and pain will be no more." (Rev 21:4)

All the while faith prays boldly for those who mourn.

All the while faith serves tenderly those who weep.

All the while faith works tirelessly to ease the pain of those who are wounded.

Inwardly faith moves hearts.      Outwardly faith moves mountains.

Faith is the lens through which we see life.

Faith sees things the eye cannot see.

"What can be seen," writes Paul, "is temporary.

What cannot be seen is eternal." (II Cor 4:18)

If we walk by faith we see love abiding at the heart of the universe.

Without faith all we see is swirling clouds of dust in the cosmos,  
sinking sands, and exploding cinders hurling through empty space.

Futility sees death and danger, doom and destruction,  
pestilence and plagues, fires and floods.

Faith sees all those things and more.

Faith sees grace everywhere.

Faith sees the providence of God shining through the tribulations.

Faith sees a new vitality shooting up out of stinking pestilence.

Of course there is suffering and setback.

Of course there is violence and hardship.

"But, nevertheless," sings faith, "there is more.  
God provides. God hears human cries. God is the rock.  
Blessed assurance, we live by faith and it gives us new sight.

That's faith.

You can't beat it out of people.

You can only kill the body but not the soul.

That's assurance.

That's conviction.

- We need churches to tell the story of Jesus and so form us as persons who live by faith.
- We need this church to bear witness in the powerful way we have learned here.
- None of us can give all to the church but all of us can give something.
- God wants our hearts, minds, and strength. Giving those, we follow with our love, energy and money.
- God has a plan for us and our giving to the world through the church is part of it.

You'll be getting a pledge card in the mail. Take a look at your church.

Consider the needs. Think about your faith. Give as generously as you can.

We'll celebrate the results on November 18. Thanks be to God.

## **Christians Giving to the World: Seeds to Sow 11-4-07**

In the fall of 1996 Tim and I moved our family from suburban Ankeny to rural Grundy County. Our home and the church we served were out in the proverbial middle of nowhere - out in among the corn and bean fields. Living in the country was a new experience for me. It was quiet. At times, too quiet. And the winter was long and dark. In the dark of winter in that remote corner of the Iowa countryside, seed catalogues were a welcome reminder that spring would, indeed come again. I spent a lot of time pouring over the beautiful, hope-filled seed catalogues that winter. Imagining planting a garden rich and lush - full of color and beauty.

It was February when I decided it was time to order seeds. I had had a lot of time to think and dream and imagine, and do some research as well. I decided that I wanted to grow a watermelon. I had never grown a watermelon before. And I didn't just want to grow any

watermelon. I wanted to grow a BIG watermelon. Maybe even one that would be State Fair caliber. I'm sure there are some among you who understand how these things work. But I did not. So I did my homework. In order to grow a big watermelon, the soil needed nutrients. I discovered there are three categories of nutrients that plants tend to need - nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium. As the time grew near to plant, I mixed my own fertilizer formula made of potash, bone meal and blood meal. When I planted the watermelon seeds I mixed the fertilizer into the soil along with a sizable portion of turkey manure for good measure and waited for the seeds to grow.

Once the plants began to grow, I then plucked out all but the best vine. And do you know, that by my birthday in September of that year, I had succeeded in growing a VERY LARGE watermelon. It probably wasn't quite State Fair material, but by my standards, it was gigantic! And it tasted great! What a fantastic birthday present.

Before I got it in my mind to grow a big watermelon, I had never

really understood the importance of fertile ground. Oh, I had planted a garden before, but hadn't paid much attention to how the condition of the soil affects the plants. Farmers, of course, know all too well the importance of fertile ground to a successful harvest and yield. And this year seems to be a good year for Iowa farmers. Good soil is where it all starts.

Jesus often taught in parables. Using stories about things people could wrap their minds around, things people knew about - like seeds and soil - using these parables, Jesus taught very important faith lessons. Like the parable of the sower in our reading from Mark this morning. "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other

seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." There are two lessons here in this parable that I want us to think about today. One is about the character of the sower and the other is about the character of the soil.

The sower is not very careful. I mean, really, seed is dropping everywhere. Obviously, he's not concerned about the cost of the seed. It's falling on the path and on the rocks and among the thorns. It's going everywhere! And that doesn't seem to be a problem in this story. It's just a matter of course that seed is getting sown freely. Much of the seed is ending up wasted on places it can't seem to grow. I think this is important to the story and to our faith. Obviously Jesus' message isn't one about perfect percentages. The seeds get cast about. Some grow. Some don't. If it all grew then that probably means there was too much caution in sowing... not enough risk. As theologian Paul Tillich once said, "He who risks and fails can be

forgiven. He who never risks and never fails is a failure in his whole being." The seeds of God's kingdom are abundant. They must be sown with abandon. For we cannot know which ones will grow and flourish and bear fruit and which ones will die for lack of nourishment. That is one lesson of Jesus' parable. Never hesitate to sow seeds, even if the ground seems rocky or thorn infested. We are not responsible to make the seeds grow. That is the work of God. But we are responsible to sow seeds of the Kingdom of God wherever we go and in whatever we do and then trust in God do the rest.

The other lesson in Jesus' parable of the sower is the same lesson from the watermelon. Good soil rocks! Good soil grows healthy plants. Good soil can produce amazing things! And, as I discovered, there are things we can do to nourish the soil. There are ingredients that can be added to the soil to make it the best possible environment in which to grow seeds into plants which produce fruit. And it does matter what those ingredients are, especially if we are to grow seeds

of the Kingdom of God.

There is a poem I read many years ago when I was a young parent that illustrates what I am trying to say here. It's called "If a Child Lives With". See if this doesn't ring true.

*"If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn. If a child lives with hostility, she learns to fight. If a child lives with fear, he learns to be apprehensive. If a child lives with pity, she learns to feel sorry for herself. If a child lives with jealousy, he learns to feel guilty. If a child lives with encouragement, she learns to be self-confident. If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient. If a child lives with praise, she learns to be appreciative. If a child lives with acceptance, he learns to love. If a child lives with approval, she learns to like herself. If a child lives with recognition, he learns to have a goal. If a child lives with fairness, she learns what justice is. If a child lives with honesty, he learns what truth is. If a child lives with sincerity, she learns to have faith in herself and those around her. If*

*a child lives with love, he learns that the world is a wonderful place to live in."*

The nutrients that go into the soil affect the outcome... it makes a difference in the fruit it grows. That's not to say that miracles don't happen. We can probably all think of children who ended up outstanding adults in spite of their terrible upbringing. God does sometimes work in mysterious ways. But as ones who have heard the Gospel, we know what nutrients are generally needed in order for the best possible fruit to grow. And those nutrients are needed so badly for the sake of the world.

So what am I talking about? The seeds of the Kingdom of God have a hard time taking root and growing in an atmosphere of scarcity or fear or anxiety or dissatisfaction or discontent or hostility or hatred. When seeds are sown in that kind of soil, it is just too hard to grow anything that is of God. And if you look around, you see there is more than enough of those things. Turn on the TV and you hear and

see things that would evoke fear and a feeling of scarcity. Those things utterly incompatible with the Kingdom of God... which is about love and abundance.

Okay, here's where I interject a plug for the church. The world absolutely needs the church to fertilize the soil and generously scatter the seeds of the Kingdom of God. In that lies our hope and our future. Left unchecked by the gospel, fear runs rampant and greed takes on a life of its own and a sense of anxiety takes over like a frenzy and there ensues a downward spiral, and people get hurt all along the way. And the world becomes a scary place which produces more fear which makes the world a scarier place... and so it goes.

The church needs to be the sowers of the good news that God's love and grace abound. That life is stronger than death, that love is stronger than fear or hate, that there are blessings a plenty not scarcity. Those are the nutrients that can truly grow the seeds of the Kingdom. Those are the nutrients that can bring forth fruit of the

spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control. And where those are present there is hope and the spiral goes upward which lifts the downtrodden and bears more hope and love, for love casts out fear. Indeed, John tells us that God is love. Love is God's gift to the world. And we, as the church, have been entrusted with the seeds of God's love to scatter about with abandon while, at the same time, adding nutrients to the soil that more of those seeds might grow and produce fruit.

When we come to worship, when we participate in this community of faith - in the ministries both large and small - we are nurturing and adding nutrients to the soil of our lives that we might bear fruit and nurture the soil of other people's lives and so on. We plant and we fertilize and leave the rest up to God.

When we give money to keep the ministries of First Christian Church going, there are far rippling effects that go out into the world - beyond these doors. When we give our time and our focus and allow

our gifts to be used together with others through this community of faith, the God who is bigger than we can think or imagine is able to bless and multiply our work far beyond our reach. First Christian Church has been here, seeking to be faithful stewards of the seeds of the Kingdom for a bunch of years now. And God is calling us to continue to be faithful stewards, generous in spirit, nurturing and tending every bit of soil to which we touch so that seeds might grow and people might know of God's love for them, for us, for the world. We can do more, we can cast the seed farther and nourish the ground with greater success when we do it together. So let us sow. Amen.

**November 12, 2007 Christians Giving to the World: II Corinthians 8:1-9**  
**Grace it Knows**

Grace. Christians know something rather remarkable, I think, about grace. In our better moments we know that the financial support we give to the church isn't about budgets and bills. We know the grip giving has on grace. God's abundance that changes the world for good. When the church spends the money we put in the offering trays with joy and thanksgiving, miracles happen. It is grace. Grace rides on the wings of giving and giving releases fearful hearts for gratitude. By grace lives are turned around. Good news. Good news. God is love. We are beloved and counted, every one of us, as precious and important and beautiful.

Giving creates grace. Grace makes living something joyous.

I used to lead canoe trips of high school kids down a wilderness river as part of the church's summer camping program. We'd pack our food and water and gear into canoes and ride the watery world by day and sleep at night on a gravel bar under the stars.

It was a remote river and there was no communication with the outside world.

One year one of the counselors got hurt and one of the other counselors had to load him into a canoe and paddle down some fifteen miles to a bridge that where they would hitchhike into town for medical treatment.

The rest of us paddled behind, to the bridge, picked up the empty canoe and went hard the rest of the day, hoping to meet up with our friends at one of a couple of little dirt paths that snaked down to the river.

At the end of the day, under the dying sun, we made camp. As we studied the topo map we determined that there might be one more little road, about four miles down-river from our camp. As everyone else set to cooking supper I set off in an empty canoe, armed with two extra paddles, into the turbulent river.

Darkness fell. I went through rapids blind, surrounded by the roar of water crashing over rocks. There was no moon that night. I had no idea of how long I'd been gone or how far I'd traveled. Finally, exhausted, I gave up. There was no road. There were no counselors waiting anxiously for rescue. I struggled to paddle the canoe back upriver against the current and through rapids.

I paddled hard. When there was a gravel bar, I'd get out and pull the canoe. Several times I collapsed at the river's edge to sleep, the canoe tied to my arm. I was thirsty, sore, and spooked by every jumping fish or cracking branch.

Hours passed when I began to see the strangest sight: a glow, steadily reflecting off the bluffs that bordered the river, faint, but inviting. As I paddled it grew brighter. It was the steady light of our Coleman lantern. It was a beacon. It looked like home. I rounded the bend in the river and

came full into light and felt my canoe steadied, guided by unseen hands. Unseen hands pulled toward the safety of the shore. All the kids had heard my labored breathing and had waded into the cold, chest-deep river, grasped my canoe, and conducted me home.

Whenever I think of grace I think of that lantern glowing into the night and the beautiful people who surrounded me, like hovering angels, escorting me to food and rest and comfort.

In Bible times the mother church was the one in Jerusalem. But times were hard. The Christians in Jerusalem were poor. Paul volunteered to go out to the Gentile churches to take an offering for the Jewish sisters and brothers. It was a radical idea: Gentiles giving to Jews. People who knew Jesus but who didn't know each other had to start seeing themselves as members of a single family.

In one of the districts, a poor district, Macedonia, there were three Gentile churches - Phillipa, Thessalonica and Berea. Those Christians had suffered because of their faith. They were mostly shop keepers and merchants. They lost business. Some were victims of economic boycotts. Some had their businesses burned or houses looted. The Romans treated them badly. They'd become outcasts at home.

They heard about the offering and begged Paul to let them participate.

Did you notice Paul's words when he wrote about them to the Christians in

Corinth? The Macedonians had a severe ordeal of affliction.

They had abundant joy. They suffered extreme poverty. They overflowed in a wealth of generosity. They gave according to their means. They gave beyond their means. It was more than could be expected. It was by the grace of God.

By the grace of God... Paul understood that there is a difference between charity for humanitarian considerations and giving as an expression of God's grace.

Giving for grace, Christians giving by grace create blessed money and make miracles happen.

Sometimes when the elder prays over the offerings we have just given I imagine, by the grace of God, those \$1.00 bills becoming \$5.00's, the \$5.00's becoming \$10.00's, the \$10.00's becoming \$20.00's, the \$20.00's becoming \$50.00's. It's not just wild imagination. God makes much of little, and transforms human lives.

Some of you put cash, every week, in the little brown envelopes, marked "Local Aid Fund." You don't sign it. I don't know who you are. I wish you could be here during the week and see the grace that flows because of your gifts. I wish you could hear the stories of people, good people in desperate need, and what our little Local Aid gift means in their lives. I wish you could share with the prayers we share with those people, see the hope born, wrap them up in a Comfort Quilt from the church and see them leaving the

building with a bounce in their step and a blessing in their heart.

Grace. Christians change the world by the grace of God in the gifts we offer. It's as powerful as precious canoe trippers wading into a cold river in the middle of the night at 3:00 a.m., saving lives, changing fear into joy, weariness into relief, alone-ness into family. Grace. It's something God gives. It is, my friends, the best bargain on the planet.

When you think about your pledge for this church for next year, and prepare the Faith and Finances pledge card, remember grace. Remember the poor Christians in Macedonia who set us an example. Remember the Christians in Jerusalem who needed the money. Remember your church here. Pray about it. Seriously. Abundant joy they had. Extreme poverty they had. Ordeal of affliction they had. And grace, amazing, abundant, overflowing wealth of generosity they had. And remember Jesus. His generous act giving all, translating his riches into poverty for our sakes, that we might become rich... Christians giving to the world, in Christ Jesus, know grace. Thanks be to God!

## **Christians Giving to the World: Giving Thanks 11-18-2007**

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Philippians 1:3-11

"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge, and full insight, to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

In first Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul encourages believers to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (I Thess. 5:16) Give

thanks in all circumstances. Hmm. If you're like me, you certainly know how to say "thank you." That is something that was ingrained in me from the time I was a very small child. I think my mother taught me to say thank you in all circumstances. Saying thank you comes almost too easily. There have been many times when I have said "Thank you" for the silliest things. Have you ever said thank you and then laughed at yourself because it just didn't quite make sense in the context?

Last week in the newspaper I read a letter to Miss Manners from a woman who'd been served with a legal summons. As she took the papers from the officer, she politely said, "Thank you." This woman wrote to ask Miss Manners if that was wrong. According to Miss Manners, it wasn't *necessary* to say thank you in this situation, but it never hurts to say, "Thank you." That's probably what my mom would say as well. It never hurts. Alfred Painter once said, "Saying thank you is more than good manners. It is good spirituality."

This time of year we think about being thankful. And that is a good practice... to set aside at least one day of the year specifically for the purpose of giving thanks. As children we learn about pilgrims and Indians and corn and turkey. And how it was to leave everything you knew and come to a new place far away, not knowing really, if you'd make it alive or not. I read a quote recently that said, "The Pilgrims made seven times more graves than huts. No Americans have been more impoverished than these who, nevertheless, set aside a day of thanksgiving." And you know, so often that's the way it is - when you are vulnerable and at the mercy of God and others, it is then that you are the most filled with gratitude.

The Apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote to the church at Philippi. He was in prison and awaiting his trial, not sure what his future might hold. He had suffered because of his faith in the gospel. Yet in the midst of such uncertainty and struggle, he was filled with thanksgiving. In his letter to the church at Philippi he wrote, "I thank

my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." Sitting there in prison, thinking about his life and ministry, he couldn't help but come alive with joy and gratitude for the fullness of life, and the depth and width and breadth of purpose with which he had been engaged since encountering Jesus.

Singer/Songwriter, Joni Mitchell sings a song called, "Big Yellow Taxi." The refrain goes like this: "Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone. They paved paradise and put up a parking lot." So often it takes losing or the risk of losing something to discover how very important it is to us. Sitting there in prison, Paul gave thanks to God for all the blessings of his life and ministry. And it wasn't that kind of obligatory, almost rote "Thank you" that I was talking about earlier. Paul's giving thanks to God was heartfelt. It was the kind of thanks that you feel with all of your being. It was, no doubt, the kind of thanks that those first pilgrims felt when they finally put their feet on dry land, or made it through the first winter.

It was the kind of thanks that we experience when a child is born or a cancer goes into remission, or we receive a gift that changes our whole lives and gives us hope.

There is a favorite movie that starts airing on TV around this time of year. It is another story of not knowing what you've got till it's gone - the story of George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life." I think I saw a flyer about some local Ames churches that will be performing "It's a Wonderful Life" at the City Auditorium to benefit for Habitat for Humanity (I'm not sure of the date). Anyway, many if not most of you probably know the story. It's the story of a man named George Bailey. He was a loyal son, husband and father who took over the Savings and Loan business when his father could no longer run it. Due to a misplacement of some funds by his uncle, it appeared to some as though George had gone bad, or at least become careless. People came in demanding their money. He was in trouble with the law. He had nowhere to turn. His life was unraveling so he decided to end it all. It'd have been better if he'd never been born.

Well, then comes divine intervention. God sends a rag-tag angel named Clarence to save George from himself. Clarence decides to show George what the world would be like if he *had* never been born. The world George had never been part of was a dark world. And many people suffered because George wasn't there to show compassion and offer a little grace and humanity as people tried to earn a living and make a home for their families. The greedy landlord and factory owner, Mr. Potter, took every last penny people had and their lives were harsh.

You see, the small acts of kindness and care that George had practiced almost without knowing it had planted seeds and those seeds had grown and infected and affected the world in a ripple effect just as the rings in a lake when you skip a rock. And when George saw what had been lost to the world simply because he'd never been born into it, a deep chord was struck. And he understood what a blessing his life had been and what he'd been given and what he'd given in return. And all he could think about was getting his life back and living each day

giving thanks, not only in words, but in a life well lived and shared. As Joni Mitchell sings, "Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone." Well, fortunately for George, he figured out what he had and got his life back, and people came to his rescue and gave what they had, and more, because he'd always been there for them when they needed him. Now it was their turn to give thanks, offering what they had in a spirit of joy and generosity.

Do we know what we've got? Have you ever wondered what the world would be like if you'd never been born? That's kind of a hard concept to wrap your mind around. As I was thinking about giving thanks, as a church, a congregation, as First Christian Church, my imagination grabbed hold of me and I started thinking of all the acts of kindness and generosity and words of grace and gospel and light shining in the darkness that have come because First Christian Church is here. If Clarence came here today, maybe he could show us what Ames would be like without the witness of this community of faith that has been here all these years. What would it be like if all those seeds

hadn't been planted? Just think of the ripple effect. Yes, there are other churches in this community doing important ministry. But God also has work for us to do and has called us to be church in this time and place, for the sake of the gospel, to share God's love and grace.

Do we experience on a very deep level a sense of gratitude, that feel-it-with-every-fiber-of-our-being sense of thankfulness for what we have and what we are able to give in return? Do we know how to truly give thanks? It *is* important to say thank you. But giving thanks goes way beyond words. It does not depend upon getting what we want or what we think we need or deserve. Giving thanks is a way of life; an attitude; a way of seeing the world. It is a discipline of faith, made easier through practice that transforms our lives, our church and our world.

In just a few minutes, you are going to be asked to bring your offering forward, along with your Faith and Finances Pledge card for 2008. Your church is asking you to give generously, with joy and thanksgiving for the many blessings you have received, trusting God to

bles and multiply each gift as it allows the ministry of First Christian Church to continue and to grow in ways we know and understand as well as ways that we will never know. "I thank my God every time I remember you..." writes Paul...."and this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge, and full insight, to help you to determine what is best, ...for the glory and praise of God." Thanks be to God! Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

<sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in clay jars,  
so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power  
belongs to God  
and does not come from us.

<sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;  
perplexed, but not driven to despair;  
<sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken;  
struck down, but not destroyed;  
<sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,  
so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

What is this treasure in clay jars?

We can easily enough imagine humble clay jars,  
commonplace clay vessels,  
ordinary as dirt,  
undecorated, unacknowledged, unnoticed earthen pots,  
invisible in their plainness.

These clay jars are not the decorative pieces stationed behind glass in a display case along with trophies and treasures.

It may be more difficult to imagine the treasure inside.

I'd suppose that the treasure is not something we have,  
like a toy given to a child,  
something we can possess,  
however delightful it may be at the moment.

I suspect that there is one treasure that we have,  
but that each of us will have it in a way which is unique to us.  
Our treasures might appear, on the surface, to be very different.  
At the heart, however, they are alike.

Treasure is important. Pirates hide it. Hunters seek it. Collectors prize it.

I imagine Paul writing his studious, thoughtful letter back to Corinth. I  
imagine him thinking about what to say and remembering, as he pondered,  
the experiences and ordeals of his own life.

I imagine him going back again and again,  
like a battlefield veteran  
whose mind replays the screams and blood,  
bombs and destruction of combat,  
to those days when he kicked in doors in the night and hauled off followers  
of Jesus, bound for trouble, separated from families, maybe forever.

But he'd come to this, after years of traveling into cities, suffering  
torments:

arrest  
beatings with whips  
hunger and cold  
inhospitable people who viewed him with distrust or disgust.

As he thought back over, remembering the people who'd befriended him and  
the ones who'd bedeviled him he drew from his mind a creative metaphor.  
It's like we have a glorious treasure. It's like we're not so much, like common  
clay jars, like you see in any household. But the treasure. Ahh, the  
treasure.

You go to a funeral and hear things, true things, fascinating things about the  
person who has died, things you never knew, which you wish you'd known,

rather remarkable and amazing things. Like treasure. Hidden.

May I suggest that the treasure may be just those surprising things that each of us has about ourselves. It's those things that mature us, mold and shape us. It's the hard times which we cannot forget. I think that's the treasure. God, merciful God, gives us a ministry born out of the trials we face and the tribulations we endure.

Remember back to a time when you were afflicted, or persecuted, or struck down.

- Did those difficulties make you bitter or better?
- Are you, for the experiences of loss or grief or danger wiser or worse?

I'll share a bit of my ministry witness with you as my personal illustration of my belief that the treasure we are given by God's mercy, may be the very things we hate at the time but which make us the people we have become.

Once, a long time ago, I accepted a call as senior minister of a large suburban congregation with upscale buildings and a sizeable staff. I wasn't at all sure about the rightness of going to that congregation but I put misgivings aside and took the job. It was a white-flight church. It was a male-dominated church where women did not speak openly. It was a church with an uncommon number of marriages riddled with adultery were in trouble.

Before two weeks passed I knew I'd made a terrible error. Over the next 18 months life became torture. I made stupid mistakes. I was met with rejection and frustration. When a television camera panned on a Saturday night and caught me at an Equal Rights Amendment demonstration the elders met on Sunday morning to censure me. My marriage was in trouble, partly because of the hateful climate in the congregation and partly because of issues of our own. I needed to leave. We moved out of the parsonage hurriedly and became almost-homeless. We had to buy a house but I had no

job and couldn't find one. I grew depressed. Our children were caught in stresses they didn't create which they couldn't change and their behaviors showed it. We struggled to just pay the bills. I took a job as a custodian in a metropolitan hospital. There was no part of my life which was easy or happy.

I never want to relive those days. I am grateful to have endured them.

That period in my life is the treasure I carry in an earthen jar.

- My faith either had to stand up or simply be something I'd inherited.
- I was afflicted, perplexed, persecuted by former church members who tormented our family.
- In that breaking down, tearing apart fractured time of my life I was forced to learn what Paul wrote plainly: the power clearly belongs to God. None of it comes from me.

We common people who resemble clay jars more than ornamental vases are treasure vessels. Merciful God, who walks with us through the valley of the shadow, gives us a ministry.

If your heart is broken you want to talk with someone who also knows the sting of betrayal or the grief of abandonment.

If you are miserable you listen most to people who have come through terrible times for they know what they're talking about.

If you lie in your bed through sleepless nights of anguish you seek out people who have worked their way through hard times. They are the ones who, like Paul, were afflicted but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. They are treasures.

You can't always tell who has the treasure you need by looking at the

outward appearance. You cannot hide it, however, from the heart.

Telling our treasure story is painful. We are exposed and vulnerable. Others may attack our weakness and scorn us. Witness is painful. We don't know where our words will land or what effect they will have.

Paul was never proud of the things he did, watching Stephen be killed, breaking up churches, filled with misguided zeal and hatred, persecuting the followers of Jesus. But God, in mercy, made that part of Paul's treasure so that he understood, so he had compassion, so he could press on without losing heart.

The power is God's. We are treasure vessels. Thanks be to God. Amen!