**It Starts With Gratitude**

**FBC Albemarle**

**April 30, 2017**

Here is the cold stark truth: First Baptist is in financial trouble. Don’t get me wrong, we are not in immediate financial trouble but it’s coming. Unfortunately, we are not alone. Many churches all over the country are in a similar position but that doesn’t change the fact that we are headed for some difficulties in the near future if something doesn’t change. I will not sugarcoat things this morning because we need to face reality.

* In 2015, 80% of our undesignated gifts were given by people ages 60+.
* Those in their 60s gave the largest amount followed by those in their 80s and 90s.
* The number of our giving units (families who made contributions to the church) has declined by 50% since 2001.

It doesn’t take a financial genius to extrapolate the trend out the next 5, 10, 20 years to see where we are headed financially as a church. I don’t share these statistics with you to scare you but the fact of the matter is that these statistics are scary!

 The knee-jerk reaction to these statistics is to “hunker down” and spend as little as possible. Maybe if we can save enough today, we can avoid the inevitable just a little longer. However, that would not be good leadership.

 Truth is, the goal as followers of Jesus isn’t to keep the doors of the church open until Jesus comes back. The goal for us is to love God, love others and build up God’s kingdom on earth. The CHURCH (people of God) is the vehicle in which God is using and will continue to use to bring about his kingdom. Therefore, ultimately, we do not have to worry about what will happen in the future. Jesus will come back and a “new Jerusalem” will be established as it is intended. I firmly believe this truth!

 So the goal of sharing this information with you this morning isn’t to guilt you into giving more to the church. It isn’t to increase the budget for the future. It isn’t to make sure that we can still keep the doors open and lights on 50 years into the future.

 The goal of our four-part series titled “The Generous Life” is to help us be deeper followers of Jesus. It is to help us to be more like Jesus, to live as Jesus lived. If generosity is defined as a lifestyle in which we share all that we have, are, and ever will become as a demonstration of God’s love and a response to God’s grace, then it is easy to see how generosity leads us closer to imitating Christ. Jesus lived and died by sharing all that he had as a demonstration of his Father’s love and a response to his Father’s grace. If we are going to be like Jesus, we need to live in the same way.

 The goal of this series is to help us to further develop the culture of generosity in our own lives and as a body of Christ. Many of you are already incredibly generous with your time, talents and money. What we want to accomplish as a body of Christ is to be generous in every way so that generosity becomes part of our DNA. When generosity flows from our core, we are being faithful followers of Christ and that is all that God requires of us!

For whatever reason, money has been a taboo subject. Growing up, did your parents ever talk about how much money they made in front of you? Chances are, they never talked about how much they made. When money was talked about, it was always in the anxious context of not having enough. Because this is the way we were raised, chances are, most of you did not or do not talk about money with your own children.

Money, however, is a central reality of family relationships. It is also a central reality in our relationships with people, institutions, and causes beyond family life. For example, money is a central reality to where a student goes to college. Money is also a central reality to who our friends are, how we spend our Friday and Saturday nights and where we vacation.

If money touches our relationships with family members as well as the world beyond, it also reaches our inner life. Isn’t it interesting that the phrase “personal worth” can mean both the extent of our financial assets and our value as a human being? How does having, or not having, money affect our self-esteem or our sense of value? Do we feel good about ourselves when we have financial security? Is low or even modest income a source of anxiety and embarrassment?

Henri Nouwen once said, “The reason for the taboo is that money has something to do with that intimate place in our heart where we need security, and we do not want to reveal our need or give away our security to someone who, maybe only accidentally, might betray us.” In other words, we fear being dependent on others because of the idea that dependence is a threat to our security. There is a great deal of pressure in our culture to secure our own future and to control our lives as much as possible. Yet, this is a concept that is foreign to scripture.

The Bible is pretty clear about NOT placing our security in earthly things. “Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.” (Matt. 6:19) We cannot find security if our heart is divided. Jesus said,” No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Luke 16:19)

What is our security base? Do we find security in God or in our material possessions? Nouwen wrote, “A truly spiritual life is life in which we won’t rest until we have found rest in the embrace of the One who is the Father and Mother of all desires.” Proverbs 11:28 says, “Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.”

We probably have all had conversations about what we would do if we ever won the lottery. (I will pass on addressing the question of morality around the lottery to focus on the subject at hand.) About a year ago when the Powerball reached over $1.5 billion, most of us dreamed of what we could do with that kind of financial windfall. We’ve thought about how we would save a little bit of it or spend some on some luxuries but much of it, we would give away to our family, friends, church and to other charities. We think about the impact we could really have in our communities and for God’s kingdom if God would just allow us to win!

What if I told you that we have already won the lottery? Kerry Robinson, in her book *Imagining Abundance*, suggests that we all have won the lottery already. “Winning the lottery” implies a random, undeserved gift of good fortune awarded by chance. Perhaps we have won the lottery with our health or with loving relationships. Maybe we’ve won the lottery by being born in America. Maybe we have won the lottery with our intellectual or creative aptitude, the opportunity for meaningful work, the chance to be paid for doing a job we love. Maybe we won the lottery with common sense, sense of humor, charm, charisma, or natural leadership. Maybe we won the lottery with physical wellness, emotional security, shelter, food, ability to have clothes and all we need to live. How many lotteries in life has each of us already won?

So the question to us this morning is, “What are we actually doing with all of our winnings?” Do we persist in complaining of our scarcity? Do we share our abundance with others? Do we give some portion to charity? Do we live with awareness and gratitude?

The psalmist in Psalm 100 understood he had won the lottery time and time again. Therefore, the central theme of the psalm is gratitude. In verse 3, the psalmist says, “Know that the Lord is God.” This is more than just head knowledge. Knowing that our Lord is God is having a deep understanding of who God is in our lives and how we have been blessed beyond our imagination. God has made us; we are his!

Psalm 100 says we are the sheep of his pasture. This simple statement carries a great deal of implications. We all know that sheep are not the “sharpest tool in the drawer.” Sheep cannot survive without a shepherd who meets all of its needs. The sheep are unable to find their own food source. They need a shepherd who will lead them to the green pastures. They need a shepherd to lead them to the waters. They need a shepherd who will ward off the predators to keep them safe. They need a shepherd to keep them from wondering off and getting lost.

Therefore, when the psalmist writes in the 23rd chapter, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake,” it makes perfectly good sense. It is God who has allowed us to win the lottery many times over in life. Therefore, we should live life with a great sense of gratitude for all that God has awarded us!

So what is our response to God’s wonderful gifts? We should serve the Lord with gladness. I think it is interesting when we have these mythical conversations about what we would do if we won the lottery. Most of the conversations I’ve had with people about what they would do with the winnings surrounded on how they would help others. How they would bless others with a house, a car or pay off debt were common responses. How they would give to their church and how they would start their own foundation were frequent answers.

So if we agree that we’ve already won the lottery many times over, what are we doing with our winnings? How are we serving the Lord and helping others with our winnings? Central to our faith is the conviction that one finds life by giving it away. Jesus said, “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 10:39) Generosity, other-centeredness, mercy, compassion, relinquishment…when all these qualities displayed in our lives, we are serving the Lord with gladness.

In Matthew 6:31-33 Jesus says, “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Jesus reminds us to set our sights on what truly matters. Let’s set our sights on being generous people and being a generous church because we have much to be grateful for together. These are kingdom ideas and I will simply trust that God will give us all that we need now and in the future as he has promised.

Yes, the financial future looks bleak for our church and for many other churches like ours. However, I know that by living faithfully and generously as Christ lived, God’s kingdom will come.