"Love Never Ends"

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Julie R. Harley – October 25, 2009 – First United Church of Oak Park

In my family growing up, being cheap was a competitive sport. Thrift was more than a lifestyle – saving money was a form of entertainment.

Going out to eat was always based on where we had coupons. Getting an Early Bird Discount was the highlight of my parents' day – right up there with the thrill of taking a nap after lunch. My mom was never shy about trying to use two coupons at a time, either. Bonus points! It was an after-dinner ritual to watch Mom whip out her coupons and have a long conversation with the server about the final bill. She had laser focus on the bottom line.

When I called my parents each week, they'd tell me what bargains they had bagged at Wal-Mart or Sears. When I came home for visits, Dad would show me the price tags from his recent victories: $12 for a pair of shoes or $8.50 for a sport shirt. He told me which gas station had the lowest prices and where to get the cheapest cup of coffee. His motto was: "The money you save is your own!"

During my father's last days in hospice care, he asked me to come to his bedside. "Call Runge's Funeral Home," he whispered. "Find out what it will cost for a nice cremation." When I later reported back that a cremation would run around $3,000, he smiled. "That's a good deal," he said. Dad was prepared to rest in peace.

My parents may have been stingy about spending money on themselves, but they were generous about showing love to others. They were never too busy to help the

widow next door. They were the first ones to call when their friend's son was killed. They spent hours caring for people who were sad or lonely. Dad volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and picked up bread once a week to take to the local youth home. Mom sewed and made crafts to sell in the church bazaar. They ushered and served communion and spent endless hours in the church kitchen cleaning up after potluck dinners. They cared about the neighbor kids and knew them all by name.

Both of my parents are gone now. But their love never ends.

Most of us tend to think about money in only one way: we want to keep as much as possible for ourselves. We're always looking for the best deal.

That's why when someone asks us to make a financial pledge to the church or to give money to a charity, we often get defensive. Our first reaction is to part with as little as possible. We're used to protecting our wallets. We're not sure we can afford to spend the money.

But what I learned from my parents and from my Christian faith is that there's a huge difference between spending and giving.

The money we spend <u>on things</u> flows through our hands and lasts only a short time. We had an estate sale at my parents' home, and all the stuff they spent 50 years acquiring was sold in one weekend for $4,000. It's gone now.

But their love never ends. The money they gave to their church leaves a legacy. The money they set aside for their grandchildren's education leaves a legacy. They touched other people's lives forever – not through their spending, but through their giving.

The stewardship pledges we make today are not an expense. They are an investment in love that never ends.

This church is a living legacy of love. When you look around, everything you see was made possible by the gift of someone else. None of us here today paid for this sanctuary. It is a legacy given to us by others. Our generous mission work is mostly made possible by a special endowment fund initiated in 1975.

"The only things we take with us from our life on Earth are those things we have given away." (From "Babette's Feast" by Isak Dinesen)

They say that diamonds are forever. But the only thing that truly lasts forever is love.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, even the greatest talents are fleeting. The greatest football quarterback … the bestselling author … the top-grossing salesperson … the biggest celebrity … and even the best parents in the world will eventually pass away. Only what we inspire in others will last. Only love never ends.

Love never fails. Love abides. William Sloane Coffin once said, "Love is not blind. It's visionary. Love sees things the rest of us cannot see."

Jesus looks at us and loves us. Though often we cannot love ourselves, Jesus sees possibilities in us that we cannot see. That love inspires us to stop spending and to start giving. Christ's love causes us to see that there's more to life than consuming. Because the only things we take with us from our life on Earth are those things we have given away.

All of you received a green card with your bulletin this morning. At the top it says, "Dear God." Then it says, "The gift that I have given which will have an impact beyond my lifetime is …" I'd like you to take out that green card and something to write with, and fill in the rest of that sentence. Reflect on your answer for a moment.

What is the gift that you have given which will last beyond your lifetime? I'm guessing it was an act of charity or kindness. It was an act of love. It was a sacred act of giving.

I'll bet what will have an impact beyond your lifetime is not something you <u>spent money</u> on. I'll bet it was something you <u>gave</u> to someone else.

That is the difference between spending and giving.

Giving is about love. That's why Paul says in 2 Corinthians that God loves a cheerful giver. Giving is a sacred act, because it is a reflection of God's nature.

Paul describes God as the provider of the abundance from which we give.

"This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God." (2 Cor. 9:10-11, <u>The Message</u> version)

A stewardship pledge is not an expense. It is an investment in love that never ends.

Paul is waging a pledge campaign of his own here, organizing a collection from the First United Church of Corinth for the poor and needy people at the Second Jewish Christian Church in Jerusalem. In the eighth chapter of 2 Corinthians he makes the case for this gift.

First, he points out that otherchurches that are poorer than the First United Church of Corinth have begged him for the privilege of participating in this offering for the saints at Second Jewish Christian in Jerusalem.

Second, he reminds them that Jesus – though he was rich in God – became poor so that we would be rich.

Third, he knows they have household budgets of their own, so he cautions them not to give away so much that they become poor themselves. He doesn't want them to give under pressure, but to share enough so there is a fair balance between their present abundance and the needs of those in Jerusalem. (Paul sounds like the presidential advisers who are trying to place a cap on executive pay at banks that received federal bailouts. We're not trying to make you poor, we're just trying to even things out.)

Fourth, Paul – in the interest of transparency and full disclosure -- declares that he is traveling with two other assistants who are auditing the books. They watch to make sure no one is skimming anything from the offering.

Fifth, Paul says, "I tell you this in advance of my visit to you so that you can think about how much you'd like to give. I want this to be a voluntary gift, and not extortion."

After he's addressed all their reservations about this offering, Paul launches into chapter nine with another agricultural metaphor: "If you sow seeds sparingly, you'll reap sparingly. If you plant a lot of seeds, you'll have a bountiful harvest."

How generous are we? How much are we willing to give to God?

We all know that Robert Kennedy was born to wealth and privilege. He rarely carried cash. He relied on members of his entourage to pick up his tab wherever he went. One day Kennedy, who was a devout Catholic, attended a church service with a friend. When the offering plate came around, the friend dutifully placed a dollar bill in the

offering on Kennedy's behalf. As the collection plate went by, Robert muttered under his breath, "Don't you think I'd be more generous than that?"

How generous are we? Money is the great taboo subject in our society, so most of us have no idea what other believers give to the church. I'll tell you what research shows: about 20% of American Christians give nothing (zero) to the church; about 12% of Christians give a tithe, which is one-tenth of your income; and most of us (about two-thirds of believers) give an average of 1.8% of our income back to God.

Rev. Robert Harris said, "A lot of people are willing to give God credit. But so few ever give God cash."

What would be possible if all of us gave at least 2.5% of our income to the church? That is the amount of the Islamic *zakat*, which is required in the Muslim faith. If all of us gave at least 2.5% of our money back to God, maybe we wouldn't have duct tape on the floor of the sanctuary! Maybe we wouldn't have to panic every time the roof leaks. Maybe we could increase rather than decrease our mission giving next year.

I know it's hard for many of us to trust that we'll be able to pay our own bills if we increase the amount we give to the church. But think about how much joy we would feel if we could <u>give</u> an additional one percent of our income to something that will have an impact beyond our lifetime, rather than <u>spending</u> that one percent of our income on something we won't remember six months from now. One pastor I know counsels with individuals, and he promises them a 90-day money-back guarantee if they grow their pledge. If after 90 days, they don't feel transformed by their increased giving, he'll return it.

That is Paul's principle too. He says we will be enriched by our great generosity.

Why? Because when we give, rather than spend, the result is thanksgiving to God. Paul says gifts should be given freely, not reluctantly or under compulsion. At First United Church, we don't pre-empt our regular programming for a pledge drive. We won't hold off playing your favorite hymn until you feel guilty enough to call in a pledge that meets our goal. This sermon is not a plea for funds: it is a gospel message about how we view money and love.

That's what makes giving a sacred act – because we choose to do it from our religious sense of gratitude and compassion.

I've noticed when I swipe my credit card at Walgreen's or Jewel, the cashier doesn't jump for joy and shake my hand. That's because I'm paying what I OWE.

But when we give a sack of groceries to someone at the Food Pantry downstairs, it's completely different. They thank us, they hug us, they cry, they say, "God bless you." Why? Because they know we're not doing this because we OWE them anything, we're giving them this gift with delight. Our gratitude for the extravagant, lavish, over-the-top generosity of God inspires us to be generous ourselves, which blesses someone else, who blesses someone else, which is why … love never ends. Amen.