

## The Garden's Big Give May 4, 2008

Not long ago I was reading the weekly edition of my hometown newspaper—*The Madison Weekly Herald*. Frankly, I usually just look to see who had an anniversary, who made the news and who died, because we don't know all that many folks in Madison anymore.

However, in the particular paper I was looking at, an article there caught my eye. It was about a church "up on the hill" (as we used to say) that gave 25 members \$100 each, and challenged them to go out and meet some of the needs of the community and to multiply what they had been given.

The pastor reported that he had already heard of some of the undertakings of his members. One was using the \$100 to plan a crisis home for families displaced by fires and other hardships. Another was working with an organization that provides wells for drought-stricken communities in Africa. Near and far, the folks who were willing to accept the challenge were using the money as a starting point to increase it and make the world a little better by using it to help others.

As many of you know and remember, we did a similar thing here in 2002. Mary Benedict, who was our communications guru at the time, encouraged those who chose to take the money to share their stories about how they used it, and she put them together in a booklet that told of their good work. We did a little video around a couple of the stories, and in fact, the story was picked up by the LA Times and others news sources. Many other churches and even businesses duplicated the idea, as was the case with the "big" church, St. Luke's.

Although Mary didn't really want it known when she was living, I think it's OK to share that she was the originator of the idea and the source of the seed money. In the introduction to the booklet she put together, she shared a bit of how the idea came about. She said that out of the blue, she was offered cash for a lot she owned in Florida, and would soon be an unexpected \$35,000 richer! She knew that she wanted to give 10% to worthy causes, and so she donated \$1000 to Southeast Community Services, leaving \$2500 to seed this Garden project idea of hers.

Then, she said, the ironic twist came into play. The land sale in Florida fell through. Her friends chuckled when she asked, "What is God trying to tell me?" They simply thought it was about not counting your chickens before they hatch, but she knew it was something more than that. She came to understand that that money had been easy, unexpected dollars, and so it was rather easy to think about giving some of it away.

What she thought she heard from God was this: "Now let's see you scramble IF you truly believe in what you want to do." Well, Mary did indeed scramble, and using \$2500 of the funds required for her daily living, and not the hoped-for windfall monies, she made the project come alive for us at The Garden. She shared

generously, and blessed our lives, and hers, in the process.

In some ways, I can really identify with the dilemma in which Mary found herself when those extra funds didn't come into being, because at the launch of our 10% program, I had a similar feeling. Although some of you may think that we give 10% of our Sunday offerings to worthwhile non-profit organizations out of our surplus funds, I have to tell you that that's not true.

The 10% actually comes out of the monies you give us to support the ministry of The Garden. They aren't "extra" funds at all, and each year since its inception, we have given away in excess of \$25,000 that could have been used to support what we do here and at Oak Hill. However, The Garden Leadership Team made a conscious decision way back when the program began that we were going to trust in God's abundance, rather than cling desperately to our monies, afraid that they'll get more scarce and run out.

In many ways, we try to model here at The Garden what Jesus talked about in the Bible passage we have for today. Our version from The Message reads like this: "Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

I really like the way Eugene Peterson interprets this particular verse, because it so clearly outlines how we're to live. In some versions, the verse tells us to be "perfect" just as God is perfect, but that interpretation has a way of distancing us from the practical ways in which we live our lives. After all, how could we possibly be "perfect" like God? There's no way.

However, if we understand this verse in its broadest form, it more directly involves us on a daily basis. We're told in the first book of the Bible (Genesis) that we are created in God's likeness. That's what living out our God-created identity refers to. It's more than that, because it encourages us to live out God's highest attributes—namely God's generous and loving nature. We do that by sharing who we are and what we have with others, and in that way, make this world a better place.

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, probably did the best job of translating the Bible passage we have today into comprehensible terms. It really makes the encouragement "to live generously and graciously toward others" more concrete and livable. Wesley wrote:

"Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can."

How is that put into action? Maybe we can learn from Sue Monk-Kidd's daughter in a story that the author shared in her collection of writings called *FirstLight*. It's a story that we can picture in our minds, because we've all found ourselves in this place.

Sue and her daughter were heading into a department store to shop, and right by the entrance was a man with a cigar box in his hand, putting it in front of customers as they entered the store. He rattled the box, and many shoppers hurried past. As she and her daughter approached, the little girl wasn't aware of what the man was doing, so she asked rather loudly, "What's he doing?" Her mother whispered, "He's asking for money." Then came the inevitable next question, "Why?" "Because he's poor and needs help."

As they enter the store, the man puts the cigar box within their reach, and they hurry past. While Sue was shopping, her daughter wandered away a bit, and she found her peering through the glass doors at the man. "Mama, can we give him some money?" she asked. "Well, sure we can," Mom said, and opened her purse. "All I have is a dollar bill and two quarters."

Sue handed her daughter the quarters and returned to her shopping, but her daughter stopped her. Staring at the two quarters, she asked her mother, "Can we give him the dollar, too? I'll pay you back from my allowance."

That's generosity. We know it as children, but then somehow we forget. Our judgment calls and cynical attitudes get in the way of our generous spirit; we're no longer quite as willing to share what we have with others.

That's not the way God intended us to live. That's not the way God lives toward us. God is known as a generous and loving spirit, and that's the spirit in which we are called to live in our lives.

We have an opportunity today, because of one person's generosity, to become generous ourselves, to multiply what we receive and to use it for good in the world. The needs are great, far beyond what anyone of us by ourselves can meet. However, together, using the resources that we each have, we can make a difference; we can make an impact.

In the message that introduced the 50/50 project back in 2002, I said that becoming more generous is really a part of our spiritual quest and journey. We are generous when we share our time with others, and I know many of you do that through tutoring, reading to the blind, volunteering to help in schools, and many other ways. We all have 24 hours in every day; every one of us can use a little of that time to help those around us.

I know we are launched on our spiritual journey when we use our skills and abilities to help others. One doctor I know about donates a day of his practice to caring for the indigent. Numerous members of the medical community have traveled to all parts of the earth to share their expertise in improving the health and well-being of others. We all have skills and abilities—maybe not medical, but some ability that could make another person's life richer and more beautiful, if only we share that talent with them.

And, of course, we have our financial resources. I know it's easy to think that we don't have enough to go around, but regardless of how much or little we have, we still have more than the majority of the world's

population. Each of us has something we can give, or some way in which we can multiply what we receive for the good of others.

Today, we have an opportunity to live that out. As you've been hearing for the past several weeks, another generous donor has come forward, and matched the amount we gave to our 10% recipient in March, asking that we offer \$50 to sixty people, who will go out and plant seeds of God's love, making this world and the lives of others better.

In just a few minutes, as that band is playing the closing song, I will invite those who are willing to invest themselves in this project to come forward and take an envelope from the tree. We will not write down the names of those who say "yes;" this is a matter of trust, and we know that those who accept the envelopes will, indeed, make this world a better place.

Obviously, since we divided the envelopes by the percentage of those who attend each of the four services, there aren't enough envelopes for all of us to do it with this money. However, if this strikes a chord for others of us, there's absolutely nothing preventing us from using some of our own money, multiplying it, and sharing it with others for the betterment of our community and world.

I would simply ask that, if you're willing to take on this endeavor, you come forward and pick up an envelope during the song, and as you get involved in making your idea reality, that you share the stories with us.

Let us pray: God, you are so good to us, and you bless us far more than most of us realize. Inspire each of us this morning to share our skills, our time, and our money with others. Allow us in some way to brighten the lives of those who are struggling, those who feel hopeless, those who are hungry for a loving word or touch. Use each of us, God, and be especially real and present with those who step forward to participate in The Garden's "Big Give." Thank you, God. Amen.

There's a story in the Bible about a poor widow, who went to the temple to make an offering. We're led to believe that all she had in the world was two small coins, which she offered selflessly and graciously. That story caused novelist Marilynne Robinson to write, "**The meaning of the story, as I read it, is that an act of true generosity is an act of courage.**" And, I would add, an act of trust—trust in a God who is generous beyond our capacity to understand.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will, in fact, live out our God-given identity and become more generous and gracious, just as God is toward us.

