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"All We Can Talk About....."

Deu 6:10-12 (NRSV) When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you--a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, 11 houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant--and when you have eaten your fill, 12 take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

1 Pet 2:9-10 (NRSV) But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the small boy (from a family who had never been to church) who attended Sunday School for the first time. Later that day, his parents asked him who his Sunday School teacher had been. He replied, "Well, I think it must be Jesus' grandmother." They were startled for even though they themselves hadn't been to church in a long time, they knew that the church probably hadn't changed that much! So, they said to him, "Why do you say that?" "Well," he responded after a moment, "She *must* be; all she can talk about is some kid named "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." Those of you who are grandparents probably know that feeling; I have sometimes been guilty of it myself. I have friends who will use the slightest excuse, like, say, a discussion of the weather or the prospects of the Broncos, to say "Want to see a picture of my grandchild?" It sometimes seems that it's all they can talk about. And now let's ask: What about in the church? What about in our church? That is, if somebody wandered in, sat through a worship service, attended a Sunday School class, went to a fellowship event, or participated in a mission opportunity, how would he or she describe the experience? And most important of all: About what would *they* be tempted to say, "Why, that's all those folks at First Christian can ever talk about!"?

My thirteen years of experience as a Regional Minister with our Disciples denomination gave me the opportunity to worship in dozens of churches over those years across several states. And from that experience, I know that there are a variety of answers possible to the question of “What is that these folks seem to only be able to talk about” depending on the congregation. With some perpetually conflicted congregations, all they could seem to talk about is who they were mad at. In some churches where there were unexpected challenges, all they could seem to talk about was how they wished life and church were like they were in the “good ol’ days.” At other congregations, folks actually didn’t seem to have much at all to talk about when they were together, but once they got out on the parking lot after church, they talked – and murmured and muttered – quite a lot! At other churches, it seems that all they could talk about is how glad they were that they were not like some other church.

What do you and I talk about day in and day out? Well, I suspect for many of us many of our words have to do with the daily minutiae of moving through the day. Parents talk about who is going to pick up which child at day care or school and which parent will then get them to their ball game or piano lessons or whatever. Spouses sometimes find that more and more of what they talk about with each other is mostly functional, words that are needed to simply make the day move along without imploding. Or friends sometimes find that the deep conversations they used to have get reduced, over time, to more and more perfunctory exchanges. Co-workers can go for days exchanging nothing but work-related words with their co-workers and are sometimes surprised to find out when one of them has a crisis. Such purely functional words and talk keep life moving – sort of the WD-40 of existence – allowing us to navigate through our days. Words and talk, in this sense, become simply tools to achieve certain objectives – children successfully fetched, a work project successfully completed. And these are not bad things, and they are surely necessary things,

necessary talk. But when that is **all** that we talk about, then it's not enough. You see, sometimes we need to talk about more important things, things that go to the very essence and meaning of our lives. Now, we may not need to talk about those things every day. Yet talking about things like the meaning of life and faith, about the meaning of a relationship, about our hurts and our hopes, about why we love someone, are absolutely crucial to have from time to time so that our lives and our relationships – and yes, our church – don't become shallow and stagnant and superficial.

So what are those things we need to talk about from time to time as **church**? Well one of them is about money. Jesus had far more to say about money than he did virtually any other topic. And while there are those who sometimes say "All they talk about in that church is money" what I want to say this morning on this Stewardship Sunday, this Commitment Sunday, is rather different: we actually don't talk about money enough in the church. And because we don't, because we don't remind ourselves often enough that money is to be talked about from the perspective of faith just like every other aspect of our lives, we insidiously and unconsciously can fall prey to a culture that is not at all shy about talking about money! If you think that all the *church* does is talk about money, think about what you see in any given hour on the television, think about those ads that pop up on Facebook and creepily track your interests, think about the letters you receive from every kind of charity and you'll realize that it's not the church that is always talking about money; no, it's our culture.

But the culture doesn't talk about money in any kind of Christian way, and we are in danger, then, of unconsciously absorbing the ideas about money that the culture promotes. Ideas like that money itself will make you happy, because the more money you have the more goods you can acquire. Ideas like that your money is totally your own to use as you see fit because you made it and therefore no one else has anything to say about what you do with it. But, you know, the Bible doesn't see it that way.

Recall with me the words from Deuteronomy that Carroll read earlier. On the verge of entering the promised land, this scripture has God giving a set of instructions for the journey. An amidst all the "practical" advice that God gives, there is also this beautiful but shocking statement:

When the LORD your God has brought you into the land.... a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.... take care that you do not forget the LORD...."

It's beauty is obvious. But let's not overlook its shock value, either. For you and I simply do not like to be reminded that we are who we are because of the grace of so many others. We sometimes like to think of ourselves as self-made, self-reliant, self-contained. But it is not true. We are who we are because of the love of so many others, love that we neither deserved because of what we did or did not do. It was just there. Think of the teachers you have had -- whom you did not teach -- who showed you who to be and what to do. Think of those who loved you into life. Think of those who stood beside you when you were more petty than pretty, more grumbling than gracious, more sorry than saintly. The witness of scripture, the two-thousand year history of the Christian faith, is that we have been loved into being through grace. We didn't earn it, we didn't do it, we didn't pay for it. And part of what that means is that our very ability to have money, to earn a wage, is because of all those people who loved us and taught us, and because of a God who gave us the talents that we can use to make our money.

But our culture doesn't understand that because it has a very different point of view about the nature of life. Along with those values of making and spending and the belief that what you have is utterly yours to decide what to do with, the culture teaches us in a hundred different ways that the individual is more important than the community,

it teaches that you can be self-made and you don't have to rely on anyone. But, again, the testimony of scripture is otherwise. The testimony of scripture is that individualism – particularly to the extreme our culture has taken it – is simply not the way a Christian ought to understand his or her life. Hear again these words from our other scripture for the morning from I Peter again: *"Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*

It is that little word "people" that fascinates me here. Because it's probably not the way you and I might have put the point, and it's certainly not the way the culture talks. Now, we might sometimes talk about, as the hymn says, the grace that "saved a wretch like *me*." For *I* once was lost but now *I* am found...." There is absolutely no doubt that each of us does experience God's love as personal and individualized. But in our too often hyper-individualistic world we must train our ears and train our souls to hear that other strain of amazing grace: that we are *never* loved all by ourselves, but we are *always* loved into a *people*, a community. It's never *just* "me and God"; it's always "God and *us*." *Us*. And that includes all the we are, all the talents God has given us to use for the good of the community, and yes, our money too.

So what does all that mean this morning when we consider how we can support the ministries of our church and for how we can acknowledge and honor our own need to give to something larger than ourselves? In less flowery terms, **so what?** Well, I Peter goes on to tell us: *"that you may proclaim the mighty acts of [the One] who called you out of darkness into [God's] marvelous light."* In short, if we are to fully acknowledge God's undeserved love which binds us to one another, which makes us a community, which undercuts the sometimes selfishness of the culture around us, then we are called to proclaim with our lives, our words, our actions, and, yes, our money, the good news of the grace that has claimed us and made us who we are.

And that proclamation will -- no, it *must* -- take us outside ourselves. The love

we experience is not the experience of a stained glass tanning booth, where we warm ourselves and get a rosy spiritual glow. The love we experience demands that we proclaim it -- both to one another and to the ends of the earth. **That** is the answer to the "so what" that God is desperately hoping for. But that proclamation, that living out this love, that sharing of the mighty acts of God requires our commitment. It requires our care, and our love, and our prayers, and our creativity, and even our sense of humor, but without our *commitment* those things will be able to do so much less to show forth the mighty acts of God, the mighty power of undeserved love, the mighty force of the gospel to be a bond of unity in a fractured world. It requires our *commitment* to share our talents, our resources, our money.

Last week you received a letter about your opportunity this morning, along with a Commitment Form. That letter invited you to consider the ways that *you* can help proclaim the mighty acts of God in this place and beyond. It invited your prayers and your service for the mission of Jesus Christ. It is not simply a commitment to "make the budget." That's just far too puny a way to think about it. It is not a commitment to give your "fair share" – for the gospel is about grace not fairness. It is not simply a commitment to "do your part." No, this commitment form represents your hope that this part of the people of God who gather at Platte and Cascade will indeed be able to witness joyfully and forcefully to what God's love has done for us. It represents your commitment to go into all the world to share that gospel. It represents your commitment to join *your* act with *God's* mighty act. It is an *offer* on your part to be a mirror of the love that has graced your life, shining the light of hope into places that are too often dark and dim. It is **YOUR** answer to the question of "So What?"

And so, like that little boy's Sunday school teacher, let it be said of us this day and every day that "all we can talk about" is what God has done and what God can yet do through our lives, our prayers, our actions, and, yes, our money. May it be so!