

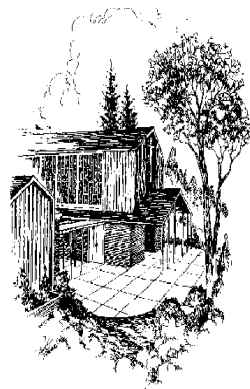
RENEW

Bring - Grow - Serve

The Complete Series

**Not E qual Gifts,
But E qual S acrifice**

A seven-part look at renewal in the church.



St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
3228 SW Sunset Blvd.
Portland, OR 97123-1273
Telephone: 503-246-4276
www.standrewspdx.com

Presented by Reverends Tom & Patricia Campbell-Schmitt

Table of Contents

- How to Stunt Your Spiritual Growth 3
- Living in Little Communities 7
- Reproducing Our Faith 12
- Living Our Faith in a Multicultural World 17
- Building a Life of Sacrifice 23
- The Life God Rewards 27
- Building a Life of Service 32

How to Stunt Your Spiritual Growth

(I Timothy 4:7-8, Ephesians 4:14-16)

This Sunday we are beginning a new series on Renewal in the church. We are going to be focusing on four important words—words that capture the picture of any church that is seeking renewal, of any church that is a dynamic, life-transforming vehicle of Christ’s love in the world. The four words we will be looking at are Grow, Bring, Give and Serve. Those four words are all included in the image of the early church we find in the second chapter of Acts. Here we find a wonderful picture of the first Christians. They were committed to spiritual *growth* as they listened to the apostle’s teaching and worshiped in the temple. Every day they were *bringing* newcomers into their fellowship. They *gave* sacrificially of their personal possessions to the point that none of them claimed personal ownership of anything. And they *served* all who were in need.

Today and next week we are going to begin with the word “grow”, and we are going to ask “How are you growing spiritually? What needs to happen in your life to enable you to grow closer to God?”

Maybe I have a strange kind of humor, but I enjoy reading books or magazine articles that take a back door approach to instruction of some kind. You’ve probably seen the kind of articles I am referring to—articles like “How to Ruin a Round of Golf.” And then the author comes up with some helpful suggestions like, “take an honest scorekeeper along with you,” or “disallow mulligans or gimmes.” That’s golfer talk for cheating. On a slightly more serious note, author Paul Meyer uses this back door approach as he suggests several sure ways to turn your normal, healthy child into a criminal sociopath. First he says, “Don’t ever enforce household rules.” That way your child will never learn about consequences. Another thing he says is “always give in to the temper tantrums of your children. Let your children know that manipulation is the key to their controlling you.” Next “Give your children a huge allowance and don’t make them do anything for it. That way they will grow up thinking that everybody owes them something.”

Well, in that same sort of back handed style I put together a message today that I hope will help all of you who made a new school year resolution to regress spiritually to do it. Our family used Labor Day weekend as a time to reflect on personal, spiritual and family goals for the new school year. So I want to support all of you who took a moment during the past weeks to think about how you were going to have a much weaker faith than you do now, and how you were going to grow farther away from God than you are now. I want to help all of you who are committed to experiencing new levels

of detachment from God to achieve that goal. Well, if some of you made decisions like that to really regress spiritually in this coming year, then today is your lucky day. I am going to offer five steps to stunt your spiritual growth. I will guarantee, if you understand and apply these five proven steps to your life, you will experience dramatic spiritual regression. So let's dive in.

The first step in spiritual regression is to cut back on your communication with God. The essence of Christianity, when you strip it all away, is a relationship with God. Christianity is a profoundly personal relationship between human beings and their creator involving literally hundreds of interactions a day between you and God. Beginning in the opening moments of the day, when you say, "Good morning Lord. Thanks for your protection during the night. I'm glad I don't have to face this new day alone. I'm glad that I matter to you, and that you have a special purpose for me. I'm glad that you are a strong God who loves me, and that you are going to be helping me through whatever the world is going to throw at me today. I'm glad that you are my God, and I am glad that I am your child." Friends, a brief morning interaction like that is just natural for a growing Christian. And interactions of one kind or another will occur all throughout the day in the life of a growing Christian. It is just natural. It's a sense of being connected to the living God.

Some growing believers will practice the daily discipline of journaling, listening for what God wants them to do with their lives. Others will write letters to God and communicating their feelings to God. The heart and soul of what it means to be a growing Christian is that string of intensely personal interactions between you and God that cause you to grow closer to God. So if a believer ever decides that he or she wants to regress spiritually, a sure way to achieve that objective is to simply cut back on the frequency, the depth and the sincerity of all of those private interactions. Ask any expert in the field of relationships how a close friendship can be quickly undermined and the answer will be, "Just cut back on the communication." So for those of you who are interested in really going backward spiritually, step one will bring quick and dramatic results. Simply, cut back the time you spend in prayer. Morning prayers, cut them out. Prayers at mealtime, knock them off. Flash prayers during the day, don't do them anymore. Knock off the number of times that you interact with God throughout the day. Shut down the dialogue with God. And whatever you do don't let any kind of dialogue with God become deep. Don't pour your heart out to God, and tell God about your sorrows and your heartbreaks. And don't take a single moment of si-

were created for service. We've been called by God to service. We've been gifted for service. We are instructed to serve others. Our church family needs our service. Serving others is the way to serve Christ. Service makes life meaningful. The question is this: What are you going to do about it, in light of all these reasons? All these things we have just looked at. We're not talking about some side issue here. We're talking about the most important thing in your Christian life. In light of all of this, what are you going to do? It seems to me you've got two options. You can walk out of here, go get in your car and do zip. Or you can seriously pray that God will help you find a place where you can serve and minister, be unselfish, use your gifts, and express your love and gratitude for all that God has done for you. If you are uncertain about what you have to share I encourage you to talk with Tom or myself so we can help you discern where you can best serve. Today you have an opportunity to commit yourself to serving Christ for the rest of your life with love and joy from this day forward; knowing that this is the very reason God put you on this earth, to the glory of God. Amen.

it's like it is being done for me." Church history tells us that the early church when they would welcome new members into the church, they would say, "Welcome, Jesus Christ now has a new pair of eyes to see with... Jesus Christ now has new pair of ears to listen to the hurt of others... Jesus Christ now has a new heart to love others with." When we serve others we are serving Christ.

The seventh reason for giving our lives in service to God and others is that service makes life meaningful. Jesus said it like this: "For those who want to save their life, will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." You know, everybody on this earth will give their life away for something. Some people give their life away for a career and they get a gold watch at the end of their career. Some people give their life away to get a big bank account. Some people give their whole life to get some kind of thrill or some kind of pleasure out of life or to attain some level of status or to get their name or picture in the newspaper or to accomplish some kind of human achievement. Each of us is going to give our lives for something. The question is: are you going to give your life for the right thing? The thing that really counts forever.

Everyone these days is trying to figure out how to live longer. But that's not the real issue in life. It's not how long you live that matters, it is how you live that matters. It's not the duration of your life; it's the donation of your life. If you are going to use your life in serving God and others, then God's not through with you yet.

When people live for themselves, they eventually get bored and feel unfulfilled. On the other hand, when you desire to serve and you start by saying: "God, I don't know all the ways I am called to serve, but I'm going to start serving You in a simple way, just giving back something of my life," that decision brings fulfillment, satisfaction, and significance. The real happiness and joy God intends for our lives is found in giving our lives away. In I Corinthians 15:58 we are challenged to "keep busy in your work for the Lord since you know that nothing you do in the Lord's service is ever without value." Can you say that about everything else you're doing? No. A lot of what you and I do is of no value in the long term. But nothing we do in serving God and others is ever without value.

As we close this morning, I would like us to take our sermon outlines and read these seven reasons aloud, together. If someone were to say to you, "Why in the world should you put your ministry of serving other people and God right at the top of your TO DO list?" Why would you say that's important? Because: (and let's read these statements on our sermon outline.) We

lence to listen for God. Listening to God in silence can really wipe out spiritual regression.

Secondly, don't read the Bible if you really want to regress this year. Don't open up this book, and don't ever read it privately. If you have been reading it once a day or once every other day, don't do it. This book is powerful and it almost always produces growth. A dedicated, growing Christian will often take a Bible and read a passage and ponder it privately. The Bible opens windows of understanding about who God is, what God is like, and how God wants to deal with us. Don't go to gatherings where this book is taught by a competent teacher. Don't attend any groups where this book is studied, discussed, and applied to our daily lives. In those groups the Holy Spirit can make the Bible come alive, can change your life, and really destroy your hope of spiritual regression.

Third, if you are serious about regressing spiritually stay away from committed Christians. If you aren't intentionally staying away from fully devoted followers of Christ you are going to get burned. Just join a small group, a Mariner fellowship group or a covenant group where people support each other and cheer each other on spiritually and in a few months your spiritual regression will stop. Next week, Tom will tell you more about how dangerous life in community can be and how it can really get your growing spiritually. Most growing believers will schedule their lives around times when they gather with other believers for the purpose of growing, fellowshiping, and worshiping. Growing believers have found that some of their most powerful times of personal interaction with God happen in the context of community. Regressors listen: If you are serious about lowering your spiritual commitment this year, you can't hang out with committed Christians. No, they're too dangerous. They'll love you deeply and they will listen to you for hours on end, seek to understand you, walk through trials with you, and before long your whole goal of spiritual regression is shot. Because there is no way you will achieve spiritual ruin in the context of a warm, authentic Christian community.

Fourth, be sure that you don't schedule your life around coming to worship on a weekly basis if you want to regress spiritually. That's putting yourself in a dangerous context. No, committed Christians have discovered that as they worship with one another, often they have very powerful, and personal stirrings with God, when they experience God communicating with them. And as the worship service closes they find themselves thinking, "Am I ever glad that I came to church today because I couldn't have had this powerful, personal interaction with God except in this context." So dedi-

cated believers just schedule their lives around making sure that they are in worship because you never know when God might, right in the middle of a worship service, have a very important, personal communication with you. Worship tends to launch you forward in your faith. Too many times God will use a private megaphone and just communicate powerfully in your ear something you desperately need to hear. That is going to stop all your regressive patterns and turn them around. Then you are going to start growing and there you go. Your goal is shot.

One more thing. Be sure and stay away from the first Sunday of the month especially, because that is communion. If you want to regress spiritually, don't come to communion. The name communion, what does it mean? It means that you are going to be communing with Christ and one another on the most intimate of levels as you hold the bread and the cup demonstrating all that Jesus gave and suffered to enable you to experience God's love. Don't expose yourselves to communion if you want to regress. In fact, make a commitment, those of you who are serious about regressing spiritually. Make a commitment to avoid every monthly communion service, and that will go a long way toward helping you achieve your goal of spiritual regression.

Fifth, if you want to be sure to spiritually regress make a decision to not give any of your financial resources or your time. Come up with every excuse you can think of not to give. Growing Christians know that giving is the aerobics of the Christian life, because it strengthens their hearts. They understand what it means when the Bible says, "Where your treasure is there your heart will be also." You don't want to develop a giving heart if your goal is spiritual regression. You don't want to develop a habit of giving your money in any kind of systematic, regular way. You want to stay far away from any discussion about percentage giving or sacrificial giving. And what ever you do don't consider tithing, or giving ten percent or more of your income. That can really sabotage your goal of spiritual regression. Be sure to schedule yourself and your family to the max, so that you have no time to give to others. Giving yourself to a ministry in the church or the community, caring for those who are in great need can really open your heart spiritually. So you had better be sure to schedule your time in other ways. Spending time serving others is dangerous if you want to regress spiritually. So here it is. I've worked hard on this message. I really wanted to serve you regressors well. And so here are five proven steps of spiritual regression. I tried to spell it out clearly for you. But now, if you are a regressor, you have to do your part. You have to take this vital information and you have got to act on it. So

Fourth, we are instructed to serve others. In Matthew 20:26 and 28, Jesus says: "Whoever wishes to be great among you, must be your servant...just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..." Note the word "must" in this verse. Service for a Christian is not optional. A non-ministering Christian is a contradiction. To be a Christian means to have the attitude of Christ and he said, "I came to serve."

But human nature doesn't want us to serve other people. Human nature keeps the focus on who is going to serve me. It keeps the perspective on, "Who is going to meet my needs? Who is going to heal my hurts? Who is going to help me?" Me, me, me.

But the Christian changes that all around. The Christian says, "Whose needs can I meet? Who can I help? Who can I serve?" Mature Christians say, "Whose needs can I meet?" because they realize the more they give their life away, the more God blesses their life. And so God instructs us to serve others.

Fifth, our church family needs our service. I Corinthians 12:27 says, "All of you together are the one body of Christ and each of you is a separate and necessary part of it." You are necessary. You are part of the Body of Christ. Think about what happens in your life when one part of your body stops functioning. You get sick and you can die if a certain part of your body doesn't function.

If you are a Christian that means you're part of the body of Christ. If you're not functioning, it can make the rest of us sick and it makes for an unhealthy body. What would happen if one day you got a call from your liver and your liver said, "I don't feel like functioning in the body this year. I just want to be fed." You'd say, "What kind of liver are you? Get back to work!" What if your heart called up or your gall bladder or your kidney and said, "I don't feel like functioning in the body this year. I just want to kick back a bit." You'd say, "Come on. You get back to work!" A non-functioning body part is not doing its job. It's not pulling its weight. It's not serving its function.

God says: "We are all needed in the body of Christ. We are all necessary." The strength of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church is not in its pastors or its staff. It is in the hundreds of lay ministers; who serve in dozens of different ministries. That's the heartbeat of this church.

Sixth, serving others is the way to serve Christ. Colossians 3:23 states: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for others. It is the Lord you are serving." Jesus said, "Whatever you do for others, you're doing for me. Even a cup of cold water given in my name,

our lives to serving God and others.

First, we were created for service. God made us for that purpose. In Ephesians 2:10 we hear “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” God designed everything on this earth for a purpose. God made dogs to be dogs, and cows to do cow kind of things. Even bees have a function that they’re supposed to do. So do human beings. The Scriptures say that human beings were put on this earth for a reason. Human beings are here to serve. We are here to help each other and to make a difference in this world, to make it a better place. God didn’t put us on this earth to sit around watching TV, eating Pringles, having a good old time, and then just die. No, God says: “I created you for ministry, for service.” Second, we are not only created for service, but we’ve been called by God to service. In the book of Galatians, Paul says: “God, in his grace, chose me even before I was born, and called me to serve him.” I used to think that that phrase, “God’s call,” was some kind of special thing for special people—people like missionaries, or priests, or nuns, or pastors. Those were the folk who were called by God. One day they’re walking down a street and suddenly they are zapped by God’s call and from that moment on they are committed to serve God for their whole lives. That’s how I used to think this whole call thing worked.

The fact is our Christian faith teaches us that every Christian is called. The moment we sign up and say we want to be a Christian, we want to have Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are also saying “And I am willing to serve him for the rest of my life.” If you are a Christian, you are called to serve and that means you are a minister. In the Scriptures the word servant and the word minister are the same word. Anytime you see the word service in the Bible, it’s the same word as ministry. Every member of God’s family is a minister. Not everyone is a pastor. But every Christian is a minister. What’s a minister? A servant. And what’s a servant? Somebody who serves. Anytime we use our abilities to help people we are ministering to them. And every Christian is called to serve.

Third, we’ve been gifted for service. God didn’t give us our talents just to spend on ourselves and then retire and die. God gave us our abilities to help other people. In I Peter 4:10 we hear these words: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received from God...” For what? To make a lot of money? No! To feather your own nest? No way. It says that we are to use our gifts to serve others. When we give our lives to Christ, the abilities we have been given by God are to be used in helping other people. So we have been gifted to serve others.

act on it. Don’t be just hearers, be doers. This could finally be the year that you achieve total spiritual ruin. Let’s close in prayer. Oh, by the way I wanted to add one more thing. If there is any group of people here who have decided that you really want to grow spiritually this year...just do the opposite of everything I said, and do it with all your heart. Let’s pray:

Gracious God, I know that there are people here today who really want to grow, who want to sink their roots down so that they can grow in new and adventuresome ways. I pray that those who are serious about growing spiritually will center their lives around you this year, and not sell out to lesser priorities. I pray that we will find ways to reinforce each other in our desire to become closer to you and to share your love with others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Living in Little Communities

(Genesis 1 & 2; John 17:18-23)

So how do you kids and parents feel about the start up of another school year? Students have been in classes now for nearly two weeks of classes and I hope things are going well. Today we are closing out the last weekend of summer and for some of you it already seems like a distant memory. So before it slips away altogether I have a question for you: what would you say was the highlight of your summer?

One of the high points of summer for me was the day Patty and I threw a little farewell party for our daughter, Kristen. She recently graduated from college and is now teaching English in Japan. A group of her friends came over for a backyard barbecue. They were all twenty-something young adults: some she knew in high school and college, some she met while she was working this summer. They sat around laughing together, eating together, taking pictures of each other, and generally having a great time together. It gave me a real sense of joy just to be able to provide the setting for that to happen.

I remember a similar gathering Patty and I organized when we first moved into our home here in Portland. A couple of weeks earlier we had gone door to door to invite our new neighbors over so we could get to know each other better. Not everyone came. Some were too busy.

I think some were hesitant to come to the home of a complete stranger. But those who did show seemed genuinely glad to be there. As the conversation progressed someone asked: “What was the highlight of your summer?” So people began spinning their stories. One woman had given birth to a new

baby that spring; she and her husband talked about the joys and challenges of parenthood. Another neighbor talked about a sister who had gotten married. Someone else spoke of a visit they had from a friend who live in another country.

At some point in the conversation the thought occurred to me that there was a common thread developing. Despite the fact that this was a group of diverse people who didn't know each other very well, there wasn't a single mention of the material world. No one said, "My best memory of the summer was buying my new car, or my a boat or a new set of golf clubs, or remodeling my kitchen. There was no mention of achievement, job promotions, first place trophies or other awards. Every significant moment that was mentioned centered on relationships.

I'll bet that if I asked you the same question, if I stopped speaking and we passed the microphone around to share what the most memorable moment of your summer was, I'll bet the vast majority of you would say something about a relationship, with a family member or a friend or a spouse or a child. Because when you really get at what touches you most deeply in your heart, it's not usually a thing. It's a person. It's a relationship. It doesn't matter what age bracket you're in. You can be 15 or 50 or 95 because people of every age all have a deep need to connect and to build genuine community in their lives.

A few years ago a writer for the *Chicago Tribute*, Marla Paul, took a risk when she wrote a self-revealing column confessing her frustration over her own inability to build and sustain friendships. She wrote expecting little, if any response. So she was surprised when all kinds of letters came pouring in from people who had experienced the same kind of isolation and loneliness. One person wrote, "I've often felt that I'm standing outside looking through the window of a party to which I was not invited." What a vivid picture. Have you ever felt that way? Marla Paul ended her column with these words: "Sometimes it seems easier to just give up and accept disconnectedness as a dark and unshakable companion, but, that's not the companion I want."

A few moments ago we listened to parts of the creation story in the book of Genesis. I wonder if you caught what it was saying. The first chapter describes how God made the heavens and the earth: each day God made something different. On the first day God said, "Let there be light. And there was light." And God said, "It was good." God goes on to create the water, then the land, the plants. After each day of creation God says, "Behold, it was good." Finally, on the sixth day God creates the first humans and we're told, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

went to Wall Street and asked the people there, "What's the secret of greatness?" They would say financial clout and a big portfolio is what will make a difference in the world.

But listen. God says, "My definition of greatness is very different." God says none of those things are going to last—connections, influence, financial clout. No one is going to remember them in the long run. God says what is going to last is service. That is the secret of a great life. God says you are never going to make a difference in the world until you learn to serve.

In Matthew 20:26 Jesus says: "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." In your outlines circle the words, "great" and "servant," because these two words go together. Look at the world around us. We all know that great teachers serve their students. We know that great salespeople serve their customers. Great leaders serve their followers, and great managers serve their workers or the employees. The key to making a difference in this world is service. That's the key to being great at anything. This is clearly an area where the wisdom of God confronts the wisdom of the world. The world says to strive, to compete, to conquer, to win is the path to greatness. But God says the way to up is down. The more we serve, the more we think of others and give to them the greater we are. If someone were to ask me, "What two words best define the Christian life?" I would pick the words, "give" and "serve." Because that's what Jesus did. In Mark 10:45 Jesus says, "Even I, the Son of Man, came not to be served, but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many." Circle the words "serve others" and "give my life." Those phrases summarize the Christian life and they are also the words that make us more like Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest models of Christian service in the 20th century was that of Mother Teresa and her sisters of the Missionaries of Charity Order. Their work of compassionate service around the world touched the lives of the poorest of the poor among us. One of the primary characteristics of these servants of Christ is the remarkable joy they discover in serving others. A skeptical journalist saw this for himself when he traveled to India to see Mother Teresa's ministry in Calcutta. He writes, "Their lives are tough and austere by worldly standards. But I have never in my life met such delightful, happy servants or seen such an atmosphere of absolute joy as they create."

This morning I want to clarify some of the reasons why the Christian faith says we should give our lives in service to God and to other people, and why that should be the number one priority in our lives, over our careers, our hobbies, and everything else. So here are seven reasons why we should give

going to give each of you a \$100 bill. There are two conditions that you must be willing to accept to this gift. You can't just take the money and run. 1) This \$100 bill is not your money. This is God's money. Right now, God is entrusting it to you.

So, your assignment (should you choose to accept it) is that you are to leverage this money, to invest this \$100 in a way that is going to leverage God's work in this world. I want to encourage you not to do anything too fast, like don't give it away immediately after the service. Start to think about it and pray about it. Make this an adventure between you and God. Ask God for creativity and ideas.

- Maybe it will start a project—like the nine year old who recently raised over \$30,000 for hurricane relief victims by swimming out to Alcatraz Island and back. A nine year old!
- Maybe you'll do a matching gift thing.
- Maybe you've been carrying a passion or burden, and now you can challenge others to be a part of it too.
- Maybe this will end up helping hurting people who live thousands of miles away, who live right here in this community.

I want you to go on an adventure with God, and ask God to give you ideas and wisdom and boldness and courage. Be as creative as you can.

Here's the second condition: In 90 days, which will be about mid-January, you have to come back and tell us a story. We want to know what God did through you. Do you agree to those conditions? OK. Please write your name and contact information on one of these cards and turn it in to me after the service. I want to say a short prayer for you, and we want to cheer you on.

Building a Life of Service

(Mark 10:41-45, Matthew 20:24-28)

For the past couple of months we have been looking at some of the great purposes of the church. We have looked at the importance of growing in our faith. We have looked at the importance of sharing our faith with others. We have looked at the importance of giving. Today we are going to look at what it means to build a life of service. We all want to make a difference in the world, don't we? We all want to have our lives count for something. We don't just want to take up space on planet earth. Some people might say that the secret of being a great person who makes a difference is having connections and influence. They would say that it is those folk, who have connections and influence, who will really make a difference in this world. If you

But in the very next chapter, in the second creation story, things are not so good. God notices that something is missing. For the first time God says, "There is something that is *not good*. It is not good that the man should be alone." (Gen 2:18).

God sees Adam's lack of community, his loneliness, his yearning for relationships, but there's no one to be found who can meet that need. So for the sake of ending Adam's loneliness, who do you think God creates next? The animals! And the man is given the job of naming them all. But then he says, "Don't get me wrong, God. Pets can make great companions, but I'm still lonely." So God goes to work again and from out of one of the man's ribs, God fashions one of his own kind—the female of the species. And God brings her to the man and finally he says, "This at last is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh."

You see, from the very beginning God saw the value of a little community—God saw Adam's isolation and did something about it by created a companion. But long before we humans came along or this planet even existed, God had already formed another little community: we call it the Trinity—God in Three Persons: the Father/Creator, God the Son, Jesus Christ, and God, the Holy Spirit. Many of you know that like Jews and Muslims, Christians are monotheistic." That is, we believe in one God. But of these three great religions, only Christians believe there are three persons in the Godhead. All function together, all act in harmony, never independently from one another. Why? Because community is deeply rooted in the very nature of God.

So when the writers of Genesis tells us that humans were created in the "image" or "likeness" of God, they mean, in part, that we were designed to function as God functions: in community.

When the man exclaimed, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23), he was saying in effect, "this woman is another me." We're both made from the same substance and we're created for the same purpose: to reflect the glory of God in community.

So after the first humans were formed we're told God gave them a directive to "be fruitful and multiply"—have children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, raise them to populate the earth forming community after community. God created this concept of relationships for the whole human race, so that every person on this earth could leave the isolation that doesn't suit our souls and walk into community.

And it would be nice to say that once Adam and Eve left the garden they all lived happily ever after. That there was no more isolation and separation

and loneliness. But that's not the case, is it? Sin allowed this separation to continue, not only between us and our neighbors, but between us and our Creator. This huge gap remained. Then one day God sent to earth one of the three: one called Jesus of Nazareth, to (in Paul's words) "break down the dividing wall of hostility," and show us how to get back to God's community of oneness.

This new community was initiated by Jesus when he began his ministry, walking into the synagogue and proclaiming release to the captives. Crowds were attracted to his teaching and his miracles so that eventually he had many followers, but do you remember what he did? Jesus chose from among them a small group, a little community of twelve. He loved them and mentored them and spent time with them. His small group was there with Jesus at all the critical points in his ministry.

So not surprisingly when he was in the Upper Room with the twelve, just a few days before he would go to his death, notice what he prayed for and what he didn't pray for. Did he pray for a life of ease for his followers? No. Did he pray for them to experience wealth and power and eternal youthfulness? No. He got to the point in the prayer where he focused on what he most longed for in the lives of his followers; what he just yearned for them to experience. He prayed, "Holy Father, protect them . . . *so that they may be one as we are one.*" (John 17:11) What did he ask for? He said, "O God, may these my followers experience . . . *oneness.*" Deep, rich, full community. "Father, I pray that they will leave their loneliness and isolation and enter into a little community of relationships that enrich and replenish and energize their hearts and souls." He prayed for a return of the oneness that Adam and Eve first knew in the Garden. The same kind of oneness that prevails between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Notice also that Jesus' concern for oneness was not limited to his immediate disciples. It extended to all believers of all times right on up to this moment in time. He said, "My prayer is not for them (his disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message" (vs. 20). Christ desired that his church would be the earthly community of oneness modeled after the eternal community of oneness. And he gave this promise that "where two or three are gathered as a small group in my name, I will be there with them (Mt. 18:20).

In his book *The Connecting Church*, author Randy Frazee writes, "The experience of authentic community is one of the purposes God intends to be fulfilled by the church. The writings of Scripture lead one to conclude that *God intends the church, (listen to this) not to be one more bolt on the wheel*

one: "What did you do with what I gave you?" The first two servants did well.

Then we come to the third servant. What did he do with the talent he received? He hid it. The one-talent servant says to the Master: "*I knew that you are a hard man, and I was afraid.*" Here's another key word: afraid. I think the reason that Jesus used this word is because most people want to be generous. Most of us want to have giving hearts. What holds us back is fear. We're afraid that when we get old, there's not going to be enough. We're afraid we won't be financially secure.

We're afraid that we're going to miss out on some aspect of the good life. So what is Jesus trying to teach us here? He's really zeroing in on the trust issue. The servant had a once in a lifetime opportunity, but he allowed his fear to control him, so he buried his talent. And when the master returned, he was none too pleased. In fact he said to him, "Get out of my sight, you wicked and lazy servant!"

Do those words sound harsh? I mean, the guy didn't lose the talent. He just hid it. What does Jesus mean by "laziness" anyway? I think what he is referring to here is *the refusal to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.* It's a refusal to carry out the one thing that's been assigned to you to do. It's like the kamikaze pilot who flew seventeen missions. It's a failure to leverage what I have been given in order to do that piece of God's work in the world that has been entrusted to me.

In contrast, the master said to the five-talent servant and the two-talent servant: "*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things...now I'm going to put you in charge of many things. Your adventure is just starting.*" You see, the Master we serve is looking for people that He can entrust his Stuff to. Just look at what he was able to accomplish when a boy offered up a couple of fish and a few loaves and 5,000 hungry people were fed. A widow offered up her pennies and turn it into a story that has inspired people to give for thousands of years.

Now it's our turn. And because I want us to remember this story, I'm going to do something I've never done before. I'm going to ask for a few volunteers. I want to invite 3, 4, 5 people to come and stand up here in front next to me. What I'm going to ask these people to do will not be anything embarrassing. I guarantee it will be fun. You won't have to dance or sing. You will go on a little adventure with God. So, just get out of your seat and come quickly down in front.

OK. This is what we are going to do. All of you who have come forward are going to get to participate, but probably not all in the same way. I'm

It's been entrusted to me, but it belongs to somebody else. So God, what should we do together with what you've given us?"

Ownership is a myth—a very enticing and a very convincing one in our society—but Stewardship is the reality. This becomes even clearer later in the story when Jesus tells us that one day the master came back to settle his accounts. He returned and said to his servants, "What did you do with the talents I entrusted to you?"

Jesus implies that one day, we will stand before God and we will hear God will say to each of us: "You know, I gave you the chance of a lifetime. I gave you a body and I gave you a mind and I gave you a number of talents and abilities, and I gave you work to do, I gave you relationships to value, I gave you a house to live in, I helped you accumulate some assets. What did you do with them? How did you bless the world with them?" The part of the story that's a little sobering is this part—the accountability part. There's an odd tendency in us human beings to think that we can worm our way, or charm our way, or finesse our way out of the consequences of our actions.

This starts early on. It starts when we're young. And it will just continue until something comes along and interrupts the cycle. One of you recently shared a story with me of one of your children who felt she had messed up her finances so badly that she called you and said, "Mom & Dad, I think I'm going to have to move back home." You said to her, "Honey, we love you—but you're not going to move back home with us. What we will do is help you begin to sort out your money issues." If they had just let her move in with them they wouldn't have really helped her get to the bottom of her problem. They would have just enabled the problem to continue. Instead, they acted with tough love and taught their daughter a valuable lesson.

As Jesus tells his story, notice that there are three servants. Why three? Jesus does something unusual in this parable. Usually, when he was telling a story, there would be two characters in it: one who does the right thing and one who does the wrong thing. For example, the parable about the wise man who built his home upon the rock, and the foolish man who built his home on the sand. Or the story about the Pharisee who prayed with arrogance and pride, and the tax collector who was humble.

In this story, there are three characters. Why? One of them gets five talents, one of them gets two talents, but both of them act with courage and skill, and both of them receive the same commendation from the Master. Why? The reason is that Jesus wants to teach us that it's not important how many talents we're given. We can have one; we can have a hundred. That's not the issue. The only question that God is going to ask you and me is this

of activity in our lives, but the very hub at the center of one's life..."

If the truth be told: in the experience of many people, church has been reduced to occasional attendance at a worship service on Sunday morning. To be sure, the experience of corporate worship, of coming into the presence of God, receiving inspiration from the Word, singing the songs and praying the prayers of our faith is a good thing, But corporate worship represents only one aspect of the Christian life. Sitting in rows of pews and looking at each other's backs for one hour each week can hardly be described as being in community.

That's where small groups become so vitally important. Virtually every church that is a vital, growing church has a high percentage of its members involved in them. Why? Because the small group is where the rubber of discipleship meets the road of real life. It is in a small group that people can get close enough to really know each other, to care and share, to challenge and support, to confide and confess, to forgive and be forgiven, to laugh and weep together, to be accountable to each other, to watch over each other. Personal growth does not happen in isolation. Our character gets a make over as a result of inter-active relationships. Small groups are God's gift to foster spiritual growth.

Although the first Christians loved to assemble in a large group at the temple for corporate worship, they also met in small groups. The two went hand in glove. In Acts 2, which is the story of the early church, we read, "All who believed were together...in the temple, and they broke bread in homes with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (Acts 2:44-47) Friends and neighbors saw what was happening in the lives of the believers and they were naturally attracted and drawn in.

You see, during those times when we are overwhelmed by trials, heartaches and the burdens of life we all need to be strengthened and encouraged by a small group of fellow believers. When we wonder if God really does love us and care for us we need God's people in our lives. Through other Christians we can sense and know God's love and care. When God's love feels distant or non-existent, the body of Christ's love is real and tangible. When we are loved and cared for by another believer, especially during painful times, we gain a new sense of God's love at work through them for us. That is why we cannot afford to stand alone; to go it on our own. We need each other; we need the community of faith.

I have put a definition on your sermon outline of what I believe happens

when we give ourselves to a little group of three or four or a dozen others who are on the journey of faith. *“Community is the experience of knowing and being known, loving and being loved, serving and being served, celebrating and being celebrated.”* Time will not permit me to walk through these with you now. But I guarantee you will experience all of these four things when you decide to place yourself in an intentional community. Don’t let the hectic schedule most of you are keeping stop you. Don’t let fear stop you. Some of you struggle with that bothersome notion that if anyone knew you deeply, if anyone knew where to get the information about your dark side, if anyone could get their hands on the key to your confidential failure file, they would probably express shock and horror and catch the next stage coach out of town, leaving you standing alone in front of the saloon.

But friends, that’s not what an authentic small group is all about. It’s about acceptance, it’s about support, it’s about love. When you become part of a small group of people who are honest and sincere about wanting to really do church together, trust slowly build. As you take little risks, and then larger risks, you will begin to live into the experience of knowing and being known, loving and being loved, serving and being served, celebrating and being celebrated. And when that happens it becomes a powerful expression of this thing God wants us to experience called community.

So If you want to experience what the Church is really all about, on a deeper level, this is your invitation. Inserted in your program this morning is some information about the covenant groups that are starting here at St. Andrew’s. One started this past year, another began last Sunday morning, and more will be forming soon. Become part of a covenant group, a Bible study group, a Mariner group.

It’s in our DNA to seek community because we were created for relationships: a relationship with God; a relationship with a few other people with whom we can deeply connect. And we will never be completely whole or fully alive until we enter into the experience of true community in each of our lives. Let’s pray.

Reproducing Our Faith

(John 1:35-42, Mark 1:16-17)

Welcome to St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church. St. Andrew. Have you ever wondered who Andrew was and why our church is named after him? Well, this morning we are going to look at a Biblical passage about Andrew. And I believe that this passage could change our lives. It could also transform our whole church. If we really understood Andrew and followed his example, the lives of

understand this story unless you understand what’s happening here. Jesus’ middle eastern audience thought, “This is unbelievable! It is an act of staggering generosity on the part of the master.” He’s saying to his servants, “My master believes in me; my master trusts me.”

This also explains another little phrase in the story, when, in verse 16, Jesus says: *“The servant who received the five talents went out at once.”* Of course he did! This was the chance of a lifetime. He went out at once so the master wouldn’t have time to chance to change his mind. He knew an opportunity when he saw one!

Another thing that’s very important for us to understand is the answer to the question: To whom did the money belong? Did it belong to the master or the servant? This is the master’s money. The Master is the Owner, and the Servant is a Steward. What is Jesus trying to tell us? We’ll never get the money thing right, and we’ll never be able to battle the “More Cycle” successfully if we don’t settle the Ownership issue. And we all have a problem with the Ownership issue.

I read this a while ago in a theological journal called The Reader’s Digest: A woman is at an airport waiting to get on a plane. She buys a little snack bag of her favorite Oreo cookies. She’s in the waiting area, sitting down, and there’s a man that she doesn’t know sitting next to her. On the little armrest between them is this little snack bag of Oreo cookies. Without saying a word, the guy sitting next to her reaches in, takes out a cookie and starts to eat it. She’s furious! So she reaches into the bag, takes out a cookie and starts to eat it. And he just smiles and nods at her.

Apparently, he can’t speak any English. He reaches in and takes another cookie. And she’s livid, so she reaches in and takes another cookie. They both keep doing this until there’s only one cookie left. The man reaches in and takes the last cookie, breaks it in half and offers half to her. She just stares at him then he eats it himself. She’s beside herself!

She gets on the plane, sits down in her seat, reaches into her pocketbook and discovers that her bag of cookies is still in her purse. Not only did he not eat her cookies, but she was eating his cookies in the airport and didn’t even know it! Some of us in this room have a few cookies; some of us have a lot. Whose cookies are they really? We think they’re ours. We wrestle with the ownership issue.

Really, this whole message could be a short one, if we could just get the Ownership thing right. You see, if I go through life acting like an Owner, then I say, “It’s my Stuff! And if I’m feeling generous, maybe I’ll give you a few of my cookies, but they’re mine.” A steward says: “None of it is mine.

Sometimes we compare ourselves with people who have more than we do, and that stimulates the “More Cycle”. Sometimes, we worry about the future: Am I going to have enough? That stimulates the “More Cycle”. Then there will be a tragedy like a hurricane or an earthquake or a flood or a fire. We see pictures of suffering, or pictures of hungry kids, or we come to church and hear a message about money, or we read something in the Bible, and then we feel kind of guilty about how much we have. When we feel that way, maybe we make a stab at some extra giving, but eventually the guilt goes away, or we experience compassion fatigue, and we revert to our old habits. When that happens, we are sucked back into the “More, More, More Cycle”.

Here’s what I think. I think that guilt alone is not enough to break the “More Cycle” or to develop the generous spirits that most of us want to have, and that God wants for us. I think the only way to break through to that kind of financial freedom is to trust God enough to go on a divine adventure with God and our “Stuff.”

This brings us to this story of Jesus. One of the key words comes right at the beginning of the story. It would have been very striking for Jesus’ listeners. They would have heard something that we might not pick up on immediately. Jesus says: “*A man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted his property to them.*” I want to stop right here. In those days, there were no big corporations like we have them today. Wealth was concentrated in just a few households, and this is one of them.

In this story, Jesus is talking about staggering sums of money. You won’t understand the story unless you appreciate what a “talent” was in those days. In the monetary system of Jesus’ day, a talent was a very large bill. Comparing a talent to a denarii would be the equivalent of comparing a \$100 dollar bill to a penny. One talent was worth 10,000 denarii. A typical laborer would work for a day and the wage would be a few denaris. So one talent representing ten thousand denarii was a staggering sum of money.

For a master to entrust his servants with even one talent could be life-changing. Given a chance like that, any servant would say: This is an opportunity of a lifetime; it’s a chance for me to exercise initiative, demonstrate good judgment, test my skills in the marketplace, and maybe even rise to a position of authority.

A man named Ken Bailey, who grew up in Jerusalem, has written about this story through the eyes of a middle easterner. He says that in the culture of that day there was an implicit promise that if something like this were to happen, the servant would share in the profits of this transaction. You won’t

people around us—family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues—would be enriched and liberated. But most of all, each of us would discover our essential reason for being alive. I am convinced that we are all looking for a challenge which is demanding enough to stretch us and to tap the best within us. We want to be involved in something which will make a difference to our time in history. Following Andrew’s example could be just what you are looking for.

So where do we first meet Andrew? In the gospel of John we see Andrew’s first encounter with Jesus, and he is so drawn to Jesus that he ends up spending the day with him. But then before the day is over, Andrew’s thoughts turn to his brother, Simon Peter. So he goes to Peter, tells him about Jesus, and then brings his brother to Jesus. Let’s stop right there. Andrew brings Peter to Jesus. He introduces his brother to Jesus. And as we learn later in the gospels Peter becomes one of Jesus’ greatest disciples. But it all began with Andrew bringing Peter to Jesus.

Each of us is an indispensable link in God’s work in this world. We were born, not only to know God and experience God’s love in Jesus Christ, and follow his example, but we were also called to become reproducers of our faith. The primary purpose of our lives is to love others and to point them to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In the gospel of Mark we see how Jesus makes this purpose, bringing others to him, a mission for each of us. He challenges his disciples and he challenges us all to become fishers of people. Communication of God’s hope, of God’s grace to others is the calling given to every Christian. Whatever else we do, if this element is lacking, we will live and die having missed our greatest purpose in life.

Now I want to stop here for a moment. What I am talking about is “evangelism,” and “evangelism” has become a distasteful concept to most Presbyterians, hasn’t it? In every city I have lived in, I have discovered this about Presbyterians: We are a people who witness powerfully to the love of Christ through our actions. Wherever you find hurting, aching, despairing, broken people, you will find lots of Presbyterians giving of themselves in loving service to others. This is certainly true at St. Andrew’s. I am constantly amazed and delighted by the multitude of ways you serve in this community, and with the individual caring that you give to neighbors and friends outside of this church.

I love the serving hearts in our church and I think most of you would say this is what being a witness for Christ is all about. We need to live out the faith and show people what Christianity is all about rather than trying to tell them about it. And I would also venture to say that most of us feel just a little, if not very, uncomfortable at the thought of verbally sharing our faith. And so we

avoid this whole issue by convincing ourselves that all that really matters is our actions, the witness of our lives.

For a number of years I, too, shared this outlook on what it meant to be a witness for Christ. It really was our deeds, not our words that mattered. Then I had several experiences that greatly stretched my understanding of being a Christian witness. One of those experiences occurred during the nine years that I worked with patients at an alcohol and drug treatment center. In this very secular, non-religious institution, based on the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, my job as a clergy person was first to do a religious inventory with each patient. I asked the patients questions like: “Do you believe in God? If so, what do you think God is like? Do you believe God loves you? In what ways is God helping you here in the center? Do you pray, and if so, what do you pray about? And what do you experience when you pray?” And then in the second meeting I explored with the patients the deeper aspects of their faith and trust in God. I asked the patients to share examples of how they were learning to trust God and other people, how God was helping them deal with their fears, their resentments, their anger, their grief, their guilt, and how they were learning to turn their lives and their wills over to the care of God.

It was not uncommon for me to walk into the patient’s lounge and find a lively discussion about God occurring among the patients, the vast majority of whom have not been affiliated with a church for years, if ever. In this very secular, non-religious institution, there was a very high God-consciousness. There was a deep hunger for a working, vital, life-changing relationship with a living God, and a need, a tremendous need for an open and honest dialogue with others about that relationship with God. This experience convinced me that a full witness to Christ must include both a witness of our words and a witness of our actions. Today, I have a hope for our church—that we will find ways as individuals and as a church to share our faith that are consistent, authentic, and beautifully unique to who we are as a part of Christ’s great body on earth. But most of us need help in learning how to communicate our faith. Looking at how Jesus went about training his disciples for this important ministry might give us some clues on how this can happen for us. He uses a concept that would be very familiar to those disciples of his who were fishermen. He says, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” To explain their new calling Jesus uses a common fishing term. It meant to catch fish in such a way that they were still alive when brought to shore for sale.

Now these fishermen were going to become fishers of men and women in the same way. To take men and women alive is to reproduce our faith in them in such a way that they stay alive. So often evangelism kills people off with confusing concepts or by binding them to a rigid set of rules, or by a

ourselves of what God has already done for us and how much God loves us. Two thousand years ago Jesus died on a cross for you. If you were the only person on this earth, Jesus still would have died for you, because God loves you. When Jesus Christ died on the cross and said “I love you this much,” he gave all that he had. He gave willingly, sacrificially, extravagantly, and generously. That is what giving sacrificially is all about. Now Jesus says to us, “Go and do likewise.” Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we will never be able to repay what you have given to us. In fact, everything we have is a gift from you and we can only give back what you have already given to us. Help us to learn the miracle of generosity—to be like you. Give us the faith, the hope, the love to give the way you did—extravagantly, sacrificially, expectantly, and willingly. Stretch our faith, expand our hope, and deepen our love for you and for your church. Break the grip of materialism in our lives. Thank you for what you have already done in the hearts of your people through RENEW. Prepare us all to be a miracle, your miracle in the weeks ahead. In Christ’s name. Amen.

The Life God Rewards

(Matthew 25:13-30)

I want to start out this morning by inviting you to join me in a little mind/body workout. Here’s how it will go. I will invite you to take a little True/False quiz that you’ll need to think about for a second or two. Then you can raise your hand if the question is true for you. Some of you who are a little more bashful, but would still like to participate, can just jot down your responses on a piece of paper. So if you’re ready, here goes. Raise your hand if

...

1. You have, at least once, spent money unwisely.
2. You have, at least once, compared yourself with someone else financially.
3. You have written a check that was under-deposited.
4. You have felt guilt over the affluence of your lifestyle.
5. You have wished that you could be more generous.

We already know how the extroverts in the room responded. But how about the rest of you? How many of you have at least one “T” on your paper...or how many of you are sitting next to someone who has at least one “T”?

Here’s what I think happens for a lot of us. We live in a world where we are bombarded with messages: Want more – Make more – Acquire more – Hoard more.

want any of you to miss the opportunity. Four weeks from today, on what we are calling Celebration Sunday, we have an opportunity to do something extravagant in faith and watch God work a miracle in our midst. And believe me, if we step out in faith, God will prove to be faithful.

The fifth benefit is giving blesses us in return. This is stated over and over again in the Scriptures. God really wants us to get this message: God blesses those who give to God's work. If you are generous, you will be blessed. How will we be blessed? More than just financially, we will be blessed in a lot of different ways. Look at this promise in Deuteronomy 15:10: "Give generously...and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to." What a blanket statement: "blessed in all our work and in everything we put our hand to." I'd like you to write down this statement on your sermon outline or somewhere. "I can't out give God. I can't out give God." Every time you give God says: "I'll just give back to you." God is a much bigger giver than we are. It makes me sad to see so many people who are afraid of giving. They are missing out on so many blessings and miracles God wants to do in their lives. God simply says, "Trust me."

The sixth benefit is giving makes us joyful. The most joyful people in the world are givers. The most miserable people in the world are misers. That is where the word "miserable" comes from. If you are a giver, it feels good to give. There are two kinds of people in the world—givers and takers. Who is happier in life—givers or takers? Givers, of course. That is what Jesus means in Acts 20:35 when he says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

I'd like you to take a moment to look over these six benefits of giving on your sermon outlines. Circle the three that mean the most to you at this moment in your life. Then, in the next couple of weeks, think and pray about these benefits of giving, and just see what God will do in your life.

Some of you may be thinking, "I want to trust God, and I would like to become a generous giver. I'd like to make a commitment of faith, but I'm just afraid." Others may be thinking, "Maybe I just don't love God enough." But you know what? I don't think those are your problems at all. The problem is: you don't know how much God loves you. If you fully understood what God has done for you and if you fully understood how much God loves you, you would have no problem trusting God with everything in your life. That is the problem. Not that you don't love God enough, but you don't really understand how much God loves you.

So this morning I would like us to take a moment in silence to remind

judgmentalism that ignores how God has been and is already active in their lives. Instead of sharing with them a liberating Lord, people are suffocated with a rigid doctrine or a picture of God as a cosmic police officer.

Paul Tournier once said, "Our task as Christians is to live our personal lives with Christ with such intensity as to make it contagious." I think authentic faith sharing starts with us becoming aware of all the ways that God is working in our own lives. To really touch people where they are in need of God, where they are hurting, aching, and hoping in their lives, the faith story must be personalized. We must be able to talk in terms of what Christ has done for us. And yet, for many of us that is difficult.

That's because many of us are ethnic Christians, meaning that we were born into a Christian home. For many of us ethnic Christians, it is difficult for us to point to any radical changes in our lives. From our earliest memories, our church and our parents have been pointing us to God, so our journey across the years has been determined by that slant. Unfortunately, we ethnic Christians never get very eager about sharing our faith until we have looked within ourselves and discovered in the most personal terms how Christ has changed and blessed our lives, and how he is helping us today be the people he wants us to be.

So take a moment now to think back on your life. There may have been a time when, like most teens, you were trying out various personalities. You were selfish and then loving; bitter and cheerful, while your parents looked on, at times calmly and at times in a panic. When you finally settled into the personality that is now most typical of you, did your faith in Christ have anything to do with it? There may have been a later period when you speculated about the purpose of your life: should your goal be money or self-fulfillment, pleasure or service to humanity? When you finally identified your purpose, did the values you learned in church have anything to do with your direction? Every life has times of critical decision, cross-roads where the choice will determine everything that lies ahead. You have probably had many such crises in your work or in your family. There may have been a crisis in your marriage, a dreadful time that lasted weeks or months. Then you and your spouse came through it and have meant more to each other since then you ever did before. When you made your critical decisions, did Jesus Christ have anything to do with them? If today you are a different person and at a different place than you ever would have been without him, then you have much to share with others about what Christ can do for all of us. Included in your bulletin this morning a handout that can help you think through areas of your life that may have been impacted by your faith.

Another key to effectively sharing our faith with others involves our will-

ingness to really listen. Jesus never went to people with a kind of canned good news. He did not have a standard “gospel pitch” which he delivered to everyone with whom he talked. He found out where each person was, who they were, what their specific needs might be and then he responded to that person accordingly. We need to listen carefully to others about their hopes, their worries, their problems, their concerns. We must care enough for others to get inside their skins so that we feel their needs, their hurts, their aches so that the good news we share meets a real need and opens up new possibilities and beginnings for them.

We live right in the midst of a huge mission field. In one of the most unchurched communities in the country, each day we encounter people in our neighborhood, in our communities, in our places of work, and even in our own homes who need the spiritual food and the medicine that we have at our disposal as members of Christ’s church.

Each day we pass by people who experience the lost-ness of having no intimate relationship with God, people who are unaware that God loves them. Each day we rub shoulders with someone who has lost his or her sense of direction, who feels confused by the many conflicting choices and values in our society, a person who has no clear conviction of where his or her life is headed and how each challenge or opportunity fits into a greater plan.

Certainly we come across people each week who no longer feel “special” to anyone, particularly to the significant people in their lives, and so their self worth is crushed. We also come across people who have felt the lost ache of broken relationships. And there are those who have experienced the lost feeling of having failed, who feel unacceptable because of what they have said or done, who need Christ’s forgiveness and a new beginning.

It is for these people that the church exists. I believe God is calling each of us to be an Andrew to someone. To bring others to a place where they can encounter Jesus, and enter into a relationship with him and with his body, the church. Then be deployed back into this world for mission and service. Today, I invite you to ask God whom you are being called to be an Andrew to. I want to encourage you to write down the names of any persons God brings to your mind. Then ask God to give you insight and sensitivity in how you might invite them to church, or share your faith with them.

I’d like to close this morning by sharing with you modern day parable. It goes something like this: Once upon a time a certain family moved to a new town. They didn’t fall among thieves; they just moved in. By chance, one of their new neighbors came by and saw them. This neighbor said to himself, “The ministers probably know about this new family. They’ll stop by.”

In a like manner, another neighbor came near, and passing by on the other

“No, I refuse to buy into the myth that life is measured by how much you accumulate. No, I won’t buy the lie that my net worth and my self worth are the same thing.” You are making a radical counter-cultural statement every time you give. You are winning a spiritual victory.

That is why people sometimes get mad or upset or nervous when we talk about giving, because giving strikes the very core of our nature. At some point in our lives we have to decide: am I going to live for me or am I going to live for God and others? Am I going to hold on tightly to what I’ve got or am I going to just let it go? Am I going to be generous or a miser? Am I going to be a giver or a taker? Giving wins the spiritual battle. Look at what Jesus said in Matthew 6:24: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” He says we have to choose what is going to be number one in our lives.

Now I only preach on money a couple of times a year and for some of you that’s way too much. But did you know Jesus talked more about money than he did about heaven? He talked more about money than he did about almost any other subject. Why? Because Jesus knew it is the issue in our lives that we struggle with the most. Of the thirty-eight parables of Jesus in the New Testament, half of them deal with money and possessions. Why? Because Jesus knew that our finances are the acid test of what really matters in our lives. So every time we give break the grip of materialism, we are declaring what is most important in our lives and becoming more like God.

The fourth benefit is giving strengthens our faith. Sooner or later we have to decide if God can be trusted with our finances. We have to decide if God is a faithful, trustworthy, promise-keeping God. There are 7,000 promises in the Bible, and did you know that more than half of these promises relate to giving. So in the face of these 7,000 promises, with more than half of them related to giving, the question is: “do I have enough faith to believe these promises?” That is the bottom line. Every time we give we are making a statement of faith. Do we really believe what God says? “My God shall supply all your needs” (Philippians 4:19). Do we really believe that? What about Luke 6:38, where Jesus says: “Give and it shall be given to you.” The promises go on and on. Notice 2 Corinthians 9:13 says, “Your giving proves the reality of your faith.” This is the real test.

I know RENEW has been stretching some of you and your faith. Hardly a week goes by that I don’t hear of someone who is prayerfully considering what sacrifice means to them and is attempting to step out in faith, trusting God like never before in their lives. It isn’t the size of the gift that matters. It is the faith and the sacrifice. Every time we give sacrificially we give God a chance to work a miracle in our lives and in the life of our church. I don’t

health.” So, in the interest of the mental health of those sitting next to you, I want to quickly give you six benefits of learning how to be a generous person. Now these six benefits are nothing new. We have all heard about them before, but we all have a tendency to be good forgetters and we need to be reminded over and over again of what is true.

The first benefit of being a giver is giving makes us more like God. Why? Because God is a giver. If we are going to become more like God, we have got to learn to give. We have got to become givers, not takers, in life. James 1:5 says, “God gives to all generously and ungrudgingly.” Why? Because God is a giver. You are either a giver or a taker in this world and God says, “I want you to become more like me.”

When we give we need to remember the words in I Chronicles 29: all things come from God, and we can only give what is already God’s. This is why we have been calling RENEW a giving campaign, not a fundraising campaign. What’s the difference? In a giving campaign, we each focus on what we individually will give in faith, in hope, and in love. In a fund raising campaign, you go collect money from other people by selling candy, raffle tickets and so on. Fund raising raises money, but only giving makes us more like God. That has been our focus and many of us have grown as we have considered what God wants to do in our lives.

The second benefit is giving draws us closer to God. Matthew 6:21 says: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” So where is your heart today? It is wherever your treasure is: if my treasure is in a boat, that is where my heart is; if my treasure is in my house, that is where my heart is; if it’s in a career, a hobby, or a vacation or my travel, that is where my heart is. Wherever I put my money reveals my values and what is important to me. It reveals my priorities, because my heart goes where my money goes. Whenever we give, God is pleased, because God is an extravagant giver. If we are going to become more like God, we have got to learn to be a giver and, when we do, we are drawn closer to God.

The third benefit is giving breaks the grip of materialism in our lives. We live in a very materialistic culture. Everything is get, get, get, get all you can. We are surrounded by so many people whose only goal in life is more. All around us we are bombarded with the same message: have it all, get it all, spend it all, achieve it all, keep it all, do it all. Everything around us is geared to make us want more and more. There is only one antidote to materialism: giving. It is the exact opposite of materialism. Materialism is based on one word—get. How do you break the grip of materialism? Give.

Every time you give you make a counter-cultural statement. You say:

side said, “I don’t believe in being a fanatic about religion. I’ll wait until they bring up the subject of religion sometime, then I’ll invite them to our church if they have time.”

But another neighbor, as she journeyed, came where they were, and when she saw them, she was moved with compassion, and stopped by to welcome them to the neighborhood. She took them some Friendship bread. As she got to know them, she showed an interest in their lives and in their struggles. She listened to their hurts and their hopes. She told them how God helped her and influenced what she did. She told them how much her church meant to her, about the adult classes, the worship services, the coffee time, the opportunities to serve others, and the support of other members. She invited them to attend her church and even offered to come by for them, which she did, the very next Sunday.

Now which of these three do you think was the “real” neighbor to those who moved into the town? Which do you think was an “Andrew” to this family? If you know, go and do likewise. Amen.

Living Our Faith in a Multicultural World

(John 4:1-37)

One of the biggest surprises I’ve had in moving back to Portland has been in the noticing all of the groups of people I did not see when I was living here fifteen years ago. I certainly remember rubbing shoulders with Asian-Americans, Africa-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, who of course were here long before any of our ancestors arrived on the scene. But I’ve been struck by the presence of so many new immigrants. They are coming to the U.S. at a rate of a little over a million people each year, from every region of the world. Some are more noticeable to me because they are dressed in ways that are unique to their culture and religion.

I read a report recently that the destination of immigrants has changed over the years away from states with large foreign-born populations such as New York and California, toward new settlement states such as Oregon. One reason I’m looking forward to having Rick Nitti come to St. Andrew’s next Sunday, is that the program he directs at Neighborhood House serves many of these new racial ethnic groups. He will tell us from first-hand experience how the landscape of SW Portland has been changing. I want to urge you to plan to stick around after the service next Sunday to hear what he has to say.

So in many ways it’s very fitting to say: “Welcome to the new Portland.” No longer are we a mono-cultural city, but an increasingly multi-ethnic com-

munity comprised of people from every continent and race.

A quick glance at U.S. immigration statistics tells the story. In the 1950s and 60s, a full 90 percent of our nations' immigrants came from Europe and just a few percent from Asia and other continents. In the last census of 2000, however, only 20 percent of immigrants came from Europe while 50 percent came from Asia, ten percent from Africa, and 20 percent from Latin America. Our nation is increasingly made up of diverse ethnic and racial groups, each attempting to share in the American Dream while remaining faithful to their own unique heritage.

One of the things these changing demographics have done is awaked us to the fact that there are other ways of thinking about spiritual matters. Multiculturalism coincides with something called "religious pluralism"—the belief that a country built on freedom requires all religious views be respected equally. The result is that American who have grown up in a largely Judeo-Christian culture are having to move over and make room for others as a new mosaic of cultural and religious traditions takes shape.

This means making certain accommodations. For example, local town meetings can no longer recite the Lord's Prayer when they begin their meetings as they may have done in the past; public school concerts may move away from "Christmas" concerts that contain lots of Christian carols to "winter" concerts that include a balance of religious and cultural music. While it's natural to feel uncomfortable when these changes occur, we don't need to feel threatened by them. These changes reflect the legal protections that are guaranteed to all citizens by our constitution. They may feel unsettling as we've been used to doing things in certain ways for years, but there is tremendous opportunity here as well.

While the spiritual beliefs of our nation's founders were near and dear to them, in their wisdom they crafted a society where individual freedom and tolerance would become cardinal values protected by the Bill of Rights. When you stop and think about it, it was only a matter of time before this multicultural mosaic would become a reality. Not surprisingly if you were to take a poll of students in an average public school classroom today, you would find that while a significant percentage of students identify themselves as Christian (broken down further into the various subgroups of Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox), you would also find among them others who identify themselves as Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, as well as other faiths. And, you would find a growing percent of students who claimed no religious affiliation at all as our community becomes increasingly secularized.

The bottom line is that people are exposed to more than just our way of

Not all of us are gifted evangelists. But every one of us can tell our friends, neighbors, co-workers about a person we have met. The woman's enthusiasm prompted her at the very least to bring her friends to a place where they, too, could hear the Gospel. That's the invitation Jesus gives to each of us this morning on the World Wide Communion Sunday. It is an invitation given to people of every race, every culture, every age: "Come and see what God has done." Amen.

Building a Life of Sacrifice

(2 Corinthians 8:1-9)

In the last few weeks we have been introducing some of the underlying Biblical theme of the RENEW ministry we are currently undertaking in the life of our church. We have looked at what it means to grow in our faith. We have looked at what it means to be a follower of Jesus and fish for people. This morning we are going to explore what it means to be a giver. To do that I am going to lift up a sub- theme of RENEW: "Not equal gifts, but equal sacrifice" because that phrase gives us a clear picture of what it means to be a giver. Now the word sacrifice is not an easy word for many of us to grasp. Living as we do, in a country of religious freedom and a society of great affluence for so many, most of us find it hard to honestly say that we have ever sacrificed in any real way.

But if we were Christians living in the Sudan, in the Middle East, or in one of a hundred other places around the world where people of faith have suffered and been persecuted for their beliefs, we would know that at the heart of sacrifice is giving—giving up one's power or prestige, giving of one's time and resources, and ultimately giving of one's life. Sacrifice can be defined as giving up something of value in order to gain something of greater value and giving of oneself is at the heart of any act of sacrifice.

And so this morning we are going to look at how we can become givers. Giving is the most talked about value in the Bible. More than faith, hope, or love. You may want to write these statistics down on your sermon outline. The word faith is mentioned 246 times in the Bible; the word hope is used 185 times; the word love and all of its derivatives is used 733 times; and the word give or giving is used 2,285 times. You just can't ignore it. Why is there so much emphasis on giving? It's because giving is at the very heart of our Christian faith. Giving is the way we express our faith, our hope and our love.

Karl Menninger, the distinguished psychiatrist who founded the world renown Menninger clinic says, "Giving is an important criteria of mental

tion in Minneapolis. While his life and his ministry are now winding down, for over a half century Billy Graham has preached the Gospel all over the world, to many different cultures and ethnic groups. In his autobiography he recounts a visit to India: “I did not attack the views of those who adhered to Hinduism and other religions; I was not in India to stir up controversy. Instead, I concentrated on presenting in a positive way the message of Christ as simply and forcefully as I knew how. I did not coerce or manipulate people. The Gospel has its own power to persuade.” (*Just As I Am*, page 268)

Sometimes, perhaps because we are embarrassed by the actions of other Christians, or perhaps because we lack enough faith in God’s ability to work in us and through us, we shy away from any thought of sharing our faith. But do you remember what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” We live in a time when it seems many have lost their confidence in the power of God. By contrast, Jesus says to the woman, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst” (John 4:14). Where people have confidence in the Gospel, lives are transformed.

5. Be prepared to deal with some messy situations

As this story unfolds it becomes clear that this woman’s situation is complex. She has had five different husbands. Maybe she has given up on marriage altogether because the man she is presently living with is not her husband. We can hardly begin to guess at the pain and brokenness in this woman’s life. That’s often how it is when we connect with other people. We have to be prepared to deal with messy situations; we need to listen attentively to people’s stories and not give them pat answers or quick-fix solutions. We need to come along side of them and walk with them through their struggles. That, in itself is a powerful witness to our faith. Because people need an experience of the grace of Jesus Christ.

6. Believe that you are surrounded by spiritually hungry people

After the woman had gone home to her village, we pick up the story again. Jesus’ disciples arrived and he began to tell them how ripe the fields were for the harvest. Then, to illustrate what he meant, he pointed over his shoulders and said, “Look, the harvest is ready right now, here it comes!” They all turned to see the Samaritan woman bringing her townspeople with her out to meet Jesus, so that they too could experience what she had experienced.

7. If you can’t be an evangelist like Jesus, you can be a witness like the Samaritan woman.

thinking. But as long as we live in this country, thank God, we are still free to make up our own minds. So a lot of room still remains for the witness and influence of those who profess to be followers of Christ. The Great Commission that Jesus entrusted to his disciples is still relevant: “go into all the world and proclaim my gospel to every person.” It is the bedrock of our faith. So the question I want us to wrestle with this morning is this: How can we go about sharing our faith in a multi-cultural world, a multi-ethnic city?

One place we can start is by being well-grounded in our own faith. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3:15)

Respected sociologist Rodney Stark has studied growing religious movements in America. In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, he tells how people come to accept a new faith through what he calls “the attachment principle”: “The fact is that typically people do not seek a faith; they encounter one through their ties to other people who already accept this faith.”

This is why Christians need to be rubbing shoulders with people in every sphere of life—those who do not share our religious background, as well as those who are un-churched or may call themselves “secularists.” We need to be involved with our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of employment—loving people with the love of Christ. As Steve Meeks writes, “Ministry is not informing others about Christ; it is touching them with his love, grace, forgiveness, power, and hope.” We seek not just to tell people about Jesus, but to have them experience him, through us.

So we need to work on building relationships with people who on the surface may appear different from ourselves, but are really very much like us—because they all need God in their lives. Let me give you an example: earlier this week I made a hospital call. I was driving into the hospital parking and noticed two Muslim women walking to my left. So I stopped, smiled, and let them pass by in front of me. Then, as I walked into the main lobby and waited for the elevator I saw them again. One of them was carrying a home-made dish and so I asked what it was and who they were visiting. They returned my smile and a conversation opened up. We talked about why we were there and a little bridge began to form. We need to move outside our comfort zone and connect with people of other walks of life.

The second kind of “bridge work” we need to attempt has to do with some repairs that I believe need to be made. What do I mean? We have allowed others to define what the Christian message is all about. Many people in our nation and our world have actually become afraid of Christians; they fear they will be judged by us or they will be treated with prejudice. Nothing

destroys our credibility more than the distortion of Christianity from a message of the Good News of God's love for all people, into a perception that it is "bad news" by those who appear different from us.

So one thing we can all do is to demonstrate to all people the love, acceptance, and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ as we live out his values in relation to others. A Gospel which is meant to embrace all people is hollow when proclaimed by a community of faith that is not willing to embody what it stands for.

There is a wonderful story in John's Gospel that shows us how Jesus went about relating to people of different cultural and racial backgrounds. In chapter 4, he encounters a Samaritan woman at a place where people came to draw water. I think we can all learn a few principles of outreach and evangelism as we watch the master evangelist in action.

1. Begin where you are

The first thing that strikes me about Jesus' encounter is just how different the two of them are: He is a Jewish man; she is a Samaritan woman. Jews and Samaritans did not get along very well. They would be the modern day equivalent to a chance encounter between an Israeli and a Palestinian or an Iraqi Shiite and an Iraqi Sunni. This does not appear to be a very promising situation for sharing your faith. Jesus is in the wrong place, at the wrong time—it was high noon. The sun was hot, and Jesus was tired. He needed to rest. Nor did there seem to be that much to work with. The woman's reputation had proceeded her; she was not very highly respected, even among her own people. No matter how you look at it, this was not a promising situation.

Sometimes we look around and lament that we are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Fifty years ago it was relatively easy to grow a church in Portland. In fact, we Presbyterians started dozens of them. Back then, Christianity was the dominant religion, we were in a mono-cultural, mono-religious time when most of our neighbors went to church. Old timers will tell us how people came flocking to St. Andrew's when we first opened our doors; how children were crammed into Sunday school classrooms. "Build it and they will come" was the prevailing philosophy. So this church was built, and by golly, people came. Some of us think, "Oh, if only things were like they used to be."

But times have changed. It is 2005 and things are not the way they used to be. That's why I want you to notice what Jesus did in this story; I want you to see the approach that he took when he encountered a woman who was culturally and religiously a world apart. The first thing he did was to begin

where he was and to work with what he had.

2. Find the point of contact

Jesus began where he was. He knew he wasn't in Jerusalem any more, he was in Samaria, a very different place. But he found a point of contact. He came to a well and noticed he and this woman shared something in common—they both needed some water. Geoff Willis says that the Gospel is like a Persian carpet: it has many threads. People investigate Christianity for many different reasons. One of the keys to effectively connecting with others is to determine the proper thread that produces common ground.

So what did Jesus do? He focused in on the woman and her need. You could call it: "need-based evangelism." Jesus listened without judgment. If the woman had been weighed down by a sense of failure in her many relationships, he might have focused there listening to her pain, telling her about the mercy and forgiveness of God, and offering her a chance to make a fresh start. The thread of connection turned out to be the village well and the water it yielded, so Jesus used the water as an illustration of another kind of water that could quench her spiritual thirst. He touched her need and she became interested.

3. Work from humility rather than arrogance or power

Often we Presbyterians have this stereotype of what evangelism is, and we don't like it. We think of someone standing on a street corner preaching at people, heckling them as they pass by. We conjure up images of evangelists trying to ram their beliefs down someone else's throat. We react to this notion so strongly that others have even made up jokes about us.

What do you get when you cross a Presbyterian and a Jehovah's Witness?

Someone who comes up to your home, rings the door bell, and just stands there!" We're tongue-tied. We don't know what to say. But listen to this simple definition from D.T. Niles, "Evangelism is one beggar telling another where to find bread." It's really not all that complicated.

So notice what Jesus does in his encounter with the Samaritan woman: he doesn't preach at her; he doesn't warn her that she is skating on thin ice and had better repent and get right with God before she is consigned to hell for all eternity. He simply asks her for a drink. In doing so he puts her in charge of the situation and opens the door to a non-threatening conversation.

4. Have confidence in the Gospel

Most of you know I grew up in Minnesota. The high school I attended was not far from the headquarters of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Associa-