

Go on to Maturity!

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91;
Hebrews 5:11-6:3; Mark 10:35-45

Jack Welsh is the much-celebrated former chairman and CEO of General Electric. Since his retirement from GE in 2001, Welsh has written two best-selling books and he's inspired countless executives with his business savvy. He also has gone through a very public and very messy divorce that revealed his retirement package, which was a remarkable assortment of luxurious lifestyle perks that made headlines throughout the country.

Several years ago Jack Welsh suffered a massive heart attack that almost killed him. After his retirement he was asked what he had learned from that experience of coming face-to-face with his mortality. And do you know what Jack Welsh said about that experience? He said, "I learned that I didn't spend enough money." When pressed (because the people thought he was joking), he added that after his bypass surgery, he vowed that he would never again drink wine that cost less than one hundred dollars a bottle. And he was completely serious.

In other words, life is too short not to eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we may die. So, blow every bit of money you have; live it up; spend like there's no tomorrow. In a way, it makes sense, doesn't it? After all, if there is nothing beyond the grave, then why not get all you can out of life while you can? Whether it's drinking the best wine, eating the best food, flying in a private jet, or having four or five homes around the world, why not live as if there's no tomorrow?

Christians, however, live life from an eternal perspective. We know there is more to life than meets the eye. We have a purpose for living, a purpose that goes beyond self-centered pursuits. We can serve God, help people, and make a difference in the world. "Go on toward perfection" exhorts the author of Hebrews. I like the way the NIV translates the phrase: "Go on to maturity", which means developing your full potential as the person God intends you to be. "Go on to maturity" – in your use of money as in all else. I have often asked myself as a pastor, How is it possible that we can reach maturity in so many areas of our lives, yet be stunted in our use of money?

Jack Welch, for example, is a genius in business, there's no doubt about that, but I want to suggest that he is an infant still sucking his thumb in terms of his use of money. Tragically, there are many Christians like that today. They may be highly successful in their professional lives or their personal lives, they may live in big homes and drive expensive cars, but spiritually they are babies in Christ, they are struggling over the ABC's of faith, they have never reached their full potential as Christians. They never learned that the purpose of life is not simply to get, it's to give, because the only way to receive abundant life is to pass it on to others. "Go on to maturity" says the author of Hebrews. Go on to maturity in your use of money, in your sharing of your resources, in your financial giving.

Just as there are several stages to physical and psychological maturity, so there are three stages in our maturity as givers. The first stage is the level of obligation. This is simply paying for the benefits of religion, what some people call "paying your dues".

The first time I heard that phrase was when I was a young pastor newly ordained on the Gaspé coast of Quebec, and a lady came to the office and said, "Pastor, I want to pay my dues." I said, "What is that?" And she said, "Well, it's what keeps me in the church; it's my membership. Here's my fifty dollars. And that guarantees that when I die I'll be buried in the cemetery." She was paying her dues. There's a logic to paying your dues, isn't there? If you belong to a club, you pay an annual membership fee, and you expect to do that. If you go to a lawyer or your doctor or an accountant, you pay a bill, and you expect to do that. So why not with the church? You become a member, pay your dues and receive certain benefits in return. This is church membership by contract, a religion of the quid pro quo.

The ancient Jews believed in paying your dues. The tithe for them was a kind of income tax payable to the department of eternal revenue; there was nothing to feel proud if one paid it because the tithe belonged to God. You had a duty to pay it, no more and no less, it was like your income tax – when you fill out the form, you don't give a little extra for the government. There is much that is praiseworthy in the Jewish understanding of the tithe; you paid the tithe, and that was it.

Now, I don't want to criticize this too much, because ten percent is better than wild horses, but Jesus said I have a problem with the tithe. And the problem was the tendency to give out of law rather than out of love. You see, the law gives as little as possible, while

love gives as much as possible; the law asks, “How much can I spare?”, while love asks “How much can I share?”; the law always sets limits, while love never has limits.

When a husband went to buy his wife an anniversary gift, the clerk began by showing him some cheap jewelry. The man said, “You don’t understand. This is for my wife, and I want something that will show just how much I love her.” That’s not giving out of obligation, that’s out of delight. This leads to the second stage of maturity as givers – the level of generosity.

Jesus taught that the secret to a joyful life comes down to one word – give! Give God your attention. Give people your love. Give the world your service. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Contemporary research reveals what Jesus knew through spiritual instinct is in fact true: nothing is more fulfilling than giving.

Jesus talked a lot about money. In fact, he talked about money more than any other topic in the gospels. You might well ask, Why did Jesus talk so much about money? Because money has the power to help or hinder us in meeting their greatest needs. You’ve heard it said that “Money can’t buy happiness”, and that’s absolutely true. But the way we use our money influences how happy we are. Being generous does something for our spirit; it lifts us up; it brings us out of ourselves to the world around us. Did you know that the root word for “miserable” is “miser”? A miser is always miserable, but generous people are joyful people. You know a generous person when you see one because they feel good about themselves and when you’re around them, they make you feel good.

When I was a pastor in San Diego, I read a wonderful story in the San Diego Tribune about a man who decided that he didn’t want to spend Thanksgiving just having a feast on Thursday and watching football games. His wife had died, and he wanted something greater in life, some greater purpose, so he got in his car and headed for Mexico. He crossed the border and found a woman making tamales over a burning fire for a bunch of ragged kids playing in the dirt. This woman had found these children living in junked cars and eating garbage because they didn’t have any money for food. She took them in and started what might be called an orphanage. It was an orphanage without real buildings and a real school, without any proper medical care. So this man decided then and there that he was going to give the rest of his life to take up an offering for this woman, an offering which over the years, has helped build dormitories, a soup kitchen, a medical clinic, an education center, and who knows what else.

Do you know what this man told the reporter about what he discovered through all this? He said “The more time you spend on yourself, the more self-absorbed and the less happy you are. The more time spent in service of others, the happier you are. Happiness,” he added, “is tied to a more generous heart.”

People like this man have discovered a fundamental truth about life: there is a large part of us that can only be filled as we empty ourselves. In giving our lives away, we discover a life like we have never known existed. We find a meaning and a purpose to life that has evaded us throughout much of our lives when we simply gave to ourselves.

Admittedly this sounds counterintuitive, because you think to yourselves the only way to really get the most out of life is to take, take, take and now the preacher is saying you’ve got to give, give, give – that doesn’t make sense. But I think the more you think about it, the more you realize it’s true. If you want love, you give love. If you want to have friends, you be a friend. If you want your life to have meaning, volunteer for a good cause, or donate your time, or give your money, or think of other people. As a pastor, I have never known a giver who was not better off for giving. And I suspect the same thing is true of you.

Personally, if my wife Heather and I were listing evidences for the Christian faith, one would be the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but another would be in this area of giving. We have been astonished again and again when we have given, and sometimes, I admit, we give with pain, it’s been a struggle. But God has always blessed us in so many wonderful and unexpected ways. We’ve never lacked for anything, we’re not hungry. We may not have as many perks as other people, but we seem to be quite content. And even now we enjoy seeing how far God can challenge us and how far we can trust God when we make our financial pledge to the church. Like you, we now have our pledge card at home, and at St. Peter’s Church, where next Sunday is our commitment Sunday, I will make out that pledge card and we will give a little more than we gave last year. It will be a struggle, because we’re already beyond the tithe. But we always give a little more. We struggle, we stretch. And every year for the past twenty-three years, Heather and I have put a number on our pledge card that seems just a little bit beyond reason, beyond practicality, beyond the safe and possible. But we’ve never been disappointed, we’ve never lacked for anything, God always comes through. You see, there’s an important truth here: you can’t out-give God. You just can’t, no matter how hard you try, you can’t out-give God. If you don’t believe me, try giving generously, try to stretch and see if you don’t experience the joy for yourself.

Giving generously is always in our best interest. But as we move toward maturity, we come to a third stage – the level of sacrifice. Many of you know and love that wonderful verse in St. John's Gospel "God so loved the world he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." God gave. And gave. And gave . . . until the only thing God had left to give was his Son.

Martin Luther said that if you or I had been the only person living in the world, God would still have given his Son for us because God loves us that much. There is only one motive to lead a person to give sacrificially, and that is to remember that one dark day when it thundered over the Palestine hills, and a young man full of life allowed himself to be nailed to a cross and his blood poured out on the ground in sacrifice so that you and I might have abundant life. His cross is not just a wonderful show of love; it's a challenge to you and me. Christ says from the cross, "This I do for you!" God now wants us to do something for him, and the place to begin after your heart, is with your checkbook. When we arrive at the level of sacrifice, we become sensitive to the needs that are all around us.

I don't know what you can and can't give, you know your needs better than I do, but I am sure you know people who are without hope, without purpose, people who seem lost, people who are struggling, people who don't know Jesus – they're all around us – and the sad part about it in the United States today, the greatest number of people are people who don't know God. Did you know that? That the people who are not members of any church are the demographic group that is growing the most. There's a need in our country today.

Years ago when I was a very young priest in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, I was serving as a chaplain in the Army Reserves. I learned something about triage from a medic who had served in Viet Nam. It was during a training weekend at Fort Indiantown Gap. I remember that it was clear and cold that day and he and I were standing out on the grounds talking about being a medic, and I asked him what it was like to be a medic in combat. The man replied, "After a battle, our job is to treat the wounded. We try first to help the ones who can recover. But if a soldier is fatally wounded, we leave him and move on to a person we can help." I asked if it isn't hard leaving a dying man, and the medic replied, "In training they tell us never look into the eyes of a dying man. They say that if we do, we will never be able to leave him."

Those words have haunted me for almost twenty years now. "Never look into the eyes of a dying man . . . never be able to leave him." I wonder if this isn't our problem as Christians in the church today. We don't look into the eyes of all the hurting, lost people

in the world, the people who are living without hope and dying without hope, the people who are living without Christ. If our eyes could see their quiet desperation, their pain, would we be able to carry on as usual? Or would we give of ourselves as if their lives depended on it – and ours as well?

So, there are three levels of giving – the level of obligation, the level of generosity, and the level of sacrifice. We are all at different levels, I know. Some of us may give without even thinking the issue through, just write a number on the pledge card and never give it a moment's thought. Some of us may follow the principle of "first fruits", and make their giving to God a top priority in their lives. Others may practice proportionate giving – giving two or three or five percent of our income to the church. Still others may tithe – giving the full ten percent. And there some of us may have moved beyond the tithe in response to God's amazing grace and boundless love. Whatever your level of giving right now, I am asking you to move beyond a token offering and this year make a sacrificial gift to Trinity Lutheran Church.

Do you know the story of the pig and the chicken? A pig and chicken were walking down the road when they saw a sign advertising ham and eggs for breakfast. "Let's go and have some breakfast" said the chicken. "Oh no," replied the pig, "for you that's only a token offering, but for me it would mean a total commitment!"

Well why not a total commitment this year? The truth is, we don't have to remain stunted in our growth, being babes in Christ forever, struggling over the ABC's of faith, and never reaching our full potential as Christians. We can go on to maturity in our use of money, as in all else.

Amen.