

“Seeds of Thanksgiving”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

A More Divine Design: Capital Campaign Consecration Sunday

Edina Morningside Community Church; May 21, 2017

**2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

*The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

Back when I was in high school, I worked during the summer—70 hours a week as a cashier at Rainbow Foods and as a clerk in Men’s Sportswear at Dayton’s in Rosedale Mall. But for one week between my junior and senior years, I joined other youth from my church on a mission trip to downtown Minneapolis. Throughout the course of that intense week, I saw poverty up close and walked a stretch of Franklin Avenue lined with broken bottles, discarded needles, and other paraphernalia of the night. One of the mission organizations we met that week was Streetlight Ministries, operating on a shoestring budget from a Franklin storefront to offer food, clothing and other basic services to those who were homeless. Their business cards were laminated yellow and had a tiny round seed taped to them, above a verse where Jesus talks about having the faith of a mustard seed. I remember feeling humbled by how much need I saw that week, and the faith of those who responded with very little means, but trust that God and the gospel could make a difference.

I was taught from childhood to give a tithe—10 percent—of my earnings back to God for use in the world. At the end of that summer I felt called to give my tithe to Streetlight Ministries, so on a late August afternoon my teenage self—big curly hair, pimples and all—walked through the glass door and surprised the people inside who barely remembered me. The woman who ran the place told me her husband was just on his way to the post office. It was past time to mail the rent check for their space, and they couldn’t wait any longer. He was sending a check but there weren’t enough funds in the bank account to cover it. “We’ve been praying for an answer all week,” she told me, “and now here *you* are!” The few hundred dollars I had come to give them was enough to make ends meet awhile longer. That’s when I started to realize how God could use the mustard seeds of their faith and mine, with what each of us could do, and thereby sustain hope for those most in need. I learned that my weeks of work and that mission week were connected by God, a way of making possible something that seemed impossible. It wasn’t about me, but about something much greater that *God* wanted to do through the gifts entrusted to me. I *still* feel shivers of awe and gratitude for that experience.

We don’t often see prayers so visibly answered, but this morning is another such moment. We have been considering a capital campaign for years. We’ve known well our needs for building repair, but wondered if it would be possible to do anything beyond propping up a century-old structure. Back in January, your leaders looked at the top priorities of this community and the best estimates we had of their approximate cost. When we put them together and added an appropriate margin for error, we came

up with this impossibly large sum: \$800,000. We talked about different ways of reducing that figure—perhaps only doing part of the narthex or not renovating the front entrance. But someone in that joint meeting of Trustees and Cabinet suggested bringing the full amount to the congregation. “Why trim the church’s vision in advance?” she said. “We can always modify later based on the results, but let’s not decide what’s possible before we actually see.” That voice of faith and trust persuaded the room, and is one reason we are here today.

By the grace of God that inspires and then makes possible an audacious vision, we have received almost \$900,000 in campaign pledges and gifts. This is the accumulated amount of little seeds, given in faith. No one person or family gave even close to half of this amount. This represents dozens upon dozens of gifts, each faithful and great in its generosity, coming at a pace and time that only God could count. We have done as the apostle Paul writes: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” While most of this sum comes from our church’s members, we’ve also received contributions from neighbors, former members, and community organizations. Every gift and pledge comes as an answer to prayer: “God, please make a way where there seems to be no way.” Today we bear witness to what results when we open ourselves to God working through each of us, making the impossible possible for the sake of God’s mission in the world. “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance,” Paul says, “so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

What are those good works that we participate in with abundance? The repairs and remodels that we envision are not just about a building. If it were only that, I’m sure we wouldn’t be here today. Rather, all that we propose to do is for the sake of a greater purpose: to share the joy of Christ’s love by welcoming and serving. *This* is why we exist, to follow God’s mission here and far beyond: giving to those who have need; scattering faith, hope and love with abandon; nurturing righteousness throughout the community.

Paul writes that the God who supplies seed to the sower will make our own offerings like seeds as well. The kernels of divine generosity that blossom in our own lives become further abundance when poured out for the sake of others. What results, he says, is “thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.” So consider the cries of praise and gratitude which rise up to God today, and which will rise up from here in years to come. Worshippers sing praise along with a repaired organ, and can more easily find their way to the sanctuary—praise God! Morningside After Dark guests might be drawn to the beauty *upstairs* as easily as they are to the beauty *downstairs*—praise God! Neighbors on the block—cycling by, walking dogs or pushing strollers—will have a beautiful spot by our entry to rest and contemplate—praise God! Visitors for any function will clearly be able to see which entrance to use, and will find working, unlocked doors to welcome them—praise God! Our guests for AA will have a fresh, inviting and comfortable space in which to gather—praise God! Parents of Edina Morningside Preschoolers will see us protecting the building for their children even as we equip young minds and bodies for a lifetime—praise God! Young adults will see a church that seeks to be relevant, a home base from which to launch caring and service ministries—praise God! People around who witness our transformation for the good of the neighborhood—even though they don’t know the Hebrew origin of the word—will be moved to cry “alleluia!”—praise God! A great chorus of thanksgivings will go out from the church, then echo through Morningside and the wider community in ways that please the heart of God.

All these good things will not be accomplished by our pledges alone. But the money is our dedication to serve more greatly still the mission of God in the world. To these pledges we add our time, our energies, and our very lives. *All* that we offer is given with trust that God will use it to grow more goodness in the world. Our offerings and pledges—with every other gift and our very existence as a church—are seeds to share joy, welcome and service, thereby eliciting a harvest of thanksgivings from the community and beyond. Praise God!

Let us pray: *God who gives beyond measure, thank you for the abundance which fills our lives and your church. Thank you for the honor of sharing these seeds, and joining your mission of love and justice for all, in the name of Christ. Amen.*