

Let me set the scene for our story in Exodus.

We're looking at the windswept, barren, stark landscape of a High Plains Desert.

We're confronted by marauding bands of bandits, mayhem and massacres around every corner, and one man stands tall in the face of it all.

That might sound a lot like some video games you play, but before those video games there were those old Clint Eastwood spaghetti westerns I've recently caught on cable: “A Fistful of Dollars”, “For a Few Dollars More”, and “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”.

Yes, the story in Exodus is about Moses and the people of Israel...but the connection with the Clint Eastwood movies is too good to pass up for a stewardship sermon!

Moses is saying to the people of Israel that they have a ‘fistful of dollars’ and wants to know what they're going to do with a few dollars more: Bad, Ugly, or Good?

Paul builds on this story about Moses, telling the Corinthian Christians - It's all about giving... their commitment to God's work...a ‘few dollars more’.

Let's go back to our story in Exodus. Gifts were to be made by all with a generous heart, who “wish to” give, all whose “spirit is willing.”

No one was forced to give. It was a choice. God is seeking a willing response.

The result of it all, as Paul describes it, should bring great joy to the one who gives.

But having a fistful of dollars can be bad.

Dr. Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist, told about a very wealthy client.

Dr. Menninger asked him one day: “What are you going to do with all your money?”

The patient said, “I guess I'll just worry about it!” “Does that bring you any peace or happiness?” Dr. Menninger asked.

The man was honest when he told the great doctor: “No, but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it away to someone else.”

I remember reading about Bertha Adams. She died of malnutrition in a little one room apartment in Palm Beach.

Everyone knew her – she had sustained herself by panhandling, soup kitchens, what restaurants would throw out...

But after her death, authorities were shocked to find over \$800,000 in cash, \$200,000 in stocks – she died a millionaire, but lived a tight-fisted life, completely wrapped up in herself.

In my work in presbyteries in church revitalization, I've seen churches die the same way – empty pews but money in the bank...terrified of giving it, using it for something good and beautiful...it's bad when that happens!

This fistful of dollars...it can be ugly, too!

Kenneth Chafin, in his commentary on Corinthians, tells the story of the carnival that came to town advertising the world's strongest man.

The barker at the carnival touted the man's strength and power. He cut off the end of a lemon and put it in the crook of the strong man's elbow. The strong man flexed his muscle and squeezed the lemon dry.

The barker then offered \$1000 a drop to anyone who could drain any more juice out of the lemon.

Several of the town's young men tried – to no avail.

Then a small, rather frail, woman stepped forward. With hardly any effort, with only her thumb and two fingers of one hand, she squeezed four drops of juice from the lemon.

The crowd went wild. The barker asked her how she did it because no one had ever done it before!

Her reply is worth remembering: “I’ve been treasurer in my church for 25 years. Compared to squeezing money from reluctant members of the congregation, the lemon was easy!”

So much of our living is judged by how much and not for what purpose, focuses more on the cost of living than on the purpose of living.

We may be outwardly religious, but there is abundant evidence that religion is not greatly affecting our lives in America: a greater percentage of our people in prison than any other nation; more drug consumption than any nation in the industrialized world; a ‘rip-off’ society marked by consumer fraud, political corruption, tax cheating, bribery, payoffs...

A world where we’re more focused on our portfolio than the people around us...

A fistful of dollars can be bad, can be ugly, but it can be good!

Moses and Paul are talking to, talking about the kind of people who reflect the mind of God – the people of the generous heart are people like you and me who belong to a generous, giving God.

Let me ask you a question: Where did you first learn to give? Where did your belief about giving originate? Were your lessons the kind that would suggest you give a nominal amount, one that was more accurately an occasional tip to God for services rendered?

Or did your commitment to give make a clear statement of your commitment to God?

A minister was called to the bedside of a woman facing her last days. He sat and held her hand and listened as she remembered her life – she had been the breadwinner for her family, a job of menial labor, but she had done her best to provide; life had been tough.

She was troubled and asked her pastor: “When I stand before God, what shall I do, what shall I say?”

As he held her hand and listened, he noted that her hands were rough and calloused, evidence of her hard work for her family, so he told her, “When you stand there, just show God your hands!”

Hers was a life given to others, a purpose greater than her own life, she had given herself for those who depended on her.

That’s the essence of our theme this year, “Bearing Fruit.”

Like Henri Nouwen frequently reminded us, achievement is not the same thing as fruitfulness.

Our achievements are things we have accomplished. Our fruitfulness is the positive, long-term effect these achievements have on others – the good we can do.

Achievement doesn't automatically mean fruitfulness. Achievement helps us stand out, fruitfulness brings blessing into other people's lives.

We need to ask ourselves this question: How have my achievements, my successes, the things that I'm proud to have done, positively nurtured those around me?

How have they helped bring joy into other people's lives? How have they helped make the world a better, more loving place?

Are we tight-fisted or open-handed?

I believe the Bible teaches us to give proportionally of our income as a clear sign of our intent to love God without holding back.

All that is done here is for God, and it is provided for by a generous and joyous response of God's people – a choice about a few dollars more to do good for God.

Now let me be clear: make no mistake about it, your money is needed here. It is necessary if we are to do the good work that God has called us to do.

Your generosity undergirds all of this, but let me tell you that this church can never be defined by the sum of its budget nor the balance on the bottom line.

It is not a dollar sign, but a cross that identifies who we are, what we do, and why we do it.

Today, in these times of social turmoil and rampant fear mongering and constant chaos and confusion, the purpose of the church is being questioned, tested – that our faith has no relationship to the real world.

There comes a time for action, a time to connect what we have and who we are into specific acts of commitment.

You have been very generous in your commitment, in so many ways how you are making a difference in this world:

- Children who have a better life in Honduras because of what we have done together and what many of you have done person to person.
- Families kept warm, children fed and clothed by your gifts each month.
- Providing a place in this community for people to gather and grow and make their life better.

- Men and women in pain who will be linked with a Stephen Minister
- Our youth given a glimpse of this world that God has made and what they can do together to change it as peacemakers.
- Minds challenged in Bible studies with others...a thought going through the head and we're not sure about it, but then it gets shared and discussed among friends and faith is strengthened and grows.
- Spirits lifted by the music and choirs and sharing worship with lives bound together in praise and prayer.

In our story from Exodus, the people of God made a commitment and came bringing their offerings to God. Paul was asking for a decision.

As you move to the days ahead, I hope you will consider your commitment to grow in generosity so this church can continue to bear fruit as the people of God...

A fistful of dollars – bad, ugly, or good?

As the poem HANDS puts it:

*"I have no hands but your hands
To do my work today.
I have no feet but your feet
To lead people on the way.
I have no tongue but your tongue
To tell people how I died.
I have no help but your help
To bring the world to God's side.*

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.