There’s good news and there’s bad news.

The good news is that there is no stewardship campaign this fall. We have already conducted our fundraising efforts for the end of this year and all of the next. So, no one is going to be asking you for money today.

The bad news is that there is still a stewardship sermon – and it’s being preached today. Frankly, I don’t consider this bad news. I have been a part of the church for almost 58 years and it took me a very long time to understand both the necessity of money-talk in church and the importance of learning to share what I have. As those discoveries have been made, my faith has become more vital.

And that’s a little hint of what this sermon is all about. Without the pressure of trying to raise funds and feeling our backs up against the budgetary wall, let’s take some time to think about what it means to give – and give generously – to the work of God and the expansion of God’s kingdom. It’s kind of liberating to be able to talk about all of this without the added pressure of raising the funds for ministry.

The premise is this: there is something paradoxical about generosity. There is something of a contradiction in terms in that time-honored phrase we heard from Acts: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Everything we know tells us that the phrase is backwards. We prefer, “It is more blessed to receive than to give.”

So, let’s take this on.
Let me begin with this true story.
Lydia and I were out running some errands and we stopped at Starbuck’s for some hot chocolate and coffee (you can probably figure out who had what). We pulled into the drive-thru line and placed our order. It took forever, especially when someone wanted her hot chocolate and I needed the coffee. Finally, we got to the window and the barista handed the drinks to me and said, “There’s no charge. The lady in front of you paid for them.” I looked and saw a white Mercedes-Benz convertible turning out of the drive-thru and making her way to Burkhart Road.
I felt like I had won the lottery! I’m frugal – okay, I’m cheap – and the idea that someone bought my coffee was a thrill! I loved it! It made my day! I called Wendy and told her that Lydia and I got free drinks in the drive-thru at Starbuck’s. She wasn’t nearly as thrilled as I was, but she responded with enthusiasm. My five dollar bill went back into my wallet and I secured the padlock again and set the security system.
First lesson: it’s great to receive. Don’t question that for a moment. We would be less than human if we didn’t admit that getting the unexpected gift wasn’t a thrill. The unexpected gift, the unanticipated kindness, the surprise present – these bring such joy to life that we sometimes respond with tears of joy and we are flushed with excitement. It’s great to receive. No doubt about it.

Almost two months ago, I spent a week over at St. Meinrad Archabbey in a course from the Lake Institute, part of the Indiana University School of Philanthropy. I am a candidate for the Executive Certificate in Religious Fundraising. Wow!
As part of our study, we were asked to read several books and articles. One of the books was entitled, The Paradox of Generosity, and was written by Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, both of the University of Notre Dame. I used their title for the title of our sermon, because they make an overwhelming case that generosity is, by its very nature, paradoxical. As their subtitle suggests, “Giving we receive, grasping we lose.”
The author of Proverbs evidently understood this idea. In the lesson we heard again this morning, were the words:
Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.
A generous person will be enriched,
and one who gives water will get water.

It doesn’t seem that way, doesn’t it? It doesn’t make sense. There are those who give freely – generously – lavishly – and seem to increase in what they have. Others hold on tightly to what is entrusted to them and only seem to need more. There is an illogicality to it that seems obvious.
Smith and Davidson delved into the matter and do you know what they discovered? In the logic of the world, being generous would appear to exact a cost to the one giving. Generosity would seem to produce a deficit.

But it doesn’t work that way. What these academics discovered was that “the results of generosity are often instead unexpected, counterintuitive, win-win. Rather than generosity producing net losses, in general, the more generously people give of themselves, the more of many goods they receive in turn. Sometimes they receive more of the same kind of thing that they gave – money, time, attention, and so forth. But, more often and importantly, generous people tend to receive back goods that are often more valuable than those they gave: happiness, health, a sense of purpose, and personal growth.”

And that, by the way, is not speculation. They have filled their book with statistical analysis to back up their claims. The evidence is in. The more generous we are the happier, the healthier, the more content, the more fulfilled, the closer to God we feel.

The question must be asked: “Why?” Why would being generous lead to such results? What is there about generosity that produces such outcomes?

It just might be that the more generous and openhanded we are, the more we are mirroring God’s activity in the world. It just might be that the more gracious and generous we are, the more we are living into what God had in mind for us in the first place. Maybe there is something to that old saying: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

I thought I’d give it a try. I thought I’d run a little experiment of my own.

I was in the same Starbuck’s drive-thru. I ordered my coffee, waited my turn in line, and arrived at the window. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw that the car behind me had two occupants. I said to the barista, “I want to pay for the next order.” I handed her my card, paid for my coffee and theirs, and drove away. In all honesty, I wanted to wait to see their response.

I didn’t have to.

I can’t explain this, but I felt such joy in offering that simple act of generous kindness. “The Grinch’s heart grew three sizes that day!” I began to see it and feel it and enjoy it. There is a blessing – a greater blessing – in giving than there is in receiving.

It seems totally paradoxical. We are taught so many lessons by so many teachers to gather for ourselves, to store our things away, to rent places for the stuff that won’t fit into our houses, to convince ourselves that those we would gift will probably use it for all the wrong reasons. We have lots of inner dialogue that tells us to hold tight to what we have and protect it and defend it.
Yet, that storing and accumulating and stockpiling and squirreling away does little if anything to bring us happiness and health and fulfillment and contentment and joy. Holding tightly to what we call ours doesn’t bring joy. Giving – generosity – brings joy.

We’re coming into that time of year when giving and receiving is the order of the day. Very soon, we will be consumed with the giving and receiving of gifts at Christmas. It is a wonderful time of year.

But, if the past is prelude, we will also be treated to stories of Evansville’s own, “Pete” and “Mr. G” – anonymous generous gift-givers whose generosity makes a difference in so many lives. No one really knows who they are. They leave gifts of cash at places and instructions are given to organizations as to where they can find the money.

The organizations are, of course, thrilled! But, I think the greater joy belongs to “Pete” and “Mr. G.” They have the joy of knowing that their gifts change lives and make the lives of some easier and better. They have the happiness of giving – the delight of knowing that they made a difference – the gladness and glee of knowing that what they did has touched and blessed another.

There is the paradox of generosity. On the surface, it makes little sense. Giving away results in scarcity, according to the gospel of the world. But, according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, giving away results in receiving more than we could ever dare to dream. The gospel of the world says, “It is more blessed to receive than it is to give.” But, according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” And you know what? It is.

For now and evermore. Amen.

1.) The Paradox of Generosity, p. 11