

Go the Distance!

Text: Hebrews 11: 1-3; 12: 1-3

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I heard a funny story when I was at a Conference at Yale last June. An African-American pastor told it as he teased about the manner in which his congregation raises the money needed to fund their mission and ministry.

His playful spirit and bellowing laughter helped all of us to laugh pretty hard, too – even around so sensitive a subject. He said, “In our tradition we make the ask, then we pass the plate just like many of you do. But we don’t let it stop there. We believe that our faith and vitality deserves more than once. And so we keep passing it: two, three, four times. As far as I am aware, no pastor has ever been fired in the black church for calling for another round of the offering plate.”

“Why there was once a Sabbath day,” he said, “when we were going through the third offering for the morning. A small girl looked up and over to her mother, a bit confused and worried. She asked, “Mommy do you think if we give him more this time he’ll finally let us go home?”

There is often a nugget of truth that lies beneath things that kids observe and say. And I think the truth on the underside in this one is that for most of us there is discomfort, unease, even at times anger that wells up when money gets airtime from the pulpit.

And I do mean the word anger here because I’ve experienced it. It is honestly hard for many of us to hold money and faith in the same sentence. A sense of being unsettled can make visit, or a feeling of irritation kicks in. And honestly, in our tradition, different than the black church, the very thought of passing the plate more than once would get the pastor like me making plans for his next port of call.

A recent study out of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Seminary drills down deeper. Their report is titled *Giving Up to Our Potential*² and it begins like this: “It is often said that Christians are the most generous people. Unfortunately, our research reveals that this claim is not entirely true. And even though Christians are more generous than non-religious Americans that is not much about which to brag. In fact, our study indicates that the vast majority of Christians are not giving up to their potential in proportion to what their faith teaches.”

Yikes, even I am getting uncomfortable! But the study goes on. “Three note-worthy sociologists have concluded that at least 20% of the folks who regularly go to church give nothing to the church or to other charities. And the vast majority of the rest, in relative terms, give very little. Congregations that manage to stay afloat do so only because of the generosity of a very small percentage who carry 60 – 80 – sometimes even 90 % of the total needed.”

In some churches, and this is squarely our story, economic survival is possible only at the hand of a small minority of generous givers, augmented by calculated and controversial draws on endowed assets – which mostly represent the gifts of past generations, rather than those who presently rely on the church.

(OMG! Take a breath, Geordie. Take one with me. And let me read you just a little bit more.)

“The authors conclude that poor giving cannot be attributed to a lack of adequate financial resources. People who collectively spend not just billions but trillions of dollars on discretionary items and goods each year cannot objectively claim that they do not have enough money to give. But they conclude,” (I am still quoting here) “their subjective perceptions of financial constraint and scarcity appears to be the key factor limiting their giving money more liberally.”

These comments are so stark. Especially knowing that the subjects of the study are people just like most all of us who say that they love their church and would want to do most anything to help out. “Just ask,” they say (as we all do), “tell us what we need to do.”

Please! Don’t shoot the messenger here! (Tell me after the service you still love me!) But one more quote needs air time. “Even upper middle class Americans tend to think that they are just getting by when they are, in fact, quite affluent by any objective standard. Most Christians have the financial capacity to give much more, but only by adjusting their financial priorities and perceptions. In fact, if American Christians were to give from their income generously – not lavishly, mind you, only generously – they could transform the world, starting right away.”

The article’s final word. The church of tomorrow can survive, can even thrive, but only when all people who claim a love for the church start giving up to their potential rather than giving down to their comfort zone.

Speaking of living and giving up to our potential. Roger Bannister died this past March.² He was 88 years old and has always been an icon of human potential to me. “He died peacefully in the English City where he, as a runner, cracked the feat that many had thought humanly impossible – to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. It all happened on a windy afternoon in 1954.”

“With 250 yards to go, Bannister poured it on and went the distance, his long arms and legs pumping and his lungs gasping for oxygen. After he passed the finish line, the announcer read out the time: “3” . . . the rest was drowned out by the roar of the crowd: 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds . . . the first human being to break the 4-minute mile.

Mind you: his amazing race against the impossible was not won by the design of any new kind of running shoe; it wasn’t influenced by some change in coach or in training; it wasn’t because there was a strong wind gusting behind him; and surely it wasn’t just a matter of luck. It was because he believed he could do it.

Fifty years later he said, "I'd like to see my conquest of the impossible as a metaphor not only for sport, but for life, our lives, meeting and seeking challenges."

My family and my friends, I leave it with this: There is no reason on the face of the planet that we cannot fund this church all on our own and then some. Not a single one. And yet we miss the call of this year after year.

At the very least, there is no good reason that we can't accomplish and achieve a substantial increase in our giving to the good of the Gospel right here. I am hard-pressed to fathom. And yet we miss the challenge of this pledge drive after pledge drive.

So, in the words of Paul, "Let us set aside and leave behind all that weights us down, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Let's go the distance. We can do this. Are you in? (I know we say we are.) But are you really all in?

In the name and spirit of the one who gave of his life withholding nothing that we might live to share in everything. Amen.

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¹ Dr. Ann A Michel. "Giving Up to Our Potential." Blog: To the Point, The Lewis Center for Church Leadership, September 15, 2015.

² Associated Press. "Roger Banister Dies At 88" in [The Hartford Courant](#), March 5, 2018.