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Steven C. Bahls  
*Augustana College*

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# Give, and it will be given to you

*Bible study on the Faith Practice of giving, based on Luke 6:38a: "Give and it will be given to you."  
For Northern Illinois Synod Assembly, June 18, 2010*

## **Steven Bahls, President of Augustana College**

Good evening. Let me once again say how grateful we at Augustana College are to have you with us. As I mentioned this morning, Synod Assemblies are important events for us. They reinforce the ties that bind this college and this synod together.

I'm grateful for this opportunity to take part in this assembly's conversation on the Seven Faith Practices so essential to effective, engaged discipleship. I was honored when Bishop Wollersheim asked me to participate, and I look forward to exploring with you the meaning and impact of our text on Giving. I must admit that I can't help but wonder why — out of the Seven Faith Practices — Bishop Wollersheim asked me to talk about Giving. Maybe it's because college presidents have a reputation for talking to other people about giving. A lot. And if you know me, talk about it a lot, with persistence.

In all seriousness, I cannot claim any special knowledge on this topic beyond that which is, I am certain, shared by everyone in this assembly. By your presence here, you give testimony to your own practice of giving, as you give so freely of your time and energy to see to the good order of the Synod. As leaders within your congregations and home communities, you already know a lot about giving — I'm willing to bet, of your money as well as your time. And I'm betting you do it regularly.

There's a distinction between giving as an occasional activity and giving as a spiritual practice. I thought about that earlier this week at a dinner honoring Fred Aigner and Don Hallberg as directors emeriti of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois. Among other things, Dr. Aigner talked about giving. He told of asking people to support the vital mission of LSSI. He said that when he would start to tell people about LSSI, they would be concerned at first about the tug on their wallets. But after they got to know the mission of the agency, it was no longer a tug on their wallet, but became a tug on their heart.

I find the same thing at Augustana. As our friends of the college get to know what we're doing here and understand how our Lutheran colleges change lives and help students grow in mind, body and spirit, they understand that what they give to our institutions is returned to them many fold. There is a magic that happens at the church's colleges and agencies and we are privileged to be a part of it.

That's what Jesus was talking about in our scripture for today, from the sixth chapter of Luke. This is part of the Sermon on the Plain, so called because it begins by saying that Jesus stood on a level place. Luke tells us that a large crowd of Jesus' disciples were there, plus a "great number" of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon. He notes that all these people had come for two purposes: to hear what Jesus had to say, and also to be healed of their diseases. And many of them were indeed healed of physical ailments and evil spirits. People were crowding around, trying to touch Jesus, "because power was coming from him and healing them all."

In that context, Jesus started saying some things that would have taken the crowd by surprise. Perhaps those crowding around even drew back in puzzlement. He started with "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." What?? Blessed are the poor??

Jesus continued with these unexpected sayings. Blessed are you who hunger now....blessed are you who weep now....woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. This was quite contrary to the conventional wisdom of the day, that people who were wealthy obviously had been blessed by God, and those who were poor had been cursed.

Likewise, Jesus told them, "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you." This was also contrary to the conventional wisdom of the day, that you should love your friends and hate your enemies. It was such an unexpected teaching that Jesus continued for the next two paragraphs explaining this principle. He included what we know as the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." He concluded, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

And then, as we get closer to our scripture for the evening, Jesus elaborated on the reciprocal nature of mercy. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." And, finally, the topic of this bible study, "Give, and it will be given to you." He continues by describing the quality of what the giver receives in return: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

That's kind of an unfamiliar image to us. He's referring to dealing in grain in the markets of the day. Imagine buying a basket of grain. The seller could simply fill up the basket, hoping there's quite a lot of air between kernels so you won't get quite as much as you bargained for. But in Jesus' image, the seller squashes in as much grain as possible, shaking it to eliminate the air and make room for more. And even then, it's running over. Poured into your lap. For that, you'd have to imagine the kind of outer robes people wore, with a fold over the belt that could be used as a big pocket — sort of a first century reusable shopping bag. When you give, you receive in abundance.

Now, I'd like to tell you what I think this doesn't mean. If you channel surf, you might come across a preacher of prosperity, telling you that if you'll just send in your money to this worthwhile ministry, God will be so appreciative that He'll make you wealthy. That's a long way from "Woe to you who are rich!" No, Jesus isn't telling us that the best way to get more money is to give some away.

I believe Jesus is talking about more than this. After all, this passage comes in the context of lessons that defy the conventional wisdom. There must be something unexpected here. Give, and it will be given to you. What do you receive when you give? One study found that generous people tend to live longer. (I've told our advancement department to make sure people know about this....You give \$10,000 to Augustana and you live five years long? \$20,000 for ten years!) Seriously, why would that be? I expect it's because generous people know the joy and contentment of making a difference in their communities, making a difference in the world.

The rich fool in one of Jesus' parables tore down his old barns and built bigger ones to hoard his abundant harvest. And that night he died. He learned too late that you can't take it with you. Jesus said, "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." We know from reading the newspaper that being wealthy isn't

what makes people happy. Think about the divorces, the suicides, the constant grasping for more.

Instead, what makes people happy is being generous with time, talent and treasure. I've seen the satisfaction on the faces of community leaders when the project for which they've volunteered so many hours finally comes to fruition. I've stood with some of our college's donors when we've dedicated the science lab they've made possible or celebrated the faculty chair they've endowed. I've seen the joy and satisfaction of directing their money not to some private luxury but to help others. And my wife and I have found that same satisfaction in our own volunteering and philanthropy.

Why do we find such satisfaction in our giving? Because God made us this way. We are created to be loving and generous. We are called to serve others.

And that brings us to something we talk about quite a lot here at Augustana — the concept of vocation. Martin Luther believed that it wasn't just clergy who received vocation from God, a special calling to serve in a particular way. Luther declared that everyone has a calling from God, some vocation they're meant to carry out. If yours is to be a shoemaker, Luther said, then be sure to be the best shoemaker you can be, to the glory of God.

Frederick Buechner is widely quoted on the nature of vocation. Buechner wrote, "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done....The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." At Augustana, we have a Center for Vocational Reflection with all kinds of programs and counseling designed to help students discover their deep gladness, their talents and skills, and the world's deep hunger, to find therein their personal vocation.

One of the wonderful things about giving time, talent and treasure to the community is that it helps you discover your vocation. You find what really gets you excited, what drives you to do more. And by getting involved in that endeavor, you find you're carrying out your vocation. That's why being generous is so satisfying.

Jesus knew this. The conventional wisdom might have been, as it seems to be today, to get as much as you can and save it or spend it on yourself on your family. But Jesus preached contrary to the conventional wisdom, because he embodied true wisdom. "Give, and it will be given to you — good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap."

That's about as far as I can take you with an eight-word scripture in the way of Bible study. I'm a practical guy, so I wanted to offer you a few ideas to help make your giving especially meaningful. Because the practice of giving time and talent is covered in the message on serving, I'm going to focus on giving money. Here are some things I've learned both from my own experience and from encouraging others to give. You might say it's about how to maximize your return.

One way to maximize returns is to inspire others to give. Here are a couple of suggestions:

- Make giving a family affair. Teach your kids to be generous when they're young, and when they're older, help them establish the habit of philanthropy. My father-in-law, Don Easter, established a family foundation, with each of his grown children on the board. Their charge is to make wise decisions on the disbursement of

these funds to community causes. Last Christmas, my wife and I gave our young adult son and his wife two checks from our own charitable fund to boost their ability to give. They were to consider the possibilities and decide where that money should go. As the Proverb says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. (Prov. 22:6)" It was the most meaningful gift that we have ever given. We saw, from the delight in their eyes as they explained how they selected their charity, that the gifts they made had been given back to them many fold.

- Second, when you're thinking about funding community initiatives and inspiring others to give, remember that early money is like yeast. There is a women's group called EMILY's list. It provides money for women candidates for political office. The group suggested the name EMILY because of the five letters in the word. Starting with E, Early Money is Like Yeast. Jesus said the kingdom of God is a growing thing, like yeast that increases the volume of the dough. Well, money given in the early stages of a campaign inspires others to give-and that really increases the dough! And, studies of giving show that if you make a gift, to be matched by others, you will indeed inspire others to give more.

What about our own giving.

- Remember the Biblical standard: tithe at least 10 percent of your income to God's work. With today's economic situation, it is a tall order from many to give 10%. But tithing today is more important than at any time in recent years. Consider our situation in Illinois. The State of Illinois is dramatically cutting back on aid to the less fortunate and the forgotten. It is also cutting back its support of education for our young people. Many would call this irresponsible. But I prefer to think of it in a different way. Have we become too reliant on government? We must do more than criticize the state, we must examine ourselves. Are we doing our part individually to help the underserved? Are we tithing? Now, you can work out whether that's 10 percent to your congregation, or whether that figure includes the greater work of the church such as LSSI, disaster relief and Lutheran colleges. Either way, if every Christian did this, our churches and our benevolences wouldn't be facing the budget problems they cope with every year.
- When possible, make your gift undesignated. Studies show that younger givers are motivated to give to programs more than organizations. So when they give, they often designate their gifts to new programs that they believe will have a meaning impact. But this creates a problem. Often, basic operations are the hardest to pay for, because people want to give to some very specific project. That can tie the hands of the organization, especially if needs change later. And often, those leading organizations have the best sense of where money can be best employed.
- Make an estate plan, and include your church and the organizations you love the most. It's especially helpful if you let them know they're in your will, with or without a number, because there are formulas that help predict how much they can expect to come in each year from the total number of will commitments. Again, you can't take it with you. Yes, we want to leave our children a legacy, but shouldn't we also leave this world a better place by our end-of-lifetime giving?
- Don't wait for an organization to become perfect before you're willing to give and don't cut it off if it develops imperfections. Thank God that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8)" God's greatest gift went to people who were imperfect. No organization is perfect, yet many organizations that are not perfect deserve our support. Let me give you an example. About every leadership skill that I have, comes from my days as a Boy Scout. I had few leadership opportunities as a young person outside of the Boy Scouts. I was made the Senior Patrol Leader at Troop 24 in Des Moines, Iowa. I learned that leading 11 to 16 year olds

was like herding cats, a skill that has prepared me well for academia. But, as an adult, I have serious disagreements with certain policies of the Boy Scouts that I believe are not inclusive enough. I struggled with whether I should cut off my support — but concluded that the Scouts like most organizations is imperfect — but they do more good in God's kingdom than bad. So I continue my support because the boys they serve could not be served if the organization was ground to a halt by disputes matters in which reasonable minds can differ. The same goes for churches, which will always have their foibles. But God didn't wait to pour out his grace until people were without fault.

Let me end by looking at the words of Martin Luther. Almost 500 years ago, in some of the most elegant and profound prose that I know of, Martin Luther wrote:

If there is anything good in us, it is not our own, it is a gift of God. . . . Thus my learning is not my own, it belongs to the unlearned and is the debt I owe to them. My wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. . . . We must empty ourselves in order to be a servant. It is with all these qualities that we must stand before God and intervene on behalf of those who do not have them.

God has showered gifts on us all — the gifts of time, talent and resources. In each of us he has created a vessel. Jane and I are fond of telling our three children that that God fills the vessel and we are responsible for emptying the vessel during our precious time on earth. We empty the vessel by giving generously and sacrificial to others. But I have discovered something. The more I empty my vessel, the more God replenishes me. Dr. Aigner is right — giving is not a tug on my wallet; it is a tug on my heart. It is an honor and privilege to be able to give.

May we empty ourselves to be His servant.

Amen.

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