

WGUMC October 7, 2012 "Run This Race to Win"  
Exodus 35:4-10a; 20-21; 36:2-6; 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

I want to thank our youth minister, Lisa Jacobs, for preaching for me and hitting it out of the ballpark last Sunday. She laid a good foundation for what I need to say today. In essence, she said, we have no excuses for not being everything that God wants us to be.

I told her that we'd make a good team, in a good cop, bad cop sort of way. Last week, she was the bad cop who started off by saying all the things she was sick and tired of hearing. So, this week, I'll be the good cop, starting off with all the things I'm thrilled and blessed to be seeing.

I am thrilled for the hard work of the committee that is bringing our new church directory together and blessed by the generous giver who is making it possible for us to start the bathroom upgrades this week. I'm thrilled that so many of you cared enough to come to our values workshop and our vision and goal-setting meetings over the past several months, and

I'm already seeing progress on our 2013 goals: a new women's study group starting this coming Tuesday night; a new website already coming into focus; layfolk already committing to The Open Table ministry and to helping our first brother or sister get themselves out of poverty. Last but not least, I'm truly blessed by the fifteen new members we're seeing so far this year and pray that I'll find time for another membership class, because we have another group ready to join.

I'm thrilled and I'm blessed. I'm also scared. I told you that I was going to tell you the truth today, and I will. The truth about the church's finances: we're in a much, much better position today than we were two years ago. And that's because of a lot of giving and hard work by good people. I thank you, and I want you to thank every member of our Finance team (please stand up). As I've said before: we got through the summer and paid all our bills and made every payroll without having to borrow from designated funds. We're

not doing that anymore. If we come up short, I come directly to you. Our designated funds are safe in our savings account to be used when needed. Praise God!

The good news is we made it. The bad news is, in the long-run, we aren't going to make it. Not if we keep doing what we've been doing. There are a couple of reasons for this. For starters, a large chunk of our income comes from pledges made by members who are currently in their 80's and 90's. As we lose our beloved saints, we lose our most faithful givers and our most stable source of income. You often hear that churches have no money because so many members are on fixed incomes. That's a myth. It's the folk on fixed incomes that are keeping churches going! If younger givers don't step up, the church will have to step down.

But there's another, more immediate, reason that what we are doing now won't be working five years from now, if we keep doing what we're doing. And it involves staffing and

membership. For this church, it's the elephant in the sanctuary. I was poking through the conference journals after choir on Thursday night. In 1970, this church had two full-time pastors and 1088 members. In 2011, this church still had two full-time pastors and 310 members. Do you want me to repeat those numbers? Currently, there are about ten churches in this conference with two full-time pastors on staff, and Willow Glen is the smallest of them all.

Susan Smith was hired full-time to be our Pastor of Children's and Family Ministries about ten years ago when this church had 469 members. It was a big commitment at the time. And with every passing year, it gets bigger. With Susan's permission and support, let me tell you what this costs. It takes about 125 members in worship every Sunday to sustain one full-time pastor. We have two pastors and an average of 165 in worship. To have a second pastor costs the church

almost \$90,000, if you count the entire package (salary, pension, health care and housing).

The fact is that we could have a children's program without Susan. It could be run by you volunteers. Or we could hire someone for 15-20 hours per week and no benefits, and we could have a Sunday School that looked like the ones in struggling Methodist churches throughout the Bay Area. But let me tell you this: I am the envy of every pastor in this district because we have Susan on staff, because we don't have a program like every other church's program, because we have someone who is making disciples of Jesus Christ with imaginative, original material created for our own kids in our own context, that forms the firm foundation of an integrated program of Christian nurture that will carry us from womb to tomb. This is the truth: in Susan, we have gifts we can't afford to have and can't afford not to have.

I've been wrestling with this since even before I arrived in San Jose last year. When I got the church packet and saw the staff list and the state of the church's finances and said to myself: there isn't enough giving. Something's got to give. Lord, have mercy. I thought and prayed and prayed and thought, and I see one way forward: we double down to give as much as we can for the next few years (financially, spiritually, physically). If you can free me from the worry that we aren't going to make payroll or pay our apportionments or we can't pay off our renovation debt, I promise you that I will do everything in my power to get you to do everything in your power to grow this church large enough so that we can do what we now have the staff and the potential to do: make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of our world.

To that end, we have set some goals for 2013. To get us on a path to growth, we're inviting Rev. Schuyler Rhodes from Temple UMC in San Francisco (passionate and progressive) to

come down here to inspire us and to teach us how to do invitational evangelism. Then we'll follow that up with a congregation-wide program in deepening our faith and sharing it with others.

Add to that a new program of adult formation, expanded social media presence, a children's choir, more musical connections between the worship services, improved accessibility in our building, and a reasonable plan to pay down our debt. I look at all this work in the coming year with fear and trembling, but not without hope. I feel privileged to be sharing with you in this ministry.

That's how Saint Paul described it in his stewardship letter to the people in Corinth. You see, Paul had been commissioned by the Apostles to take up a collection to support the widows in the church in Jerusalem. To raise money, Paul decides to insert a little competition among the churches. (Kind of like our Olympics theme for our stewardship campaign this year.) So,

he writes to the Christians in Corinth, bragging about the Christians in Macedonia: "You should see their generosity, even in the midst of their poverty!" Pretty good, this guy. He tells the Corinthians that the Macedonians are begging for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the widows in Jerusalem.

Yes, it is a privilege to be sharing in this ministry. Lisa reminded me of that last Sunday. What a privilege it is for all of us to be on Lisa's team! And Susan's team! And Bob's team! What an exhilarating feeling with the team all here! I had the same feeling last summer when the pews were filled to overflowing with screaming, squirming kids at VBS. And when the Woodhaven patio was filled one Saturday in January with over 100 folks from three churches coming here to serve the community and Change the World. What a privilege to be sharing in this ministry!

We just have to go about it the same way that the Macedonians did. Paul says, first, they gave themselves to the



Lord and then they gave themselves to the ministry. If we do this, if we give ourselves first to Christ, then there will be no greater privilege for us than to give our souls and bodies to his body. There is no higher honor than to be the Church, the Body of Christ on earth.

My friends, I'll be honest with you. The odds are long. The polls are against us. And the experts have been reporting on the death of the United Methodist Church for decades. But I, for one, am running this race to win, not for me, but for God and for you. In my opinion, you are one of a handful of congregations in this conference that can defy the trends, because—look around you, look inside you—you are practically drowning in potential. It would be a mortal sin to waste it. (Pity your pastor. I have to gaze out at you every week, seeing a sea of gifts and graces, and then go home and cry out to God: how can we tap into it?)

Here in Silicon Valley, we excel in everything, don't we? So why not excel in faith, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness and in love for Christ and for one another? Why not excel in living AND in giving? (If every member of this church simply pledged the denominational average, which is less than 3%, we'd be doing great!)

One of our members once complained to me that his job was working hard to make other people rich. How much more satisfying would our lives be if we worked hard to make others rich in faith? Spiritually healthy, rather than wealthy! In this valley, where there are so many ways you can lose your soul, here's a way to help others find theirs.

A word on pledging. Paul says that the Macedonians, in their extreme poverty, gave according to their means and even beyond their means. To me, that means giving up something for God. I don't have cable TV. I shop at Goodwill. I don't go out to eat very often or go to movies. I don't travel. I vacation

in a tent. I choose to live simply. That way, I can help the Body of Christ help others abundantly live. If your pledge doesn't cause you to go without something you'd like to have, then you're not giving enough. Grace is free, but discipleship will cost you. So, I don't know what you should give, but give until it costs you, and then give a little more.

In a relay race, everyone runs their own leg, but in order to win, those who can run the fastest have to make up for those who can't run quite as fast. It's the same with pledging. The important thing to remember is, we're all on the same team. We're running together, and we're in this race to win.

Until I become like Moses when he was building the tabernacle and I have to send out the word to stop giving because you are all giving too much, I'm going to be your pastor telling you to keep giving, so you can keep living and so we can keep going for God and going for that gold! Let the Stewardship Games begin.