

“STEWARDSHIP: BUILDING COMMUNITY TOGETHER”

Exodus 35:4-5a, 20-29; 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

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Stewardship is an important part of faith for us Presbyterians. We understand it as a part of our vocation, our calling from God, to use everything God has given us wisely and well, gratefully and generously. So stewardship encompasses a lot. It's about what we do with our time, where we devote our energy, how we develop and use our talents, our care of the earth, the way we do our jobs, and our participation in civic life, as well as how we allocate our resources. Stewardship is a sacred trust, a faith practice, a worldview, a way of life.

I think it's always important to remind ourselves of this larger picture when we begin to talk about stewardship in the context of the church's ministry and mission, lest we forget that the stewardship God calls us to is much more than just writing a check to the church or volunteering to serve on a committee. Our stewardship of resources, time, energy, and talent for the work of the church is just one part of a larger commitment to honoring Christ by being good stewards in our whole life. It's an important part, though, for all of us who value, and need, and believe in, and love the church's ministry... because that ministry could not exist without a shared commitment stewardship of those resources, time, energy, and talent.

At this time of year, we are focusing on our stewardship of the resources that make ministry possible, especially financial resources. Time, energy, and talents are at least as important (I wouldn't want anybody to think they are not; they are indispensable!) and are often our focus, but it is also important, I believe, for us to think specifically about our commitment to stewardship of our resources for ministry. It is, as our stewardship committee reminds us, a "heart check." What we do with our money says a lot about where our hearts are.

Will we define ourselves by what we have (as our society tells us to do) or by what we give? Is giving a priority or an afterthought? What do we really value? What does money mean to us? What do we expect to get out of giving? Is this a joyful opportunity or a resented obligation?

There's no denying that many of us have tremendous anxiety around money – whether we have a lot or not nearly enough for our basic needs, we fear that it won't be enough. We also see the tremendous, obscene inequalities of our economy, the staggering needs, so many good causes... decisions about giving can be overwhelming. It can be hard to think faithfully, prayerfully, biblically about all of this. It's easier just to write out the same check we wrote last year, to "wait and see" if we have some extra funds to give, or to complain about "the church always asking for money."

But it really deserves more thought. It really is worth reflecting on what our church stewardship means to us. We can think about that in a lot of different ways, and some of them serve us better than others.

There are those who see their giving to the church as a kind of “fee for service,” that pays for benefits they expect to receive, whether that be pastoral care, social connections, particular things to participate in, or what have you. A bigger-picture version of that understanding imagines that giving money to the church buys you benefits with *God* – atoning for sins or securing a place in heaven. Other people, including many preachers, promote the belief that if you give generously to the church (well, to *their* church) you will be blessed by God with financial prosperity beyond your dreams.

How clear can I be about this? Every one of these beliefs is not merely wrong but heresy. Christianity is not a business with goods (spiritual or otherwise) for sale. God’s grace cannot be bought. And the “prosperity gospel” is not THE gospel.

Scripture gives us a better grounding for our giving. I chose the two scriptures we read this morning because they offer a helpful lens for looking at stewardship, even though they show us two very different and interesting examples of giving in the context of communities of faith. Both of them describe offerings of material resources requested from and given by God’s people, in particular but different circumstances.

In Exodus 35, we read just a part of a much longer narrative about the construction of the tabernacle – a fancy tent that was a kind of moveable sanctuary for the Israelites while they were living the life of nomads after coming out of slavery in Egypt. It was to be the visible sign that God was present, dwelling among the people. The tabernacle invited them into encounter with God. It offered a focus to their worship, a sacred space in the wilderness. It helped to define sacred time as well, reinforcing the commandment to keep a Sabbath rest. It gave a sense of stability in a world that was dangerous and unpredictable.

I think we can relate to all of that. These are things we feel, too, about our church building and especially our sanctuary. And they are part of why we feel that something is missing in these days when we can’t gather in our sacred space. It’s probably worth reflecting on the key fact of the tabernacle: it was a *portable* sanctuary; it went with the people wherever they wandered. Wherever they went, God went, too. Maybe in this time, we need to hold that confidence close; maybe we can think about our sanctuary having moved temporarily, or having been *extended* ... to our living rooms or to wherever we may be. God has not left us; nor have we left God.

But our temporary separation from our sanctuary does help us appreciate how significant the tabernacle would have been for the Israelites. And we can see why they gave so gladly and generously to its construction – not just the material resources to build it, but also their skills and energy. Because we do that, too, right? . Some of us – and we are grateful for those folks – give their time and energy to keeping our church in good repair and looking nice. As we give regularly to support the ministry of the church, we know that a part of our giving enables us to have a place for where we can worship, learn and fellowship together; a place where we can host an art festival, an ISAAC meeting, a fair trade sale, a blessing of animals, or an election precinct; a place where potlucks, support groups, choir practice, or pastoral counseling can take place. A place where we are reminded – whatever the event – that God is present with us. And we also,

like the ancient Israelites, respond generously to special requests when we need to make our church more functional or beautiful – refurbishing our gathering space, replacing a boiler, upgrading lighting.

Those ancient people are so far away from us in time, and we don't understand a whole lot about this tabernacle-building project. I've always wondered, for example, how these folks so recently enslaved and wandering in the desert came by things like jewelry, gold, and fine linen. Did some of them find a way to prosper while in Egypt? Were these things gifts from Egyptian neighbors when they parted? Did they perhaps "liberate" a bit of the Egyptian wealth they'd contributed to as they left the county? Were they joined in their wanderings by other groups of nomads with more resources? Was the actual quantity of the materials not as abundant as the text sounds? We just don't know.

Nor do we really understand the significance of the complicated instructions for the tabernacle's construction. Exodus includes several chapters of mind-numbing detail. (If you don't believe me, check out chapters 36-39, which will tell you, among other things, how many loops were on the edge of each curtain, and what color they were!) But the people's offering for the tabernacle never fails to move me. "They came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing..." Men and women, bringing whatever they had, "everyone who could make an offering." It is a story of obedient response to God, not in any way grudging or self-concerned, but willing and generous. It's a story about a community coming together to make that sacred space which was in turn going to be so important for the unity of their community of faith.

The offering Paul describes (and promotes) in his 2nd letter to the Corinth church is an offering for a quite different purpose. At the time he was writing, the Christians in Jerusalem were going through a hard time. Many among them were poor to begin with. And they had begun to experience persecution and discrimination. The Jesus movement was becoming increasingly separated from the Jewish community. As Jewish Christians were rejected and ostracized by the religious communities they had once been part of, they lost the web of social connections that supported them. They weren't looked on kindly by the Roman authorities either. So they needed help. Paul has already asked for and received some generous financial contributions for the church in Jerusalem from the church in Macedonia, and he urges the Corinthian Christians likewise to be generous in sharing.

This, too, feels familiar to us. Compassion for others and helping those in need is a reason we give also. It doesn't matter if they are people we know or don't know, if they are nearby or far away. We feel for the folks who are relying on a food pantry or a hot meal at Ministry with Community; our hearts hurt when we think about children in refugee camps; we want to be part of making our local community more equitable; we know that just a help or opportunity can change someone's life; we are concerned about the ways Covid is impacting people's lives.

And we recognize, as I'm certain Paul did too, the scriptural imperative to act with compassion and justice on behalf of those in need. This giving, too, is in obedience to God. But again we see the givers – the members of the Macedonian church - described as generous, willing,

eager. Their giving comes not out of grudging obligation but out of a sense of God's grace, and "abundant joy" that overflows in compassion for others... even though they themselves are poor. They see the chance to "share in the ministry to the saints" in Jerusalem as a privilege.

Paul hopes the Corinthian Christians will follow their example. As he sees it, this is about gratitude for God's goodness, about compassion, about a Christ-like willingness to make sacrifices, and most of all about a faith that's truly genuine because it is lived out. But it's also about the nature of the church. The collection for the church in Jerusalem underscores the unity between the somewhat more well-off and secure urban churches in places like Corinth and the struggling Christians in Jerusalem. Paul understands that they are all part of the same church, and wants them to see themselves as a connected and caring siblings in Christ. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians previously (and Jerry read to us last week) "if one suffers, all suffer." It's about community.

As different as the tabernacle story and Paul's plea for the Jerusalem church are, that is the common theme. Giving is about building community. I definitely believe it is a good spiritual discipline for us as individuals, as well, but the Biblical worldview places the emphasis on the building of community. It's not a quid pro quo; it's not as much an obligation as a response; it's certainly not a magic key to personal abundance. The blessing of giving comes primarily in the way it connects us with one another. We aren't just making financial commitments to a budget, we aren't just writing checks or volunteering some time to do a church project or serving on a board or ministry team. We are building community, and we're doing it together, with willing hearts, abundant joy. And that's what stewardship is all about. Amen.

Resources:

Exodus (Interpretation Commentary) by Terrence Fretheim.