

**MESSAGE: “The Sermon on the Amount”**

**Text: Exodus 36:2-7**

**Purpose: the purpose of this message is to encourage the congregation to thank God for life’s resources and to commit those resources to God as an act of discipleship.**

**Read: Exodus 36:2-7.**

**That is a sermon I am waiting to preach. To be able to stand in the pulpit and announce, “The finance chair has informed me that the treasurer has too much money for too few bills. The trustees have repaired and improved all the property and cannot think of anything else to spend money on. The pastor’s discretionary fund is spilling over with contributions that no one wants. The missions committee has abandoned all fundraising, because all needs have been met. Mission Shares have been paid three times over and Bill Burnside, our Conference Treasurer, is begging us not to send any more.” As I said, “that is a sermon I am waiting to preach.”**

**Where do you suppose the offerings came from that the Israelites gave for the construction of the Lord’s sanctuary? Remember, the congregation Moses served was a people of slaves who were instructed to escape from Egypt at a moment’s notice. Whatever land and houses they possessed were abandoned. No U-Haul was available for transporting goods to the Promised Land. And since no one had invented Sinai Megabucks, the desert afforded few opportunities for enhancing one’s income. Where do you suppose the offerings for the Lord’s sanctuary came from?**

**Hear the words again, “the artisans...came...and said to Moses, ‘The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work the Lord has commanded us to do.’ So Moses gave command, and the word was proclaimed throughout the camp: ‘No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.’ So the people were restrained from bringing...” Again I ask, “Where do you suppose the offerings came from?”**

**They came from offerings made by the people. Sacrificial offerings. The wedding ban given to one by her husband on their wedding day. The silver cup that belonged to great-grandma. Crimson yarn that had been saved for a special garment. A table made of acacia wood that represented someone’s last tie to a fading heritage. Fine skins that would have brought a good price in the land to which they were headed. Sacrificial offerings made by people who wanted to give, who needed to give, who understood that their greatest resource was the Creator of heaven and earth, the One who delivered them from slavery, who**

parted the Sea of Reeds for their escape, and who sustained them with water, manna and quail.

Too often, the size of our giving is a function of the size of our guilt. The giving opportunity comes to us like this, “Can’t you see how desperately this little girl from India needs assistance? Just eighteen dollars and ninety cents a month will meet her needs. Surely you can spare that?” Yes, we probably can. In truth, we can probably spare a whole lot more than we will ever admit. But is that a solid motivation for giving?

Look one more time at the story we have read. How did Moses present his ‘sermon the amount?’ Did he say, “Don’t you want God’s altar to look pretty? Won’t you give a piece of gold to dress it up a bit?” No. We find Moses’ invitation in chapter 35, verse 4 and following, “This is the thing the Lord has commanded: Take from among you an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord’s offering...” And the people gave so much that they had to be restrained from giving!

Someone may ask, “If God is the giver of all things, then why do some have so much while others have so little?” Good question. Let me respond with an example of funny bones. For those who may not know, funny bones are a chocolate, twinkie-like thing that kids (and some adults) like to eat. When my kids were small, my father-in-law used to bring them when he came to visit. He would give a box of them to my daughter. On the face of it, she could have the whole box while her brothers went without, except for one thing. With the box, my father-in-law would say, “Share these with your brothers.” Sharing. The first rule learned in kindergarten, yet one often forgotten in life.

Let us be candid. We are all being asked today to consider how much we are willing to share or pledge for the support and ministries of the church during 2017. I could speak at length about the needs of the church, community and world which we hope to meet, but I am not going to. Instead, I am going to speak about our need to give as an act of Christian discipleship.

All of us, regardless of how much or how little we possess, have a spiritual need to give. Among the crazy, inside-out guides for living that Jesus gives us in his sermon on the mount is one that goes like this, “Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

We may be skeptical. We scowl at the adage, “The one who makes the sacrifice receives the blessing.” A parishioner once told me about a church pet blessing ceremony she

attended that had a tragic ending. One of the pet cats ate one of the pet hamsters. The hamster made the sacrifice; the cat received the blessing.

We put our brakes on giving, because we fear that what we have given will be lost to us. Perhaps you can sense the spiritual poison this turns into. As long as our trust remains deposited with self, it cannot be given to God. As long as fear of scarcity suffocates our generosity, the breath of love will not revive. As long as we buy into the myth that what we have is ours, we cannot discover the truth in the verse, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

God has the resources to multiply our offerings into blessings that exceed our expectations. With this assurance and trust, we may risk, indeed, we must risk a spiritual adventure in giving. If we are to be what God has created us to be, we must allow the conversion of our wallets as well as the conversion of our souls. The two are more closely linked than we might realize. Do you know that there are approximately 500 references in the Bible to faith, 500 to prayer, yet more than 2,000 references to possessions?

As we prayerfully consider what God is asking us to pledge for 2017, I ask you to reflect on two biblical challenges. The first is the principle of a tithe. A tithe is 10% of one’s income. It is the biblical minimum recommended for giving. In Malachi, God holds the people of Israel accountable for not giving a full tithe of their income. I urge you to consider this spiritual discipline and opportunity for your own life.

“How can I possibly tithe 10% of my income?” someone may ask. Let me tell you the story of the resignation of the church treasurer. The day the treasurer resigned, the church asked the local grain elevator manager to take the position. He agreed under two conditions. First, that no treasurer’s report would be given for the first year, and second, that no questions be asked about finances during that year. The people were surprised but finally agreed since most of them did business with him and he was a trusted man.

At the end of the year, he gave his report. The church indebtedness of \$225,000 had been paid off. Staff compensation had been raised by 8%. Mission Shares had been paid at 200%. There were no outstanding bills. And there was a cash balance of just over \$30,000! Immediately the shocked congregation asked, “How did you do it? Where did the money come from?”

He quietly answered, “Most of you bring your grain to my elevator. Throughout the year, I simply withheld ten percent on your behalf and gave it to the church in your name. You didn’t even miss it! Do you see what we could do for the Lord if we were all willing to

**give at least the tithe to God, who really owns it?” And so the new treasurer had made his point.**

**(Adapted from A Sourcebook for Stewardship Sermons, James E. Carter)**

**The second biblical challenge I ask you to consider is the principle of growth. We are encouraged to grow in grace. Someone once said, “Growth is the only evidence of life.” If we are not growing in response to God’s call, we are not spiritually alive. Many of us are able to increase our giving for 2017 as a responsive act of discipleship. The question may not be “Can we?” but “Will we?”**

**I close with the example of a woman who was deeply moved by a message one Sunday. She had nothing to give when the plate came to her. She received the plate from the usher and hesitated, with tears flowing down her cheeks she desperately wished she had something to give. Finally, she stepped into the aisle and placed the offering plate on the floor. She surprised everyone by stepping into the plate and offering herself.**

**Stewardship is not just about how much of what I own will I give to God. It’s about how much of me am I willing to give.**