

MESSAGE: “A Farewell to Alms”

Text: Psalm 24

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to recognize that all we have is God’s, to worship God through the act of giving and to approach God’s altar with our financial pledges for the new year.

In the spring of 1995, in Keene, New Hampshire, a man opened a consignment shop with the name of Good Fortune. The enterprise was appreciated by Keene residents who were delighted to see a longstanding Main Street vacancy put to good use. A problem surfaced, however, when the new owner installed a colorful, arching, rainbow-sign over the shop entrance. According to city-planners, the rainbow-sign arched too high to conform to city regulations.

The shopkeeper stuck to his guns, saying, “I purchased the building, and I should be able to advertise with any sign I choose.”

City-planners disagreed, insisting, “You may own the property, but you pay taxes to the city of Keene. You are therefore compelled to obey city regulations. The sign must come down!”

The debate continued for a month as folks on each side weighed in through editorials in the local newspaper. Eventually, the rainbow-sign was removed and a much less conspicuous sign was erected in its place. The city officials had spoken, and their word was final...or was it?

Early next morning, a rain shower fell upon the city of Keene. By the time of the morning commute, the sun refracted its rays through the lingering raindrops. High into the sky, arching over the city of Keene, from one city line to the other was the most vivid and beautiful rainbow I had ever seen. A photo was taken and printed on the front page of *The Keene Sentinel* the next day.

We often debate with one another, ‘Who owns what?’, but the composer of psalm 24 speaks the truth we sidestep: *the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof*. This is perhaps the missing piece that complicates the Israeli/Palestinian scramble over the Gaza Strip. Who holds claim to the land? Whom has God morally given it to? It is also the missing piece to the Stewardship question. Does God have a claim on my resources? If so, how much of a claim? In what sense are they ‘my’ resources? In what sense are they God’s? How do I figure out what God expects from me? Does God really want me to give back what God has provided?

Absolutely! This is what we mean when we pray, “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” This is what God is talking about in Malachi 4: “Bring the full tithe into my storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and

pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” Can it be that our reluctance to give God the first fruits of our labor and the full 10% tithe actually prevents us from receiving the full blessing God wants to bless us with?

One November, when I was perhaps six-years-old, I decided that I wanted to give my mother a Christmas gift she would remember. She did so much for me, and I wanted to give her something really special. One night, I heard her lament, “All my potholders are stained and ratty!” I decided right then that I would make her some potholders, which I could do, because my sister had a frame and I could buy a bag of loops for \$3. But then I thought, “How excited can she get over two potholders?”

This is what I did: every night, after she had gone to bed, I snuck downstairs, removed one of the ratty potholders from her supply and hid it in a bin under my bed. After supper one night in early December, Mom asked, “Does anyone know what is happening to my potholders? They seem to be disappearing?” Nobody knew, of course, except Sneaky Steve, who wasn’t about to confess.

I knew my plan was succeeding about a week before Christmas when Mom announced, “If anyone wants to know what I’m hoping Santa will bring me for Christmas, it’s potholders! They keep disappearing, and I only have four left for Christmas dinner!” By this time, I had collected twenty-three potholders. I wrapped them up in snappy Christmas paper along with the two new potholders I made and put the present under the tree. On Christmas morning, Mom was delighted when she opened a gift with four new potholders, and then another, and another. By the time she got to my gift, she had a new supply of 15 potholders to add to her four. And of course when she opened my gift, she hit the mother-load: 25 potholders! So what if most of them looked familiar! She was delighted to have her potholders back and to simultaneously solve the Case of the Missing Potholders!

Here’s my point. Everything we have to give God belongs to God already, but the love that accompanies the pledge makes all the difference in the world. Loving God with heart, soul and strength is the essence of worship. When Jesus was asked, ‘What is the greatest commandment?,’ he replied, “to love the Lord your God with heart, soul and strength.” But he identified a second commandment that was also essential, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ God may not need my pledge, but certainly my neighbor does.

In psalm 24, verses 3-6, a question is asked and an answer given. Who shall be admitted to the temple? The answer is: those with clean hands and pure hearts. Clean hands that do not with-hold offerings of compassion. Clean hands that signal a ‘farewell to alms,’ because the giving is substantial enough to change a life. ‘Clean hands’ in the psalm does not refer to soap and water; it refers to moral responsibility that loves God enough to care for the least, the last and the lost in a life-changing way. Clean hands invite the needy off the street

and into the home. Radical hospitality and compassion of this sort is expensive, requiring sacrifice and sustained giving.

And what about pure hearts? Pure hearts that love God by giving what God asks. Consecration Sunday, which we will celebrate next week on Thanksgiving Sunday, is an opportunity for us to ask, “What is it that God asks of me?” The emphasis is not on the church’s need to receive, but on the congregation’s need to give. You don’t need me to tell you that the church needs pledges to pay for lights, salaries and Sunday school curriculum. Those things are obvious to anyone who is observant. But you may need me to remind you that a spiritual faith that is alive is a spiritual faith that gives generously to the mission of Christ’s work.

That is precisely why Jesus spoke more about our relationship to material possessions and resources than he did about prayer. Save the leftovers for tomorrow; give the firstfruits today. True worship demands true sacrifice. For me, this means percentage giving, pledging to God through the church a percentage of my compensation. It reminds me weekly that God has a claim on my salary just as my family does. And what a deal it is! God doesn’t take 10% from me; God generously gives me 90% with which to live, love and laugh!

I want to thank you for the generous and faithful contributions that you have given to God this year through the stream of the United Methodist Church of Auburn. It has enabled us to heal broken hearts, nourish hungry bodies and souls, instruct seekers of truth and wisdom and worship the God who made us. As you consider what you feel called to give for 2018, I ask you to grow one step in your faith journey with God. Maybe that means giving a percentage of income, even 1%, rather than an occasional contribution. Maybe it means giving on Sundays you aren’t here as well as Sundays you are. Maybe it means donating some time along with your weekly offering. Whatever you decide it will be, it will, I have no doubt, be worth it.