



Sermon, November 27, 2016
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Thanks Living, Thanks Giving: "Give All You Can"

Scripture: Psalm 116, read responsively from the United Methodist Hymnal, p. 837

Opening story

A mother wanted to teach her daughter a moral lesson. She gave the little girl a quarter and a dollar for church "Put whichever one you want in the collection plate and keep the other for yourself," she told the girl. When they were coming out of church, the mother asked her daughter which amount she had given. "Well," said the little girl, "I was going to give the dollar, but just before the collection the man in the pulpit said that we should all be cheerful givers. I knew I'd be a lot more cheerful if I gave the quarter, so I did."

A man had a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. He could receive little company and was not to be excited. While in the hospital a rich uncle died and left him a million dollars. His family wondered how to break the news to him with the least amount of excitement. It was decided to ask the preacher if he would go and break the news quietly to the man. The preacher went, and gradually led up to the question. The preacher asked the patient what he would do if he inherited a million dollars. He said, "I think I would give half of it to the church." The preacher dropped dead.

"It's not what you do with the million if fortune should ere be your lot, but what are you doing at present with the dollar and quarter you got."
(unknown).

The same is true for our prayers, our presence and our service as it is for our financial resources. What blessings will we return to God for all that we have received from God? What will we return?

Thanks Living, Thanks Giving: "Give All You Can"

This is the question the Psalmist deals with in this morning's scripture litany that we read together. The Psalmist begins out by describing how dire his situation was:

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the LORD :
"O LORD, save me!"

But God came to the rescue, God blessed the psalmist with life, because God is compassionate and merciful. Then the psalmist asks the crucial question:

"How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?"

We have been blessed. What will we return? How can we repay the LORD? The Psalmist immediately knows the answer:

"I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people."

This last Thursday our nation celebrated our annual holiday of giving thanks. I suspect that it was a bittersweet gathering for many. Nonetheless, the practice of expressing and practicing gratitude is essential for our mental and spiritual health. So we are going to practice gratitude for just a few moments. I invite you to get in groups of 3 or 4 and share with one another the things for which you are grateful this year.

(People share in groups of 3 or 4. Then invite anyone to share what they heard.)

Thanks Living, Thanks Giving: "Give All You Can"

Stewardship begins as the spiritual practice of recognizing and acknowledging that we owe our very existence to that which is beyond us, that which is greater than us. All of life is given to us – as an act of grace. The question is – how will we care for this gift given to us? This question is perhaps the most basic and the most profound human question. We are all gifted in many ways, and caring for the gifts given to us is a deeply significant act of gratitude. But the gifts are not for us alone, they are for the world. They are for our families and communities as well.

Stewardship reminds us that we are part of what I call the Great Chain of Blessing. Blessing flows through us. Our purpose in life is to be agents of accomplishing God's will in the world/universe.

"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

When we pray this we are dipping into the stream or flow of intentionality, of purpose present in the universe – the universal, cosmic expression of the will of God. Giving is being in the flow of God's intentionality. Give is verb form, gift is noun form. World is a gift of God. We are most like God when we give: "God so loved the world that he gave..."

Giving thanks reminds us that we really have very little to do with producing all that we have been blessed with. Think of it, in regards to food:

Did you put together the DNA in those seeds to organize itself to grow, and to convert air and water and minerals powered by sunlight into proteins and carbohydrates to form into roots, stems, leaves, flowers and fruits?

- Consider what you are made of
- Consider all the things that sustain your existence
- Consider all the things that you use at your place of work –
- Where did they come from?
- Who made them?
- Where did the raw materials come from?

Thanks Living, Thanks Giving: "Give All You Can"

- Where did the rain and sunshine come from?
- Where did the silicon, the copper, the gold, the iron come from to make up our computer circuitry?
- Where did the petroleum that is made into plastic come from?
- Meditate upon your cell phone, or your computer, or your TV or CD player...

Giving reminds us of this flow, this continuity of intention and blessing, of which we are a part. But we forget this, don't we? So I would like to teach you a profound spiritual practice to remind you to practice gratitude. I want you to reach down with both hands and put them on your belly. If you are like me, it is very easy to find your belly. And right there at the apex of the belly is the most profound theological statement God has to make about you. Do you know what it is? Your belly button. Yes. You heard correctly. I had a professor in seminary, Doug Adams, who loved to say, "Do you know how to tell a self-made man? They have no belly button." That's right, you get it. Our belly button is there to remind every one of us that we came from someone else. We are bound in a great chain of blessing.

John Wesley understood this. This is the idea behind the third part of his rule for discerning how to be a part of God's plan for blessing the world: "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can." "Give all you can." Pat your belly buttons: we are not self-made. All that we have comes to us from God. We were placed here not as proprietors, but as stewards. We are not our own, but we ourselves belong to God, and so it is with the things we have. We call them possessions, but in fact everything is on loan. All that we have we are to employ for God in a way that is pleasing to God, acceptable to Jesus Christ.

So is there a magical formula that we can employ to discern an appropriate amount to give to the Lord's work. Wesley says simply, "Give all you can." First, provide for the things you and your family need in order to live: food, clothing, shelter and what is necessary to remain in good health. If one observes his second rule of prudence and frugality, then unnecessary indebtedness should be kept to a minimum, not

Thanks Living, Thanks Giving: "Give All You Can"

counting student loans, of course. Whatever is left over, then first apply it to the household of faith, and if any remains after that, then do whatever good you can in the world at large.

Closing story:

At age 16 Andor Foldes was already a skilled pianist, but he was experiencing a troubled year. In the midst of the young Hungarian's personal struggles, one of the most renowned pianists of the day came to Budapest. Emil von Sauer was famous not only for his abilities; he was also the last surviving pupil of the great Franz Liszt. Von Sauer requested that Foldes play for him. Foldes obliged with some of the most difficult works of Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann.

When he finished, von Sauer walked over to him and kissed him on the forehead. "My son," he said, "when I was your age I became a student of Liszt. He kissed me on the forehead after my first lesson, saying, 'Take good care of this kiss—it comes from Beethoven, who gave it to me after hearing me play.' I have waited for years to pass on this sacred heritage, but now I feel you deserve it." (From Andor Földes, "Beethoven's Kiss," Reader's Digest, November 1986, 145. One online reference is at <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=4530>)

God says the same thing to us. We have been showered with blessings too numerous to mention. But when we come to church, God comes and gives us one kiss on the forehead. "Take good care of this kiss. It is the kiss of life. It comes from my Son who gave his life that you might have yours. Take good care of this kiss."

What will we do with that kiss?

What will we return to bless this world that God loves so much?