

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Holy God, all we have, all that we see, is yours. In this time of reflection and Thanksgiving, we recognize the bounty you have given us is given for our enjoyment, but all things are ultimately yours. We are stewards of all around us, and we must treat it well. From our neighbors to the little things we own, help us to remember who we are because of your calling to us. May our Thanksgiving times be mindful of the goodness we have while being mindful of the mission still in front of us. As long as your children are suffering, there can be no final rest for us. Guide us, Gracious God, to name our joys in life, to hear those voices of sorrow, and to lay our efforts always at your feet for your Glory.

Holy God, we come to understand how to manage what we have earned and what you have given to us. We hear the calling to gain all we can, save all we can, and give all we can. Indeed, God, we know and we feel the call to giving is a blessed one, and we want to do it well. Help us, Gracious God, to give in a way that honors ourselves and our neighbors in need. Help us to give as a means of sacrifice, not holding back for our own satisfaction. Help us not to give so much as to hurt ourselves. We wish to seek you, Gracious God as the goal, and everything around us as a means toward faithful service. Help us to give lovingly and without remorse to those truly in need, and let us give so as not to hinder ourselves from wellness. In this faithful space, we find you and truly joyful life. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, our Lord of Stewardship, who taught us to pray as one...

SERMON

There's a popular children's book called *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. It tells the story the relationship between a young boy growing up and an apple tree. The tree seeks to do all it can for the young boy. As the boy grows older, the boy asks more and

more from the tree. The young boy wants money, so the tree gives all the apples it can grow to him to sell. Now an adult, he wants a house, and the tree tells him to cut off the branches of the tree for the lumber. The man wants a boat, and the tree tells him to take the entire trunk to make one. There is nothing left but a stump, and the boy, now an old man, sits on the stump of the tree because he wants a place to sit.

You can interpret this story many ways in light of the idea of “giving all you can.” Some see it as unconditional love, but it is also a story of warning. We, of course, don’t want to live a life that lacks love and service; we must give well. On the other hand, like the giving tree, we can easily give too much of ourselves in the pursuit of love and service. We can come out of our service taken down, left with nothing, and burnt out if we give too much without taking care of ourselves. Jesus doesn’t call us to extremes but to faithfulness, and that’s where we gotta keep working to get.

We continue assembling this stewardship puzzle. John Wesley’s words and our modern interpretation bring us to the final point. “Gain all you can.” We are called to live a life that honors the blessing of work and to gain the fruits of that labor, but never gain at the expense of your own well-being or your neighbors well-being. It’s harder than it sounds. “Save all you can.” We are called to live a life that honors our wealth and our things by putting them into proper perspective. Don’t spend frivolously, and don’t hoard things that you don’t need when they could be of use to your neighbor. Now we come to the final piece, and this last piece brings the entire picture into focus. “Give All You Can.” This part, like the other two, can lead us to some very unfaithful places if we do not do it well. There is a faithful middle ground between the lack of giving and the debilitating experience of giving more than we should. Let’s explore what “Give All You Can” means for

us today as we hear Wesley's words, delve into the scriptures from Mark, and find the faithful middle ground between giving too little and too much.

Wesley continues his sermon, after gaining and saving all we can, to giving all we can. We must consider what it means to be a faithful steward in this world. He says,

“Consider: when the possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being and placed you in this world, he placed you here not as proprietor, but a steward. As such he entrusted you for a season with goods of various kinds. But the sole property of these still rests in him, nor can ever be alienated from him. As you yourself are not your own, but his, such likewise is all that you enjoy.”

The translation is simple: Don't think that you and your stuff is all about what you want. You have been put on this earth to take care of all God's bounty, not to just accumulate God's things. You are a steward. You take care of the things you have been entrusted with: the things you have accumulated and, more importantly, yourself. God calls us to willingly give of our time, talents, and tangible gifts, but we must do it well. When we give, we must honor these things by giving so that we are uncomfortable, but, at the same time, not giving too much that we dishonor the God-given gift of ourselves. That's may be the most crucial.

Our scripture lessons today show us some interesting examples of what it means to give. The first scripture lesson was the rich man who came to Jesus and asked him what he must do to gain eternal life. Jesus' response is simple; he reminded him of the commandments. “I have done all these since my youth!” said the rich man. Jesus is moved to compassion with him, because he sensed that there is something missing...something vital. “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me.” Those words strike deeply, with the rich man, and I believe us as well. The young man is “shocked,” but in Greek, it is better

translated “sad,” according to the New Interpreter’s Commentary. He went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Perhaps they were the most important thing in his life.

This passage has been interpreted and interpreted over, time and again. Everyone has their own two cents on what Jesus said. Some think, “the only way to be faithful is to give everything away!” I don’t think that’s the case. Notice that he didn’t give the last statement first; Jesus didn’t tell him to sell everything right off the bat. Jesus is using his fantastic pastoral care skills to guide this man. Here’s one of the keys to pastoral care: it’s always about more than the first question...the first question just begins the search to what the other person really needs. The first question of the rich man here wasn’t the point. It wasn’t what he needed to do to find eternal life; it’s what roadblocks were in his path. As Jesus quickly discerned, the main roadblock was his unfortunate connection to his possessions, and how the balance got out of sorts. He cared more about his wants and desires than his neighbor’s needs and God’s calling, so he was found unfaithful.

In the Old Testament, there are a lot of Levitical Laws concerning proper placement of things. Right off the bat, the people are called to give 10% of their gross income. This is known as tithing. It is a practice that easily and appropriately translates to our current day. It’s an expectation that we seek to give 10% back to God, through the church or other places doing God’s work As Catherine and I have grown in our marriage, we have sought to make tithing something we do each month, no question. Right now, we’re still working on it, growing month by month with our monetary devotion. It’s a hard thing, because to give 10% away right off the bat can put you at a disadvantage with all your expenses. There are a lot. But here’s the key: our giving SHOULD be a hard thing. Giving SHOULD be a sacrifice. We should be giving of our time, our money, and ourselves that we become disadvantaged

with that sacrifice. If we aren't giving to a disadvantage, then giving is no sacrifice. Because we are in these walls, because we worship a God who gave everything for us, we are called to sacrifice in return, and 10% really isn't all that much in the grand scheme of things.

Last week, we talked a great deal about faithful treatment of stuff. Sometimes you have too much, and you have to give some away. This is the case here. This man had more than he needed, and that stuff was becoming a roadblock to wellness, to "treasure in heaven." Wesley's sermon gives some important features on how we best give. First, we attend to our basic needs, then our family's basic needs, because we can't give well when we don't take care of ourselves. With what is left, we are called to give to our community of faith, and then those that have need. Whatever we give we give as an offering to God, who does not let any of our good actions go to waste.

We give to a disadvantage, but a disadvantage does not necessarily mean giving everything. The second scripture lesson may not be what it appears. We have Jesus and the disciples watching the crowds come and deposit their offerings into the Temple Treasury. Many come with large sums of money, but then comes a poor widow. She drops in 2 small copper coins. The New Interpreter's Commentary says that each one of these coins is worth 1/64 of a denarius, which is one day's wage. Jesus says that she has put into the treasury more than the other people, for she has given all she had to live on. We have to step back and look at this passage with new eyes. The automatic interpretation is that she is lauded by Jesus and all of the other people are. This passage comes right after Jesus denounces the scribes and how they "devour widow's houses." This very well be an example to further Jesus' point. The widow may not be lauded here; Jesus might be lamenting her situation. She had to give all she had to live on because the temple

authorities are that greedy. Jesus is more critiquing those who encourage others to give more than they should.

“Give All You Can” refers to many parts of our lives. Our finances, our time, our belongings. But we can easily go overboard if we do not measure “all you can” very well. This is a lesson in boundaries. The woman at the temple felt such an obligation that she gave more than she should. I don’t think that this is necessarily a faithful thing and an easy trap to fall into. Do you ever get the feeling that you are being asked more of than you can give? We seem to think that it’s a badge of courage for the one who is busier beyond their ability to cope, and we should wear that badge even though we are totally broken and run down. There’s another charity calling you for money. A friend is asking you to be at a party he or she is putting on when you had some personal time planned. An organization you support wants you to be an officer or take on more responsibility. It’s an honor, but you don’t really feel the motivation to do it. You think that others are depending on you, so you take up the mantle of leadership. Your employer keeps asking for more time without proper compensation. Well, you want that promotion, so may as well keep chugging along...even though you’re chugging along on empty. Family is coming for Thanksgiving. You don’t want them to think that you live in this mess, so you feel the necessity to deep clean the entire house because, well, it had to be done. At the end of the day, you find yourself literally sick because you haven’t done anything to take care of yourself. You eat badly and on the run, you don’t get enough sleep, because, well, who has the time? You realize there’s no time for yourself; it’s devoted to someone or something else.

Some of us thrive on being busy, but this is too much. The workaholic gives all he or she can, but they do not give well. The principles of church and of God can be easily abused

to make each and everyone one of us the martyr on the altar of service. When it goes out of balance, we aren't worshipping God; we're making service the idol because we aren't taking care of another blessed piece of creation...ourselves! You realize that you have given all you can, but we have gone to the deep extreme. We have become like the old widow who put everything she had into the temple because she felt obligated, but there is nothing else to live on. Life has lost the joy, and service has no meaning because we aren't in it; we're sacrificing all of ourselves to do it. This is not God's calling for us, and we should avoid giving more than we can for our good nature and good health.

Thus completes the stewardship circle. Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can. None of them by themselves is faithful. All of them together is faithful. We honor God, we honor our neighbor, and we honor ourselves in good stewardship. Let us not be the Giving Tree but learn from its lesson. As we give all we can, we must give so that we are disadvantaged by the giving; we must be sacrificing, whether that is our 10% or more. On the other hand, if we give too much of our time, our money, or anything else we possess, then we have stopped being faithful to ourselves, and the giving has lost its meaning. We cannot give all that we have to live on, no matter how much we feel we are being faithful. When you find the middle ground, you know it. It feels right; we are able to give joyfully and not overburdened. That was the wisdom of Wesley: The more that we accumulate faithfully, the more that we can give faithfully. The more that we save faithfully, the more that we can give faithfully. But we only honor those two when we honor ourselves in attending to our own needs, not getting all our wants. Let's do it all to the Glory of God, the benefit of our neighbor, and our own personal wellness. Amen and Amen!