



JOYFULLY GIVING THANKS

November 24, 2019, Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Reign of Christ
Colossians 1:3-5a, 11-20

Adam D. Gorman, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Listen to Paul's words to us again. "All things have been created through Christ and for Christ." One more time. "All things have been created through Christ and for Christ."

Which means that we are Christ's creation, that Christ created us, and everything that we have, for Himself. Furthermore, if all things are already His, then that means that whatever we believe is ours is really only ours on loan from Him, the one who created it to be used for Himself. That means that whatever gifts, talents, or material things we think we have, that we think are rightfully ours to hold onto and to do with however we see fit, are actually Christ's, and they are to be put into service for Him.

As stewards of God's good gifts, we are called to give back to Him that which is rightfully His. And we are to do that not from a begrudging heart or a contrite heart, nor from a tight grip, but, in Paul's words, we are to "joyfully give thanks" to God by freely and abundantly giving back to Him that which is already His.

This coming Thursday is Thanksgiving. Think of the bounty of food, family and friends that we will all get to experience in one way or another. Think about how much we have, how blessed we are, and be grateful, and give thanks for that, by giving more than just a little something back to God. Rather, let's think of ways to give a great something back to God.

Many years ago I read a post that said something along the lines of "do not donate clothes that you don't want anymore, that have holes in them or that are out of style, because that's not really giving, that's just not wanting to throw it away. Do



not reach into the back of your closet, or into the back of your pantry, and see what you haven't used in a year or two but go to the clothing store or to the grocery store and buy things you would want for yourself and then donate them to someone who needs them more than you do. Donate a portion of your first fruits not of your scraps, because God is the one who provided for you already. Don't give of your leftovers, but give of your abundance."

In case anyone isn't quite sure what I mean by first fruits, let me explain something we find a lot of in scripture. 2,000 years ago people lived in an agrarian society and farming was life. Therefore, when people gleaned or reaped their fields, that is, when people pulled in their crops, they donated their "first fruits". These first fruits and vegetables were the ones that had been most long awaited for, they were the very first fruits and vegetables of the season to come in, and yet these people donated them to God through the church before taking something for themselves.

Then, and only then, they took what portion was theirs to eat and to be sold so that they could have food and resources to take care of their families with. And then, oftentimes, after they gleaned from their fields, after they reaped the harvest from their fields once or twice, they did not continue to comb back over the field over and over again, trying to get everything they possibly could out of the crop, claiming every scrap as theirs. Rather, they then left some of the crop in the field for the widows and orphans and for the traveling foreigners that would walk by.

That is an example of understanding that that which we think is ours is actually God's to begin with and therefore it ought to be used according to God's ways. They were not only being good stewards of the land, caring for it in purposeful and healthy ways, tending to it in ways that nurtured the soil and made it richer, but they were also being good stewards of that which was produced by the land.

Now, since we are no longer living in an agrarian society, we need to think of ways in which this Biblical expression of good stewardship will be made manifest in our lives. How can we give of our first fruits?



When Pastor Karen F. Bunnell preached about stewardship, she said, “it’s not just all about money – it’s about how we look at everything that we have received from God, and how we in turn, use those things to His glory.”

And when Pastor Randy Harris preached about stewardship he said, “A significant part of stewardship is about seeing in ourselves, and in one another, the reality that we are made in God’s image, that we belong to God, all of us! And in light of that ultimate identity that we share with God’s children near and far, it’s about adjusting our lives so that the way we spend our time, the way we give our money, the way we use our God-given gifts, is in keeping with our ultimate commitment to God. We do so for the sake of God, and of God’s children: the ones in our midst, and particularly the most vulnerable ones in our community and around the world. Stewardship is about shifting the way we use such things as time and money from things that are of worth to things that are of greater worth, in keeping with our ultimate allegiance to God.”

Many of you don’t know this about me, but after I worked for AIG and before I went to seminary, I worked at the United Way of the Capital Region in Pennsylvania as a campaign manager. And as a campaign manager, my role was to help companies and organizations run workplace fundraising campaigns. The industry sectors that I worked with were very diverse, which meant that the people I worked with were very different from one another. For example, I worked with school districts and healthcare systems including Hershey Medical Center, insurance companies like Blue Cross Blue Shield, to utilities, including gas and electric companies. I even had the opportunity to work with, and on, Three Mile Island.

My job was to work with each organization in order to help them run the best fundraising campaigns they could within their particular company. That took a lot of thought and brainstorming because every company looked different, felt different, had a different culture, a different language, and even a different socio-economic status. Some companies played games for an afternoon, or did fake casino nights like the Brick Church School did several years back. Others were



more formal with boardroom presentations, filled with PowerPoint slides containing historical facts and figures, a video, and a strong ask to each person in the room for thousands of dollars and even more money from the company itself.

During those years, I learned so much about human nature. I also learned that we really don't know much about our neighbors. We don't really know what is important to them, and what they really need. What they care about. What their wants and desires are. What their struggles in life are. And that we often miss seeing how much some people truly give out of their hearts.

While I was working there, one particular instance changed my life forever. It was one simple moment, mere seconds, and the lens through which I see people, and see this world, changed forever. It was likely the day after I had been at the Rite Aid headquarters, with Mary Sammons, the CEO, and her top executives helping to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars. Then, here I was the next day, before dawn, in the back of a warehouse, in a break room tucked away in the dark crevices of a Walmart, nothing special, just a regular old Walmart, about to give a speech and presentation to the morning shift employees before asking them for their hard-earned money.

Here I was asking for money from people who made hourly wages, and who didn't even have benefits because of Walmart's unjust practices of only giving its employees enough hours that they wouldn't be required to give them benefits. Like if benefits started at 30 hours, employees could only work 29 hours... This type of thing happens a lot now, but back then, that was the first company who really started establishing that practice in mass. That's something to think about.

Furthermore, before I had found myself in this break room, in the back of a warehouse, I had been on the phone with the store manager of that Walmart. And when we had spoken, he had told me how excited he was to have me come into their store and help them with their campaign because they really wanted to beat all the other stores in their area in fundraising. On the phone, it had sounded like he was very interested in United Way and in doing good for others. But then when



I got there and he thanked me for coming in, he introduced me to a roomful of employees / and then immediately after the introductions / he left the room and that's literally the last I heard from him. No pledge. No thank you. Just wanted to win a competition for his own benefit.

Now does that sound like being supportive of a good cause to you? And what message do you think he was sending to his employees with that move?

Anyway, I gave my spiel to the employees about the impact of each of their dollars given to the local United Way. How they would help the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner. How we supported doctors who gave free medical care, how the organizations we worked with fed the poor, gave housing to the homeless, and helped families who had someone in prison. And at the end of the speech, I collected all of their signed pledge cards thinking to myself, "what a waste of time." But it wasn't a waste of time at all.

Everyone left in a hurry to get their workday started and it took me a couple of minutes to clean up. As I collected the posters, got the DVD out of the DVD player, and organized the pledge cards, I began to see that some of these people gave \$25, some \$100, and some even \$100s of dollars – and then, slightly irritated and probably a little self-righteous, thought to myself, "Well, they are certainly better than their managers."

Then I walked out of the break room, through the warehouse, and toward the registers where I would exit the building and return to my car. But someone stopped me. He didn't speak English very well but I could tell that he wanted to give me a pledge card before I left. It was the Janitor and he wanted to give me his pledge card before I left.

And, I thought to myself, "oh gosh." You see, I did not want to take his money because I thought about how little he must have, but also I did not want to be disrespectful to him, and, frankly, that was my job, so I accepted it. Then, when the pledge card was in my hand, I noticed that he had pledged to give over \$600.



Remember, this was 2006 and he was likely making close to \$15,000 a year. So I knew that \$600 was a lot of money to him and his family, so awkwardly, and not knowing any better, I basically asked him if he was sure, and he said, “Absolutely!”

The janitor, who had clearly been cleaning the bathroom and who had not even been given a break to hear the presentation, gave the most. In my bewilderment, he must have seen how hard it was for me to take his money so he asked me for one of the United Way brochures in my bag. Then he began to point to some of the different organizations and programs that our local United Way funded. He explained to me who in his family or circle of friends was affected by, and helped by, each one of the organizations. The stories he told me were so sad yet so beautiful, sorrowful but hopeful, difficult but joyful. It was his life through the lives of all those around him.

This Janitor was the person who made the least money and yet gave the most money. Not only did he give the most money, he gave the most of his heart and soul. HE gave of his first fruits and he was storing up treasures in heaven. The person, who many of us would think could least afford to give, gave the most. He was not thinking about himself but rather the impact that United Way had had on his family and friends and making sure that others were able to receive and benefit from the same kinds of help. He was being an agent of change, joyfully giving out of, what was to him, his abundance. He knew that that which was his, was not really his to begin with...

You see, it was God’s before it was ours. Everything that we think is ours is God’s and even we are His. So as we head into Thanksgiving let us Joyfully Give Thanks by giving back to God what is rightfully His to begin with. By giving ourselves back to Him, by using our talents to further His kingdom here on this earth, and by joyfully giving of our time and resources because he joyfully gave those to us first.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.