

Starting Small

November 12, 2017

I Samuel 2:1-10, Luke 2:36-38

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver

I'd like to talk about your intentions. According to Wikipedia, an intention is "is a mental state that represents a commitment to carrying out an action or actions in the future."

Of what use are intentions?



You've probably heard it said that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Whether we're talking about New Year's resolutions, turning over a new leaf, or kicking some old habits, our intentions are often met with skepticism.

American business leader Brad Smith once said, "Good intentions often get muddled with very complex execution. The last time the government tried to make taxes easier, it created a 1040 EZ form with a 52-page help booklet." Screenwriter Sonya Levein scoffed, "Good intentions are not enough. They've never put an onion in the soup yet."

And while you'd think that you could find a little more receptivity at church, it doesn't always happen. Televangelist Joyce Meyer said, "Good intentions never change anything. They only become a deeper and deeper rut." And Britain's "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher noted, "No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well."

Apparently, "good intentions" are doing about as well in the public eye these days as are "thoughts and prayers". They are dismissed as meaningless and maybe even harmful.

And yet this morning, I'd like to speak in favor of good intentions. I know, intentions are never enough – but without intent, we run the risk of sinking into despair, frustration, irrelevance, and uselessness.



¹In fact, our scriptures for today tell us the stories of two women who had, at least initially, *nothing* to offer *except* their good intentions – their “thoughts and prayers”, if you will. And today, we remember them as paragons of faithful living. I would argue that it was their *intentions* that set them on the road toward following through with the *actions* that would eventually bear fruit in the world.

Let's consider the story of Hannah. Here's a woman who is, apparently, the living embodiment of the “there are no atheists in foxholes” mentality. She's an outcast in her village and at a difficult place in her marriage because of her inability to conceive a child. She drags herself to the Temple and throws herself into a prayer – in fact she is so demonstrative in her plea that the clergy on duty that morning suppose that she is drunk. “Lord, if you give me a son, I'll give him right back to you – I promise. I'll raise him to serve you. I just need to have a baby, Lord.”

While you didn't read all of her story, I'm here to tell you that everyone in this room has whispered a prayer like Hannah's at some point in your life. “Lord, if I can only get an ‘A’ on this test...” “All I need, God, is *one date* with her – and then...” “Father, I'm asking for a healing – and if I get it, then I promise that...”



Uh-huh. Let's see what happens, Dave...

²Except that in Hannah's case, she actually

Hannah, James Tissot (19th c.)
Red, Elspeth Young, 2008

follows through on her prayer. She is able to conceive and she gives birth to a son. When he gets to be three or four years old, she takes him to the Temple, where she leaves him in the care of the high priest.

(I should note that while there may appear to be some biblical precedent for this practice, we are not advertising for such at this point and would, in fact, request that all children that were brought to worship today be taken home by their parents. Thank you.)

In her later years, Hannah goes on to have 3 more sons and 2 daughters – yet she chose to make good on her vow when all she had was the young boy named “God has heard” – Samuel. When she brings her son to the Temple to leave him with the old priest, Eli, she bursts into song celebrating a God who not only has the power to transform the world, but is apparently willing to intervene in it as well. She sings of a God who has heard her, and she replies by fulfilling her intentions, and Samuel rises to deliver Israel from threats both inside and outside the nation. Hannah goes on to live a life that is apparently steeped in faith. The story begins with a desolate woman crying out in her emptiness and ends with a family reunion and a nation entering a new expression of God’s presence.



³Similarly, the reading from the New Testament features a woman in the Temple. This time, however, it’s a woman who, by first century standards, is ancient – well into 80s if not older. Like Hannah, Anna was present to the Lord – although we do not know the nature of her prayers. Did she have children? Did she pray for them? We don’t know. All we can be sure of is that she was apparently alone in the world at this point of her life. She would not have mattered much to anyone then or now, except for

³ *Simeon and Anna in the Temple*, Jan van’t Hoff, 21st c.

the fact that she is the only woman in the New Testament to be called a “prophet”. She has the distinction of joining in the small group of people who announce the good intentions of God as revealed in the infant Jesus.

Both women point to a central truth of life and scripture: we are designed to be creatures of gratitude. We express our thanksgiving through intentioned, disciplined giving, even when there is apparently not that much to give. Hannah and Anna stand in the presence of God and offer what they have – even if at first it does not appear like much...

For me, this sense of gratitude has been rooted in the practice of giving. Specifically, I have tried to make a percentage of my income available for the Lord’s work. I’m glad that I learned that early in my life, because I’ve discovered that it’s really easy to put this into practice when you don’t have much to offer to begin with.



Some time ago a high school student asked me how I decided how much to give when it came time for the offering at church. I told her that everyone had their own thought, but that one practice that has been held up by the church for years is that of the tithe: bringing 10% of one’s income and offering it to the Lord. She held out \$30 she’d just received from a babysitting gig and said, “So wait... let me get this right... I have \$30 here, and you’re suggesting that I only put \$3 of it in the plate?” I nodded, and she said, “Wow! What a deal! I get to keep \$27?” I said, “Sure. Just remember that when you’re sitting on top of \$3000 or \$30,000. You don’t believe me now, but it’ll be harder later.”

Each person who is a “Covenant Member” of the congregation, as well as many other people, should have received a letter containing a green “Intention of Giving” card. Observant members will have turned the card over and

discovered a chart on the back that helps break down this concept of percentage giving. You can find your weekly income and see what a gift of 4%, or 7%, or 10% might be. There are no commands – just some help for those of us who are mathematically challenged.

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Sometimes when we talk about percentage giving, we get sidetracked with questions that, while important, are not really the heart of the matter. I'm asked, "am I supposed to use my gross salary or my take home pay?" Other disciples find themselves in a position where there is not a lot of income, but rather some fixed assets like retirement savings. How do you give 10% of nothing?

Last week, with Karen's help, I challenged the people of this congregation to demonstrate gratitude by writing at least one thank you note each day for the month of November. I hope that you're making progress in that discipline. If you'd like, you can take a few more cards from the back of the room.

Today, I'd like to invite you to prayerfully consider declaring your intentions to live and practice gratitude by returning to God some portion of that which has been entrusted to you.

Of course, this challenge has real-life ramifications. Choosing to give something to the Lord's work means that you'll have less available for other purposes. For Hannah, it meant that she risked becoming childless again – who knew if she would be able to conceive any subsequent children? For Anna, her presence in the Temple – the gifts of her time and energy – meant that she was not able to be in other places. You and I, as we consider the implications of this little green card, will have to be aware that there are consequences that will show up in our spending at Amazon.com, or in the size of the loan we try to take out for the next car or home we purchase.

Perhaps you are new to this idea. If that's the case, then let me encourage you to start small and look for ways to increase. When Sharon and I got married, I talked with her about my hopes to return 10% of our income to the Lord. I was paid the princely sum of \$7500 for my first year of work in youth ministry, and we tried to give back \$750 of that. Today, I'm happy to tell you that we are in a position to return more than the 10%. We can do that because we've practiced and we've learned how to do it better, and we've discovered that we actually like giving money to the church. If you would like to hear more of my giving journey, I'd be happy to share that with you.

Here's the goal: can we learn to be like the women in scripture? Here's Hannah, a young mother who has just given the most significant gift of her entire life. Over there is Anna, who might be 84 or she might be 105, depending on how we translate that verse, who is utterly dependent on those around her for her daily sustenance and yet is somehow able to find her way to the Temple for worship and praise each day. And each of these women burst into song and praise the goodness of God as they present themselves and their gifts.

The hope is that you and I can somehow cultivate an attitude of gratitude that leads to a life that is filled with thanksgiving, joy and singing as we grow to discover that our intentions match God's intentions, and that our "hopes and prayers" have hands and feet that result in real action that brings real change to the world around us.

Consider the opportunities that are before you this morning, beloved. Establish and declare your intentions. And respond by giving some of what you have, and all of who you are, to the Lord with joy.

Thanks be to God! Amen.