

Party Tithe!
November 26, 2017
Luke 15:11-32, Deuteronomy 14:22-27
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/sermon11-26_2017-11-26_11-24-16_t001_in1.mp3

Every time a group of people chooses to become “Covenant Members” at the church, whether it’s because of Confirmation Class or as a result of some other conversations, I always ask the same question: what is your favorite part of worship? When we assemble in God’s name, we do a lot of things – from the gathering hymn to the benediction, which is your favorite? This morning, let me invite you to give that some thought and simply turn to your neighbor and answer that question: what is one thing you look forward to when we come into this room for worship?

Did you say the candles at Christmas Eve? Or when we get to sing your favorite song? Or maybe when we get to stop singing your neighbor’s favorite song?

I can’t say that this is my absolute favorite, but one of the most special aspects of worship here at Crafton Heights is what I like to call “the dance of the meerkats”. It’s listed in your bulletin as “receiving our tithes and offerings”.

The church wherein I grew up had a team of twelve men, each of whom accepted responsibility to facilitate the collection for a given month. These men recruited, plotted, and sometimes planned their vacation time around the Sundays for which they’d be on duty as ushers.

The Crafton Heights U.P. Church of 30 years ago elected a single man as “Head Usher”, and it was the responsibility of that office bearer to make sure that there were four men who were appropriately prepared to come forward at the correct time and receive the morning offering.

But this morning, as on most Sunday mornings here at CHUP, I suspect that this will happen. The music will start playing, and then heads start popping up, like meerkats out of their burrows, as people seek to make eye contact in trying to assess whether or not they are needed for this important ministry. Through some sort of signals unknown to linguists, two, or three, or five or six of you will rise and walk toward the back of the room. The fifth person there generally pretends to be going to get a drink so that no one will think that he doesn't know the signal.



At any rate, a crew is assembled and the offering is received. I am teasing, of course, but that's because it reminds me that giving really is a joyful and blessed aspect of our life together. We tend to forget that in the United States some times, but when folks travel to Africa with me, they almost always react to the joy with which the people bring forward their gifts. Whether it's in small churches in remote villages or large complexes in the middle of town, there is a sense of profound gratitude that marks the giving of the offering. People are excited because they are *able* to give.

Too often in the American church, we are taught that our giving is rooted in one of three beliefs: one, we give out of duty. We are consumers of religious services, and so we better pay up to cover our costs. That's the thinking that lay behind the car ride wherein the young boy left church with his folks and said, "Wow, that was really good. I'm glad we came!" His father was less impressed, and commented that the sermon was a little long and the second hymn was off key. "Oh, come on, Dad!", sighed the boy. "You gotta admit, it was pretty good for a dollar!"



The second stream of giving in many of our churches is from those who are so pleased with how things have been going for them lately that they'd like to offer the Man Upstairs a tip as a gesture of appreciation. Folks think, "I like my life, and God has done all right by me, so here you go, Big

Guy – get yourself something nice on me...”

The other reason that I see folks being asked to give in the North American church is because giving is seen to be an investment strategy. The worship leader promises that if you give to God, then God will bless you. There’s a promise held out that seems to indicate if you give a little, you’ll get a little, but if you give a lot, you’ll be deeply enriched.



¹There are a number of models for giving set forth in scripture, but none are impersonal and very few are based primarily on appeals to either greed or duty. More often, as is the case in our reading from Deuteronomy, we see that giving is a response to what God has done in the world.

In the passage you heard, the people are commanded to set aside a tenth of their produce and take it all down to the church and live it up with the gathered community. If you live too far from church, or you have such a big harvest that this is impractical, then go ahead and sell your tenth and stop at a Sheetz or a Get-Go along the way. The party is to include everyone, and is to be centered in giving thanks to God for what God has done in the world.

Other parts of the Bible offer a rationale for giving that includes the expectation that people will take part in funding what needs to happen for the upkeep of the temple and the financial provision for the worship leaders, and many passages indicate the need to be attentive to God’s call to care for the poor. There are many, many places where the Bible talks about money – in fact, Jesus spoke more about our finances than he did about hell, or about sex, or even about love. The scripture is full of exhortation to give generously to the Lord’s work.

I’ve told you some of my story, and you’ve heard

Offering: illustration from a Bible card published by the Providence Lithograph Company between 1896



from Ed, Stacey, Karen, and – in a little while – Ron. Today, I'd like to affirm that giving out of gratitude is a fundamentally good thing that – as we learn to do it better and better – will bring us great joy. I've taken as my text for this a very well-known story of Jesus that we often call "the parable of the prodigal son", or sometimes "the loving father".

²When we hear these familiar words, we usually focus on the profound vision of forgiveness that is offered here. A son essentially wishes his father dead, and then blows through his inheritance, and is finally restored by the father's willingness to make things work. At the same time, there is a different son who is lost to the family as a result of a self-induced fog of pride, legalism, resentment, and self-righteousness.

This week, though, as we are thinking about gratitude all month long, I'd like to ask you to consider which character in the parable is the most grateful? I'll suggest that it is, in fact, the father – a man so excited about the turn of events that he throws a heck of a party and brings in all the neighbors. There is music, feasting, joy, and laughter – the whole thing, to tell you the truth, is pretty Deuteronomic. It's as if Luke 15 is a vision of Deuteronomy 13.

But you interrupt me and say, "Wait a second, Pastor! How can God be grateful? To whom would God be grateful? Is it even possible for God to be grateful?"

And, on the one hand, I'd say that you have a valid point, particularly if your vision of gratitude looks like a child who has received a gift from a relative and whose mother drags that child in front of that giver and commands, "Now, listen to me, child! Before you even think about using that gift, you're going to say a proper thank you!" Nobody likes that kind of experience – not the giver, not the recipient, and not the one who feels obliged to make sure that the "thank you" gets said.

² *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Rembrandt van Rijn c. 1661-1669

But what if gratitude is being glad for what is, or has been, or could be with an eye toward the one who made it possible? In the parable, the father is so happy about the restored relationship with his boy that he wants the world to witness it. In this context, we could even say that the father is, in some way, grateful to the son as well as to those who come forward to share in the joy. The father is supremely happy for how things are, or for who is there, or for what can happen as a result of these things...

Listen, I had some experience of this as a father – when some interaction between my daughter and myself allowed me to break out of the dull routine of my normal life and see myself as profoundly blessed... but I have to tell you that no matter how I experienced this a generation ago, I am simply *killing it* as a grandparent. I mean, there I am bounding one of those little girls on my knee and all of a sudden I'll blurt out, "Ooooooh, look! The baby spit up on me!" A blonde four year old will ask me a question, and I'll say, "Do I want to go out in the rain and play in the mud? You betcha!"

One of the great gifts I have received at this season of my life is that of joy in shared activities, in sharing – in relationship. Listen – there is not a blessed thing that either one of my granddaughters can actually *do* for me in any practical sense. They *cost* me money, energy, sleep, fishing time, and more. And, of course, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

In the same way, the father in the parable is a paragon of joy and gratitude because he is glad for the chance to participate in relationship. Because he is so blessed in this fashion, he finds himself giving, and giving, and then giving some more. The whole shooting match is his – and yet he is the most grateful person at the party.

This week, we're presenting our Intention of Giving cards as a part of our worship. In a few moments, the elaborate dance of the meerkats will begin and you'll be invited to place one of those green cards in the plate. I want to remind you that we are doing

all of this with the full awareness of the fact that there is a whole lot of 2018 that is outside of our control. We don't know what will happen in our lives or in the lives of those whom we love. And yet in spite of that uncertainty, we will declare our intent – we will decide and proclaim – that so far as it depends on us, we want to live like the Father. We want to be like God.

We want to laugh with the people of God.

We want to rejoice in the possibility of relationships with each other, with God, and with God's world. We want to be givers.

In the fall of 1983 a Dutch Catholic priest and theologian named Henri Nouwen had just finished what he called an exhausting trip through the United States wherein he spoke as often as he could urging Christians to do whatever was in their power to stop bloodshed in Central America. He later wrote,

I was dead tired, so much so that I could barely walk. I was anxious, lonely, restless, and very needy. During the trip I had felt like a strong fighter for justice and peace, able to face the dark world without fear. But after it was all over I felt like a vulnerable little child who wanted to crawl onto its mother's lap and cry. As soon as the cheering or cursing crowds were gone, I experienced a devastating loneliness and could easily have surrendered myself to the seductive voices that promised emotional and physical rest.³

By chance, he happened to be invited to a meeting with a woman who had a copy of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. He stared at the poster for the entire meeting, and later made arrangements to visit the museum to see the original. He sat with the painting for four days, and as he did, he was overwhelmed with a sense of God's call on his life. As he reflected on both this experience and the ways that it shaped him,

³ *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday 1992, p. 4.

he said,

In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.⁴

I am here to suggest that the father in the story that Jesus told, that Jesus himself, and that the One of whom Jesus spoke so often all point to a reality in which we experience gratitude as both an awareness of that we've received as well as a discipline to practice in our interactions with each other, those around us, and the Lord. As we think about who we are called to be these days, may we be those who are called "grateful", "joyous", "generous". Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁴ *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday 1992, p. 85.