

Sacred Texts for Beloved Community 7 *More Than Enough*

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Ex 35:4-9, 20-22; 36:3-7

⁴ Moses said to all the congregation of the Israelites, “This is the thing that the Lord has commanded: ⁵ Take from among you an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord’s offering: gold, silver, and bronze; ⁶ blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen; goats’ hair, ⁷ tanned rams’ skins, and fine leather; acacia wood, ⁸ oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁹ and onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breast piece. ²⁰ Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. ²¹ And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred and everyone whose

spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting and for all its service and for the sacred vestments. ²² So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. ³ and they received from Moses all the offerings that the Israelites had brought for the work of constructing the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning, ⁴ so that all the skilled workers who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task being performed, ⁵ and said to Moses, "The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do." ⁶ So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." So the people were restrained from bringing, ⁷ for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work.

Luke 21:1-4

Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ² he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, ⁴ for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

Two wonderfully evocative texts for Stewardship Season, and at first glance they seem quite different. In the first one, the ancient Israelites have accumulated riches and the giving gets out of hand; in the second, out of the poor widow's poverty, she gave everything she had. But the common denominator in both is sheer gratitude for God's abundant blessings.

The Old Testament text describes a remarkable moment for the people of ancient Israel. By the time of our reading, they have reached a point in their journey with God that finds them overwhelmed by all God has done for them. They had been slaves in Egypt for generations. From the pain of their oppression, they had cried out to God. God heard the sounds of their suffering and delivered them. Once freed, in the desert they would have wandered aimlessly through the wilderness but God provided a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night – signs that God was with them and leading them. When they were thirsty God made water flow out of a rock. When they were hungry, manna appeared like morning dew. Now, they also had their moments of doubt along the way and did a fair amount of grumbling. When God got irritated about their lapses in appreciation, Moses would intervene and they'd be back on the right path again.

We see in this ancient story, what we know from our own experiences,

that faith in God is rarely an instantaneous thing. Growing to trust God to provide what we need can be hard won. Learning to depend on God for the essentials – love, grace, mercy, life itself - often requires a journey through a wilderness of doubt along with glimpses of God’s steady presence. This biblical moment encourages us to remember that over time a genuine awareness of all that God has done for us should be met by our deep gratitude, by a profound awareness that everything that really matters is a gift from God. Then we respond by the gifts of our lives.

Moses had given specific instructions about what was needed to build the Tabernacle and then simply said: “Let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering.” Nothing was mandated; nothing required; no sermon about tithing; Moses didn’t lay on guilt or lift up fancy stewardship slogans. He simply appealed to their deep awareness of God’s abundant goodness and did what we do every week in worship: he called for the Offering. Well, in their grateful response the people came, and they came, and they came, offering their gifts and themselves to God. And here’s the remarkable thing: they were so willing to give thanks to God, so overwhelmed with generosity, that Moses actually had to ask them to stop giving. The highly skilled supervisors of the Tabernacle’s construction, could not figure out what to do with all the offerings of the people. They asked Moses to restrain the givers.

In nearly forty years of ministry, I've never had to restrain the givers! Can you imagine? Of all the amazing things that Moses has been through: conversing with God before a burning bush; parting the sea to lead a nation out of slavery; climbing Mount Sinai and holding court with God Almighty up in the thundering clouds. Of all the things that Moses did, perhaps the most amazing thing of all was this: he preached a stewardship sermon in which he said, Please, do not give any more, for what you have already brought is more than enough. Those ancient believers in the God of heaven and earth reached down into some spiritual depth that runs far deeper than calculating a pledge. They remembered who God is, and how God had provided for them - generously, abundantly. Then, from that deep awareness, they responded with grateful and generous hearts.

We at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church have inherited this biblical spirit of generosity born of the deep awareness of God's gifts. For over 150 years of people gathering here to love God and neighbor, we have been blessed with this expansive church campus for worship, education, nurture and community life. We have abundant resources to live the Christian faith in service to the community and world. However, despite our inheritance and our wealth of resources, this congregation is not without challenges when it comes to stewardship.

Let me share a couple observations. We enjoy a membership of deeply committed givers, but we also have a large number of folks who do not make a financial commitment. As the stewardship letter you received indicates, the best way to support the church is to make a pledge, and pay toward that pledge over the course of the year. A pledge is a promise and enables the church to budget based on anticipated income. However, we recognize that this trend is changing in churches everywhere, with fewer people pledging while more people are making general contributions. We have fewer pledges than we did before, but general contributions have steadily increased and the budget has grown. Still, there are many members who make no traceable financial contribution to the church. By that I mean, if you only put cash in the plate we don't know who it comes from. All gifts are welcomed, of course, but we need gifts of time and talent as well.

The church's tradition is to elect church leaders from among those we know are supporting the church financially, because our elected leaders are entrusted with financial oversight. The size of the gift makes no difference to be an Elder, Deacon or Trustee, but giving does matter as a sign of commitment. Every year the Nominating Committee receives a good long list of active members to serve in leadership, but the Director of Finance has removed about a fourth of them for no financial support of the

church. These members active enough to be nominated to leadership but have no record of giving to the church, and we want you to be fully involved. We want everyone in to be deeply aware of God's blessings and, if they are able, to respond with their gifts to support this church's ministry. And we always want to broaden our pool of people who are eligible for leadership as Elders, Deacons and Trustees.

As our scripture indicates, giving matters as a response to the unending gifts of God. So, before you fill out your pledge card this year, or calculate your annual contribution to the church, begin here. Or if you don't give, begin here. Think about God's gifts to you, the gift of life itself, and then respond with a glad and generous heart. Remember everything we have of ultimate value is a gift of God's love for us. And the church needs our gifts to do the good work of the gospel.

Some years ago, my old friend and colleague K. C. Ptomey was nearing his retirement from Westminster Presbyterian in Nashville. K. C. gave our preaching group a copy of his last stewardship sermon and, today for mine, his words resonate with my own pastoral experience as well as with today's scripture. After 40 annual pledge efforts, and more than a few capital campaigns, K.C. said, "I've seen everything... house-to-house calls, letters, telephone campaigns, challenges to tithe, banners, posters,

fancy stationery, charts, graphs, movies, slides, skits, Bible studies, suppers, lunches, breakfasts, desserts, efforts to impart guilt, promises of eternal bliss, threats of hell-fire and damnation. I've seen it all... I've done it all..." K.C. said. "But what a lifetime of ministry has finally taught me is that generosity simply comes out of people who have experienced the love of God, the unmerited grace and goodness of the living God, which is something we can never earn.

"Awareness," K.C. went on, "deep awareness, of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God, is the only thing I know of that can elicit abounding generosity. Guilt won't do it. Slick stewardship messages won't do it. Charts won't do it. Letters won't do it. Sermons won't do it. But awareness, deep awareness, of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God – that will do it. Drive down the street on a fall day and feast your eyes on the colors. That'll do it. Hold your newborn child - or grandchild - in your arms and feel those tiny fingers wrap around your thumb. That'll do it. Listen to the doctor who, after long hours of surgery or tests or time, reports that your loved one is going to be okay. That'll do it. And when death comes, and the church upholds you, absorb the promises of resurrection, of everlasting peace. That'll do it. Stand in this place any Sunday joining your voice with others, singing of God's tenderness.

God's forgiveness. God's love. God's care. K.C. concluded: Look around at the faces of those with whom we worship; linger over those who have been an important part of your life, who have loved you, encouraged you, inspired you. That'll do it. Simply -- Be aware."¹

Friends, if we allow ourselves to appreciate the abundance from God that is ours, then our generosity will overflow. The ancient Israelites, whom Moses had to restrain from giving, had given more than enough. And the widow in the gospel put everything she had to live on into the offering plate. Two very different stories, but again, one common denominator: sheer gratitude for God's abundant blessings. If those who worship and serve together through the ministries of this church remember all the gifts of God that have come our way, there will always be more than enough. More than enough indeed.

AMEN.

¹ K.C. Ptomey, Homily preached at Westminster, Nashville, 10/12/08.