

For Such A Time As This: Blessings
Nehemiah 10 :32-29; Matthew 6:19-21

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On December 9, 1937, the Ann Arbor city engineer, George H. Sandenburgh, declared the First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor building to be unsafe. Worship was moved immediately to the Michigan Theater and the building was closed. It seems that the trustees first became aware of problems with the building in 1930 when they learned that the walls of the sanctuary were spreading outward, and the roof supports were separating. A new roof was needed immediately. But, this was early in the Great Depression. The congregation didn't have the resources to do anything but temporary repairs.

Then, in 1937, the church hired an architectural firm to assess the building. They found more problems - a wall pulling away from the roof, a tower too weak to hold the weight of the main spire, and the inadequacy of the temporary fixes put in place seven years before. Plus, many things needed to be updated - including the heat and ventilation systems. There was nothing to be done but build a new building.

Of course, this was still the Depression. Money was still scarce. But, the leaders of the church were determined. They estimated that a new building to house the church and the Wesley Foundation would cost approximately \$300,000. So, they decided that the church would raise \$200,000 and The Wesley Foundation would raise \$100,000. Through faith and generosity, they made it happen. One church member donated \$100,000. The rest of the congregation donated the second \$100,000. And the Wesley Foundation received the final \$100,000 as a grant from the Kresge Foundation. In October of 1940, less than three years later, they dedicated this building and with no outstanding debt!

This church has always been blessed with faithful congregants who have lived out their faith with First United Methodist Church as their church home. From making sack lunches to teaching Sunday School to serving in leadership to working alongside the people of Meru, Kenya to build a secondary school, literally thousands of people in our 200-year history have given of their time, their talents, and their money because they believe in what happens here. They believe that the church, our church, is a place of transformation for both individuals and the world.

One reason people in this congregation have given of themselves and their resources so generously is that this church has a rich history of sound preaching and teaching about how giving is tied to our faith. So, in keeping with that tradition, I'd like to spend today examining the scriptural basis of stewardship as we continue our sermon series, "For Such A Time As This".

As we all know, many kinds of nonprofits hold giving campaigns, yet the church is unique in framing giving as stewardship because that is how scripture describes humanity's relationship with God. Genesis 1 and 2 are creation stories that were passed down orally from one generation to the next to explain our origins. Genesis 1 describes how God created the universe and everything in it in six days. From the start, God gave humanity responsibility for caring for creation. Starting with Genesis 1:26, God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble

us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.’

This story is foundational in understanding what stewardship is. God created everything. Everything belongs to God. But then God created us to take care of it all for God. Like you entrust your car to a repair shop or your suitcase to a hotel steward or your retirement savings to a financial planner, God entrusts the world and everything in it to us. It doesn’t belong to us. We are caretakers of God’s creation and beneficiaries of God’s generosity.

Of course, the other creation story tells us about the entrance of sin into the relationship between God and humanity. God makes a covenant with Adam and Eve. All of this is yours but don’t eat from that one tree over there. But what do they do? They eat from that one tree over there. This sets up the pattern for the whole rest of the biblical story. God provides for us and asks that in return we follow God’s law. We do pretty well for a while but eventually rebel. God gets frustrated but ultimately comes back with a new covenant so humanity can try again. Noah and his ark are a case in point.

Many generations after Noah, God chooses Abraham to be the father of God’s people, the nation to be known as Israel. God says to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

This is a second important piece of how we understand stewardship. God blesses us with abundance so that we can bless others out of our abundance. We are blessed to be a blessing. God’s expectation is that we will use some of what God has given us to care for creation, for the church, and for each other.

Centuries later, after God’s people escape from slavery in Egypt, God hands down the law through Moses to the people. Among the law is Leviticus 27:30 in which God commands that we tithe.

A tithe means giving ten percent of what you have back to God. In those days, that could mean ten percent of your livestock or your harvest or of your wealth, depending on what blessings God had given you.

One reason for the tithe was to care for the temple and the priests. When the people arrived in the promised land, each of the twelve tribes received a portion of land except the Levites. The Levites were to be the priests who were responsible for the temple and the community’s spiritual life. Today’s scripture reading Nehemiah comes from near the end of the Hebrew Bible after the Jews have returned to Israel from captivity in Babylon. They rebuild their temple and the city walls and begin again. Part of that process is making a new covenant with God, a new commitment to following God’s laws. In this passage, they are reading aloud their covenant, and we hear what the tithes are to be used for - care of the priests and the temple and help for the poor, widows, and orphans.

So, we get to a third basic principle of giving. The Bible standard is 10% and the money goes toward two things - the temple and those who care for it and people in need.

So, these three understandings of the relationship between God, people, and money - that everything is God's and we are called to care for it and give some of it back to God, that we are blessed to be a blessing, and that our gifts go to support the worship home, the staff, and the needy - these are the basic principles Jesus grew up with.

Jesus then came along to show how to put them into action and to point out where they had been misused. More importantly, Jesus helps us to understand how giving is closely tied to our growth in faith as disciples. Some of what he says can make us feel pretty uncomfortable.

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24)

And, of course, our second scripture reading today which ends “where your treasure is there your heart will be also”. Each of these, but especially the last, points to how Jesus understood giving to be a reflection of our faith. When we give, we make a statement that we value what is of God over our possessions. We value love, peace, compassion, and justice more than the latest iPhone, a bigger retirement account, a new car. Not only do we value what God values, we will put God and God's kin-dom first in how we live and how we give. Giving is how we show our love for God - and our trust in God. By letting go of some of our time or our money rather than holding on to it protectively, we are saying that we trust God will care for us. Finally, we give out of gratitude for everything God has given us. God has created us in God's image. Just as God gives so generously to us, we give back to God generously.

Over the next couple of weeks, as we consider our gifts to the church and prepare for Thanksgiving, I invite you to spend some time considering your blessings. What has God given to you? For what are you grateful? How might you be blessed so you can be a blessing to others? And I invite you to consider the blessing of being part of this church. Today's heart card asks you “What do you love about our church”?

Next week in worship, we will offer our pledges and gifts for 2024 to God during our worship service. Even if you pledge or give online, I hope you'll take a minute to write down your pledge and put it in the offering basket. We will collect all of our pledges together so that as a community, we offer this gift to God. And then we'll have a great community dinner to celebrate the generosity of God, the blessings God has given us, and the blessing of this place in our lives.

Like the people of Israel generations ago, together we travel the journey of faith, together we commit to be stewards of God's creation, and together we support this church community so it will be here for generations to come. Amen.