

“CENTERED LIVING IN AN OFF-CENTERED WORLD:
IV – HOW I THINK ABOUT MONEY AND POSSESSIONS”

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Mark 12:41-44

About two hours northeast from here, on the Jersey shore, lies a town called Ocean Grove. Ocean Grove is one of those towns, like Ocean City NJ that was founded by Methodists in the 1800's. They were formed around “camp meetings,” revivals of a sort. They were “dry” towns – no alcohol was allowed at all within the town, and there was no driving allowed in the town on Sundays.

You would think, wouldn't you, that towns like that would have disappeared by now, but no, Ocean Grove is still thriving. Some of the old rules have changed – there certainly is driving on Sundays, and I'm frankly not sure about the alcohol rules – but the camp meeting is still going strong.

In the middle of Ocean Grove lies “The Great Auditorium,” their worship space – and it is great! It seats nearly 6500 people, and has a phenomenal organ! And from the end of May to the middle of September, Ocean Grove has worship services featuring some of the finest preachers in the world, and some of the greatest musicians as well! Some of us have attended their great Choir Festival which features thousands of singers from choirs all over the area.

All of those things are wonderful, but do you want to know what I think is the most amazing thing about Ocean Grove's worship? Their offering. No kidding! Their offering. And here's why. They must have a hundred ushers, and they're all dressed in blue jackets and white pants. At the appointed time, they take up the offering, but then, that's when the fun begins.

They have this thing called the “Ushers' March,” and the organ starts this really upbeat music and from all corners of that great auditorium the ushers march down the aisles and make their way to the front, and by the time they're all there they stretch all the way across the front holding their offerings up to God. It is quite a spectacle, and then after the Doxology has been sung, the upbeat music starts up again and they march back up the aisles to their seats. It is quite something – it's something people actually come to see – and it probably takes five to seven minutes of the service – just to bring the offering up, so add that to what it takes to collect the offering from over 6000 people – and the offering section of a one hour service ends up being probably 10 minutes long!

Rather than try to be efficient in collecting the offering, I think Ocean Grove has it right. It is a celebration for them – a real celebration! It says where their heart is – giving back to the God who so faithfully has given to them. No matter what else goes on in the service, the offering is a highlight for them. They know the joy that comes from giving!

Now, hang with me here, while I go in a totally different direction. I read a story this week where a woman talked about handing out candy at her house on Halloween (which is something we'll all be facing soon). She said that she went to the store and purchased several bags of the “fun sized” candy bars, and when she got home she dumped them out into a big bowl that she put by the front door. Then here's what she did – see if any of you can identify with this? She dug through the bowl and took out her favorite candy bars and stashed them away for herself.

Maybe out of a sense of guilt, she posted something about it on Facebook and said that she got 65 “likes” from people who identified with her, and multiple comments from those who confessed to doing the same thing.

Now, why did I tell you those two stories? Well, because I think they provide a perfect lens for us to look at how we human beings tend to think about money and possessions. We either look at them as gifts from God, gifts that we can share and use along with him; or we look at them as “let me see what I can take and keep for myself.”

And today's scripture lessons show that pretty clearly. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus is watching it lived out right before his eyes. It's offering time in the temple, and he watches as people of great means come forward to make their offerings with pomp and circumstance, making sure that they're being noticed. And they are being noticed, but perhaps they don't realize that Jesus notices their hearts as well – and he knows that their giving is not a heart thing, it's a head thing.

But then comes this poor widow. He notices her as well. He knows her situation, he knows she's completely vulnerable, he knows she has little to her name, he knows it takes a lot for her to even walk forward to present her offering, it would be so much more comfortable for her to stay in the shadows. But he sees her come forward and give everything she has into the offering. And when he does, he sees her heart, and knows that it's a heart of joy. (You can almost hear the Ocean Grove organ start to play!)

It seems that that poor widow knew something of what the people in this morning's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures knew – that God was with her, that God had always been with her, and would always be with her – and no matter what, it was going to be okay. Did you hear what the people in Deuteronomy said when they made their offering? They remembered, literally, what God had done for

them – how he had been with them through their ancestors, how he delivered them from captivity, how he led them to a land flowing with milk and honey, how he made them into a great people? So, they said, “here we lay down the first fruits of the ground you have given us.”

You see, it was all about God – not about them – and I think that was the case with the poor widow – it was all about God, and not about her. She trusted God, she knew God cared for her, so she gave her all – everything she had – with joy. A bit different from holding back, or giving sparingly, or keeping the best for oneself, huh?

I don’t know about you, but these lessons certainly give me a lot to think about in terms of my own giving. If Jesus were sitting here watching me at the offering, what would he see? If he was watching you, what would he see?

Would he see us giving some to him, but keeping the best for ourselves? Would he see our checkbooks and know that we had calculated how much we could “afford” to give him, versus how much we wanted for ourselves? Or would he see us joyfully giving with grateful and trusting hearts, remembering his love for us and the gifts he has showered upon us?

As people of God and followers of Jesus Christ, we know that all that we have comes from God, and we are merely stewards of those things. God has blessed us and given us the opportunity to then bless others. In a world that invites us to hold tightly onto everything we have, to keep it for ourselves, and to get even more of it, we are people called to do otherwise – to release that tight grip and give out of what has been given to us.

And when we do, friends, joy floods in – it just does. That widow knew joy that those others would never know, because they were so focused on what they had kept for themselves. The people in Deuteronomy knew joy, because they knew that their offerings would enable others to have life, and trust in God as well.

And we too know the joy that comes from giving with our whole hearts. We’ve seen it here in this place. We’ve seen what has happened when we’ve given joyfully to God of the abundance he’s given us.

We’ve seen lives touched and made whole through coming to worship here in this place. We’ve seen how music from the choir has reached into hurting hearts and helped heal them, or dull hearts and helped inspire them.

We’ve watched as people streamed into Sunday School classes and found inspiration and knowledge and friendship.

We've seen our youth go to things like the conference youth rally and come back fired up in their faith, or take part in mission projects and be more inspired than ever.

We've watched the hungry being fed through the Harvest Food Festival, the Community Kitchen, and the rotating shelter.

We've watched children who have no good adult role models in their lives, perk up through our mentoring.

We've seen children who walk into their school nurse's office with holes in their shoes and worn clothing, come out with their heads held high because we were able to give them a new pair of shoes and new clothing.

We've heard from so many people whose joy overflows because, even though they can no longer physically be with us for worship, can now worship with us through the worship videos available on the church website. They feel like they're part of the community again!

And we know that our giving enables others who are homebound or shut-in to stay connected through our visitations and telecare ministries.

I could go on and on. There are people in two communities in Africa who are drinking fresh water today because of wells we paid for – no longer are they forced to drink dirty, disease carrying, infested water.

There are people all over the world who have been hit by disasters whose lives are a little better because we gave to UMCOR – the United Methodist Committee on Relief.

I've just hit the tip of the iceberg – but you get the picture. When we've given with joy and abandon, like that widow woman and the people in Deuteronomy, God has taken our gifts and done marvelous, amazing things.

When we fight the world's fixation on keeping everything for ourselves, when we open our hands and offer our gifts to God with joy, God does amazing things. We have seen it over and over again in this special place.

Next Sunday, you'll have the opportunity to make a financial pledge to Christ through this church for 2017. You should have gotten or will get soon in the mail, a pledge card to fill out. Please spend time this week in prayer about what God would have you give. Do what those people in Deuteronomy did. Remember. Remember your story. Remember what God has done in your life, and is still doing. Remember God's faithfulness, God's gifts to you. And then, ask him to guide you in

what to give for next year. And most of all, do it with joy! Don't let fear or worry make the decision for you, do it with joy!

Let me finish with a little picture of joy. One day, many years ago, a 10 year old boy went into a soda shop to get some ice cream. He climbed up on the stool and asked the waitress how much an ice cream sundae cost. She replied, "50 cents." The boy reached into his pocket, pulled out all his coins, and then asked, "How much is a dish of plain ice cream?" Well, some people were waiting to be seated and the waitress was growing a little impatient and kind of snapped, "35 cents!" The little boy said, "I'll have the plain ice cream."

So the waitress got the ice cream, put it before the little boy, and went off to seat and serve others. The little boy finished his ice cream, paid the cashier, and departed. When the waitress came back to clean up, she began wiping down the counter, and then she saw it – two nickels and five pennies – her tip.

You know what? That boy is going to be okay, because he already knows the joy of giving and sharing, he already knows that it's not all about him. He already knows.

May you and I know that kind of joy in our giving as well. God has richly blessed all of us, and we can be a blessing to others, if we'll give with joy. May it be so!

Amen.