

“GIVING WILLINGLY, REJOICING GREATLY!”

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I Chronicles 29:1-9

Matthew 25:14-20

Well, here we are again at one of my favorite times of year to preach! You might be surprised to hear that because it's not Christmas or Easter. No, it's stewardship season, the time when we make our financial pledges for the coming year. I've told you before and I'll tell you again today – it's one of my favorite times to preach because I get to invite you to experience joy!

There's a church that I read about recently which is located in Los Angeles, where, when the pastor announces that it's time for the offering, the congregation applauds! Actually applauds! So excited are they about giving to the Lord's work!

And I've heard from missionaries to several places, especially in Africa, where the offering is a time of music and dancing, and the people walk or, really, dance their offerings up to the basket on the altar. Their very act of giving reflects joy!

To give is to know joy! This morning's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures shows the reality of that through something that happened in the time of King David. David's son, Solomon, had been called by God to build the temple, and David gave in abundance to make it happen. You heard the litany of things he gave to make that holy place to worship God possible. And you also heard how it brought him joy to do it!

His joy seems to have been contagious because when he asked others to follow his lead and give toward the building of the temple, they did it! As the scripture put it, "They gave willingly, with single mind they offered freely to the Lord." Notice it didn't say that they offered money to pay for the bricks and mortar – rather they offered money to the Lord. Sure, the money went for the materials, but it was all about their love and devotion for, and thankfulness to the Lord for all with which he had blessed them.

They gave willingly and rejoiced greatly! What a perfect way to frame what we're about to do in these two weeks of focusing on stewardship of our gifts. Giving willingly and rejoicing greatly!

Friends, God has gifted all of us in abundance. He's gifted us in so many ways – with unique skills and talents (you heard that extolled in that wonderful

children's book!); with people who love and care for us; with jobs where we can use our gifts and from which we receive income – well, the list goes on and on – we are a blessed people – blessed beyond measure. And, as the Gospel lesson told us rather plainly, because we are so blessed, because much as been given to us, much is expected of us. We're not meant to sit on the things God gives us, hoarding them for ourselves, piling up storehouses of treasure – no, we're meant to give of those things for the sake of the kingdom.

For too many people, how to do that becomes a calculation, and the question for them becomes not, “What can I give to the God who has given so much to me?”, but “What can I afford to give God from what I have left over after I take care of all my needs and wants?” So instead of God being first on our list of giving, God is moved way down the list to, what do I have left to give him?

And friends, that kind of giving hardly produces joy.

King David said to the people, “Give first to God and see the amazing things that will happen.” And I say the same thing to you today. No matter what you decide to give to God in the next year, give it first – before anything else. I told you a long time ago that, before I started giving my offering online, I used offering envelopes like many of you, and my envelope number was 1. Every time I was paid,

the first check I wrote – the very first check I wrote – was my offering check for the church, and in the memo line I wrote my envelope number. So it showed that my check, my offering, #1 was for God.

That's what our giving should be – for God, because of God – and – to help other people know God as well.

Multiple studies have shown that the more people give, the happier they are, and I can personally attest to that. The more I am able to give, the happier I am. Because I know that using the gifts God has given me, sharing from the abundance he's poured into my life, makes a difference – and it brings me, and I daresay, God, joy!

I sure hope that all of you know what a difference your giving has made this year. I hope you rejoice when you see evidence of what you have done here in this place. For you have given willingly and abundantly, and because you have, great things have happened. So this morning, I want to take a few minutes to tell you about a few of them.

Because you gave willingly and abundantly, more and more people drew closer to Christ through spiritual growth opportunities in the church. You helped pay Katie Sparks' salary, and she in turn, organized classes, purchased curriculum, recruited leadership and did so much more. And what that means is that hundreds of people take part now in things like Sunday School, and Disciple Bible Study, and Lenten Lunch and Learn, and short-term studies. And I can tell you from being involved in a number of those things, that lives are changed in them! People come to know Christ in a special way, and they grow as disciples together with others who become very important to them. If you don't believe me, just take a walk around here on a Sunday morning and look at the joy and fellowship in our Sunday School rooms. They are communities of love bound together in mutual love and commitment to Jesus Christ! And you make those classes and groups possible through your giving!

One of the greatest joys of the year for me was this summer watching our church and Wrights AME Church do Vacation Bible School together! Your giving made that possible as well! It was wonderful to see children of many races bond with each other, hold hands together as they skipped from one activity to another, learn from teachers from both churches, and sit together at meals. Friends, in our world that is so divided and still struggling with issues of racism, what a beautiful thing it was to cross that divide and bring our children together in unity! You made that happen through your giving – rejoice greatly over that!

Some of what you gave this year left the church – it went towards what are called “apportionments” – money given to the Annual Conference for ministries beyond the local church. So, for example, you made it possible for our Conference to have its huge Youth Rally in Ocean City, one of the greatest things our youth do all year long! They get together with literally thousands of other youth for no other reason than to praise God and commit to be disciples of Christ! They come back on fire for the Lord!

Another place your apportionment money goes is to Camp Pecometh, where hundreds and hundreds of young people go each summer to learn the stories of Jesus and figure out what it means to be a disciple. Do you know that studies have shown that children who go to church camp when they are young are twice as likely to stay as people of faith as adults than those who do not? Because of your giving, you make Camp Pecometh possible!

Some of the money you give goes to pay bills. Now, I know that doesn’t seem too glamorous, but, as in your own home, it has to be done, because we need electricity, plumbing, heating, air conditioning, and on-going maintenance. But let me tell you some of the things you make possible by paying those kinds of bills that keep this church open. You help us be a place where all kinds of people come to find joy and hope – not just all of us, but so many others as well. For our church is

known as a welcoming place. Scouts have a home here – Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts – a home where they learn the skills to become people of integrity, morality, character and leadership. The Cecil County Choral Society has a home here – where they use the musical gifts God has given them and bring joy to the hundreds and hundreds of people for whom they sing each year. AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and NA (Naranon) have a home here, and oh, what a gift we’re giving by providing them space to meet. People drawn together by common, serious needs know that they can come here and find others with whom to share their journey – and it is good – and you make it possible by giving to keep this church running well and in good condition.

I think I hardly need to tell you about the good you do through your giving to missions and outreach, because it seems like every week we hear the results of something else you’ve done – whether it’s helping to put food on the table of the hungry, or snacks into the dorm rooms of stressed-out college students, or rental assistance to those down on their luck, or lifesaving money to those whose lives have been devastated by natural disasters – oh, the list goes on and on. Not to mention funding teams to go to Kentucky and Costa Rica. So much good was done in both of those places on both of those trips – and so many lives were touched and changed – and not just the people in those places, but the people on our teams. Rejoice, because through your generous giving to missions, you made that happen!

I could go on and on, because your giving has made so many good things happen this year. Like enabling us to have the incredible church staff that we do – people like Sharon and Steve who fill our lives with music; Sandy, who helps form faith in young lives; Ray, who visits so many people each year; Lee, who minds our money; Sylvia and Donna, who keep this beautiful building in tip-top shape; Katie, of whom I spoke earlier, in education; and Kay, our fabulous church secretary, who practically runs the place! Because you give, we have them, and what a blessing they all are!

As I said, I could go on and on, but I'm going to mention just one more thing. Because of you and your giving, new people have come into this church. We received thirty new members this year, and you helped make that happen. Part of the way you did that was through our ever-increasing communication outreach. Your gifts help us reach out into the community through our social media, video ministry, outreach events and radio commercials, among other ways. But you did it in another way as well, and I was reminded of that through a story I read just this week.

It was a very powerful story written by a man named Kent Millard this week. Kent is now a seminary president, but he grew up in a very troubled family. His father was an alcoholic for many, many years and the family struggled because of it.



One day, the father had a “come to Jesus” moment and knew he had to, and wanted to, stop drinking, so he fell to his knees and prayed for God to help him, and he began the walk into sobriety. One of the things he decided to do was to start taking his family to church. Kent says he’ll never forget the day they first walked into the United Methodist Church in their town. He was afraid, because it was a small town and everyone knew his father had battled alcoholism. He didn’t know what would happen when they all walked into that church, but they were welcomed with open arms. And this is what Kent writes about that experience: “I didn’t know much about God or Jesus but I liked the church people because they accepted an alcoholic and his family.” (Interpreter Magazine, Dec. 2017)

I don’t know the history of all those who joined our church this year, but I do know, because I talked with them in the new member classes, that your welcoming of them made a difference in their lives. You made them feel at home. You didn’t ask questions about their background, you didn’t make them feel like outsiders, you welcomed them into this place, and they’ve become part of our family.

My friends, you’ve done some absolutely incredible things this year because of your giving, and I hope you’re rejoicing greatly about it! It is astounding what God can do through us when we give to him first and give to him our best. So many lives are made better because of it, including our own!

I want to finish by telling you something incredibly serious – and it is this: the world needs the church of Jesus Christ now, more than ever! You know that as well as I do. Evil is running rampant. WE seem to spend more time worrying about how to keep people out, than how to include them. Harsh, insensitive, and mean-spirited words are spoken, posted, and tweeted every day. There are wars and rumors of wars around the world. People are dying for lack of food, lack of water, lack of love.

Friends, the world needs the church of Jesus Christ now, more than ever. So we need to do everything we can to keep the church healthy and alive with the spirit of Christ! One of the ways we can do that with our giving. As King David invited those people so long ago, so I invite you today to please, give willingly and rejoice greatly, because God will take what you give and do more with it than you ever thought possible!

Please be in prayer this week about what you'll write on your pledge card, and then, when you bring it with you next week, while you may not dance down the aisle, don't be surprised if there's an extra little spring in your step, because you know, through your giving, you're partnering with God to do great things!

My friends, God has richly blessed you in so many ways – so I invite you to give willingly, and rejoice greatly! May you know the joy of giving!

Amen.