

“FOUR LETTER WORDS OF STEWARDSHIP:
III – KEEP OR GIVE”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Stewardship Sunday

II Corinthians 9:6-15

Mark 12:41-44

Many of you know that for three years I lived in Washington DC. I was a student at Wesley Seminary (where Carlos is studying now), and I lived on the campus in NW Washington all three years of my studies there. I loved every minute of living in Washington, and my friends and I took advantage of every opportunity we had to do things while we were there. We went to concerts and lectures, visited all of the museums whenever we could, since they were mostly all free – we were poor students, after all! I loved being able to take the Metro down to the Library of Congress and do work there. But maybe what I enjoyed most of all was visiting all of the beautiful memorials there.

They are breathtaking – the Jefferson Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the Viet Nam memorial, and so many others. So many have been built since I left there – like the World War II memorial and the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial.

At any rate, on weekends, we would take the Metro down to the mall area and just walk around the memorials. And one of the things I really liked to do was read the inscriptions. Far too many people never take the time to read them. They just look around quickly and move on. But the power of the memorials for me is in the words inscribed on them.

Which brings me to some words on another memorial that I visited one day a number of years ago. It was the Holocaust Memorial in the center of Boston. I was up there visiting my friends Linda and Hugh and we went into the city, and stopped to see that memorial. It's a really interesting memorial – made entirely of a series of glass columns on which are etched quotes of all kinds. To really visit that memorial takes some time, because you need to read those quotes.

We took the time that day, and I read a quote there that I have never forgotten. As a matter of fact, I took out a piece of paper and wrote it down, stuck it in my wallet, and there it stayed for years and years. Here's the quote, written by a person who survived the holocaust, a woman named Ilse.

She wrote: “A childhood friend of mine once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night on a leaf. Imagine a

world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you gave it to your friend.”

I was so moved when I read it, maybe because I was standing there with my best friend. But to think that, in the horrors of that death camp, a child who no doubt was starving, found a raspberry, and then, instead of eating it, gave it – the only thing she had – to her friend. Unbelievable, and so incredibly moving. I’m serious when I say that I remember that exact moment when I read it and how moved I was to this day.

You know what? I think Jesus must have felt that same way when He saw the widow give her offering in the temple – the story we just heard in the Gospel lesson. You have to remember that that widow had virtually nothing to call her own. Widows in that day and time were extremely vulnerable. When their husband died, because women did not work outside of the home, they were left to rely on the kindness of family and friends. The scripture itself says she was poor, so it was obvious to those who looked upon her that she had very little.

And there she was in the offering procession. Many had come before her, and no doubt, some of them were people of means. They made their offerings, and Jesus saw them doing that, and was grateful that they did. But I think He had one of those moments that I had in Boston – a moment when He saw something that touched His very heart – when this woman who had so little gave everything she had – everything.

It was an act of love, and an act of unbelievable trust. She trusted that God was with her, and it would be okay. And she trusted that her gifts would be used for God’s purposes. I think she left there that day a woman, as the scripture says, with a “glad and generous heart.” When she could have kept everything she had for herself, and when people would have understood that, instead, she gave everything she had to God who had first given everything to her.

My friends, like all those people who gave their offering in the temple that day – the ones with means, and the poor widow – each of us has a choice to make with the things we have – to keep or to give. And yes, though it is a financial choice, first and foremost, it is a spiritual choice.

One man has said that giving “is more a matter of spiritual understanding than it is a matter of financial planning.” (Philip Amerson, “Legacy of a Lightweight,” *First Fruits*, p. 104).

Bishop William Willimon agrees with that, and says that our offering is “a test of our worship. Is this service (he writes) only a time to sing a few hymns, think a few lofty thoughts, feel a few warm fuzzies, and go home to a big meal? Or is this a time to put our money where our mouth is?”

He continues: “It’s **not** about how well we are able to listen to the word, or to sing the hymns. It’s about how well we are able to show forth our gladness and

generosity in offering ourselves and our gifts to God.” (William Willimon, “With Glad and Generous Hearts, *First Fruits*, p. 50 & 51).

And to do that my friends, we have to make a choice – to keep or to give.

I read this week a story a man told about how some friends of theirs wanted to go away for a weekend, but needed someone to watch their kids. So this friend asked him if he and his wife could watch them. After checking with his wife, they agreed, and had a most delightful weekend with the three teenagers. He says that at first, “I wondered a little about it, but the day came, and all of a sudden, we again had multiple teenage voices in our home. What a treat they were, what a joyful presence, what a gift! But what if our friends had not had the courage and taken the risk of asking, of giving us the real gift of a chance to give? Then we would have missed a little bit of heaven.” (Robert Hill, “Generosity,” *First Fruits*, p. 67).

When I read that, I thought “that’s me!” I’m the one who, in this place, has the opportunity to ask you to give – to experience a little bit of heaven. I’m so blessed to be able to invite you to know something of what that widow knew in the temple. I’m so blessed to be able to invite you to give and trust that God will do great things with your gifts.

Bishop Robert Schnase in his book that I told you about last week, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, writes, “Giving causes life. Before, our giving may have been arbitrary, perfunctory, haphazard, a little here and there. But when we discover the great difference generosity makes; place it in service to God, and use our resources to relieve suffering, strengthen communities, and restore relationships then we look at giving entirely differently. We look at our giving, and see it as if for the very first time. We discover that something as ordinary as our giving can help lift souls to heaven and change lives for the purposes of Christ. (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, p. 136).

I don’t know about you, but I want to be a part of that! I want to give so that souls can be lifted to heaven, and lives changed. I’ve already seen it so many times and so have all of you.

I’ve seen it right here in the ministries of this church that we make possible by our giving. Over the course of the years I’ve been here, I’ve watched children be moved to give. I see it every summer at Vacation Bible School, but now I’m thinking particularly of two little girls who learned here in this place about giving to Jesus, and who, both in their own little way, raised great amounts of money for missions. One was a long time ago, and one not so long ago. Somehow, their little hearts were convicted by the things happening here in this church, and they did amazing things to raise money for others.

I see the power of giving as well every time I sit down at our staff meetings. I look around the table, and think of the other staff members as well, and give God thanks for the gifted people they are, and the wonderful work they do, because you provide the funds to pay their salaries and fund their ministries.

And let me tell you about something that happened just a couple of weeks ago. Our choir had a picnic, and they invited me to attend. Now, you all know how wonderful our choir is, and how committed they are to worship. What you don't know is how much they love each other, and enjoy each other's company. It was a great time, with food and fellowship, and singing and even dancing! It was, in many ways, a family gathering – a family formed because of the church and their place in it. When you give, you help this family be the best that they can be, to the glory of God.

So in those and a thousand other ways, when you choose to give instead of keep, you help lift souls in this church to heaven and change lives for the purposes of Christ.

But you also touch souls and lives outside of the church – in so many ways as well. I'll never forget the tears that filled the eyes of the woman working behind the desk on the switchboard at Union Hospital last Thanksgiving Day when I handed her the thank you note and gift card from our church. She asked if she could give me a hug and said that nobody had ever done anything like that for them. We touched their lives and made them better that day.

Take part next week in the Rotating Homeless Shelter and you'll see what difference your gifts make. Watch as cold and weary people lay down to rest on clean sheets, and hungry people savor good, home cooked food. Look in their eyes and see how they feel when someone actually talks to them instead of crosses a street to avoid them.

Or watch some of the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts in the groups we sponsor and see the life skills they are acquiring, and lessons of respect and integrity they are learning. Their lives are being touched and changed because you are choosing to give, instead of keep.

Even beyond our community, our gifts make a difference. Today, in the typhoon-ravaged Phillipines, UMCOR (the United Methodist Committee on Relief) is already there providing life-giving help. They're there, because you, and people like you, have given to One Great Hour of Sharing and other special appeals.

And missionaries throughout the world, like the ones we sponsor in Nicaragua and Appalachia and other places, are sharing the love of Jesus Christ in wonderful ways. And they're able to do that, because you have chosen to give, rather than keep.

I don't know about you, but my heart is filled with joy when I realize that all those things can happen because of our gifts. God can do amazing things when we choose to give, rather than keep it all to ourselves.

Adam Hamilton put it so well. He said it this way: "Generosity changes us, filling us with joy and filling our lives with blessings. When we are generous with what we have, we find that unexpected blessings flow back into our lives, catching

us by surprise. Somewhere along the way, as we see our acts of generosity helping others and perhaps even changing the world, we say in wonder and amazement, ‘Wow, look what happened,’ and we find ourselves blessed.” (Adam Hamilton, *Enough*, p. 89).

That happens to me every time I pull into the church parking lot and look up and see the big EUMC and the Wesley Wing. I think “wow, look what happened,” and I’m so glad I was able to be a part of making that happen, along with so many of you.

Friends, I invite you to look around you, and like Adam Hamilton said, “see your acts of generosity and how they have helped others and even helped change the world.” And I invite you to continue on that journey of joy by choosing to give, rather than keep.

So now, as we prepare to sing the hymns, I invite you to bring your financial pledge for next year forward to the altar with joy and thanksgiving, with glad and generous hearts, and lay it before God in prayer! May it be a blessing for you this day and in the year ahead!

Amen.