

“WHAT GIFT CAN WE BRING?”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Thanksgiving Sunday & Stewardship Sunday

II Corinthians 9:6-8

Mark 12:41-44

If you ever need to get your blood pressure pumping a little higher, I have an idea for you! Read the Letters to the Editor in the newspaper! You never know what you're going to find there, but you can usually count on one of them to stir you up or get you riled up! People who take the time to write letters to the editor are usually pretty passionate about something, and that passion comes through in their letters!

These days, you never quite know what you're going to see when you turn to the opinion page. It could be about local politics. It could be about national politics. It could be about taxes. It could be about health care, or immigration, or standing up vs kneeling on the sidelines of football games. Sometimes someone will throw one in there taking on all the things that are going on in our world, and bewailing the state of life these days.

By the way, that's not a new phenomenon. It's been going on for a while. Listen to these words I read this week:

“We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched us and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.”

Boy, that writer sure has a handle of what we're going through today, huh? Well, guess what? Those are the words of President Abraham Lincoln! They are part of his Proclamation for Thanksgiving, written in 1863!

Lincoln was seeing evidence all around of national arrogance, an attitude of “look how good we are” and “look at all the things we've done by ourselves!” How far the country had come from its God-filled and God-centered roots. So he called for a day, just one day, for the country to stop and be grateful for the gifts of God.

Thank goodness we still have Thanksgiving Day! For we live in an even more self-centered and self-satisfied world than did Lincoln! With all the advances in so many fields,

with all the amazing accomplishments of so many brilliant minds, I daresay there are times when thinking about God or especially, giving thanks to God for his many gifts, never enters into peoples' minds.

And our world is so fast-paced, and we can generally get anything we want in an instant – like drive-up food and ATMs for instant money, any bit of information we want in mere seconds by Googling, instant communication through texting and social media – well, you know what it's like. It's so fast paced that life flies by and we stay so busy, we forget a lot – like God – and life becomes all about me.

Abraham Lincoln's call to remember and to be thankful and grateful reminds me of many lines of scripture – some gentle, some not so gentle. Maybe you remember when Job was complaining to God, and God shot back, "Where were you, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth?" And "who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" (Job 38)

Or how about when Jesus told the story of the ten lepers who were healed and only one of them turned back and said "thank you"?

Oh, how easy it is for us to lose perspective on who we are and who God is. It's not all about us, and we are not the be all and end all – God is. But in our busyness, our self-absorption, our self-centeredness, and our pride – we forget that.

A pastor named Rachel Rivers told her congregation one day how she had gotten into that kind of rut herself – of self-centeredness, and self-absorption. She was probably tired like a lot of pastors get, and might have even taken on a bit of that martyr complex we're prone to – nobody works as hard as I do, if I don't do it, it won't get done, and on and on and on.

Well, one day she had to go and run some errands in the city in which she lives. She didn't actually say what city that was, just that it was and is a beautiful, vibrant city. So she set out that day to run three errands at three different spots. Stop one. She can't find a parking spot anywhere. Around and around and around the block she went multiple times, even expanding the area on subsequent circlings, yet never could she find a parking spot. And the more she drove, the more frustrated she got, still finally she thought, "the heck with this, I'll forget it and move on to the next place."

So, off she drove to the next spot, and lo and behold, no parking spots there either – not a one. Even more frustrated now, she gave up errand number two and hit the gas, heading off to errand spot number three. Now, she's steaming and thinking to herself, "What is this city coming to?! You can't even go on a simple errand and find a place to park! This is ridiculous!" She could feel her blood pressure boiling over!

And then, for some unknown reason, something came into her head. She suddenly realized how self-righteous she was being. How entitled she felt that those parking spaces

should have been there for her! And she felt terrible. She started thinking – “Oh, my goodness! I’m alive! It’s a beautiful day! I’m in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. If I need anything materially, I can go to a store and get it.” And in that moment, she let go of the anger and irritation, and embraced gratitude for the gifts she’d been ignoring which were right in her face! And once she made that shift, she said it became easier and easier, because once she started seeing one gift, she’d sense another, and another and another.

When she told her congregation about this experience in a sermon, she ended with these words to them: “Throughout our day, if we find ourselves getting irritated or a bit upset, we can take it upon ourselves as a challenge to find gold in the moment and in the experience.” (On-line, Rev. Rachel Rivers, “The Power of Gratitude”)

I love that phrase “find gold in the moment.” What a great way to become people of gratitude – be attentive to all around you, and then “find gold in the moments of life.” I hope we can do that, and I hope we will do that, not just at Thanksgiving, but each and every day. For God has surrounded us with good things, and we need to give thanks to him for that always.

One of the ways we do that, one of the ways we show gratitude to God, and we’ll do it today, is through our giving. We give because we have first received. We give because we are grateful.

Surely that dear woman in the Gospel lesson was grateful. What else would explain her extravagant gift? She certainly didn’t have much in her life, from all outward appearances. She was alone, she was a widow, and in that day and time, to be a widow was to be vulnerable, and alone, and pitied. Of all people in the synagogue that day, everyone would have understood if she had given but a pittance to the offering, or even nothing at all, yet she stepped up and gave everything she had – while the ones with much (materially, at least) gave in a cautious, measured fashion.

If there was anyone with more joy in their heart than Jesus that day, it was that dear woman. She trusted God. Even though life hadn’t gone the way she hoped, she was alone, after all – still she trusted him and was grateful for his gifts in her life. She could have bemoaned her situation, instead, it appears that she found “gold in the moment” and praised God with her extravagant giving.

I will confess to you that sometimes I let life so carry me away with busyness that I fail to see the beauty with which God has surrounded me. I suspect that some, if not many of you, can identify with that. But then something will happen – perhaps a little child wanders into my office with his cup of water to water my plants, or a piece of music so beautiful that it brings tears to my eyes comes on the radio, or in the midst of the craziness of shopping, a person will stop and hold the day with a smile, or I’ll come around a corner and catch a glimpse of spectacular fall leaves shimmering in the sunshine – and I remember – I find “the gold in the moment.” And I give God thanks for his gifts.

Today, no matter what's going on in your life, may you find gold in this moment of giving your pledge to the Lord. May what you give be a sign to him of your gratefulness for all he has done and will yet do for you. May it be a sign that you trust him to take what you give and make great things happen. And that you trust that no matter how much you give, you will be okay, you will have enough.

In a few moments, you'll have the opportunity to bring your pledge to the altar and give it to God. May this be a moment of sheer joy for you – knowing that you are partnering with God to make a difference in this world.

The words to the hymn we will sing while we do that say it all:

What gift can we bring, what present, what token?
What words can convey it, the joy of this day?
When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing,
What song can we offer in honor and praise?

Then we'll sing of the "gold in the moments" –
Give thanks for the past, for those who had vision,
Who planted and watered that dreams might come true.
Give thanks for the now, for study, for worship,
For mission, that bids us turn prayer into deed.

We'll give and trust God in the future as we sing –
Give thanks for tomorrow, full of surprises,
For knowing whatever tomorrow may bring.
The Word is our promise, always, forever,
We rest in God's keeping and live in God's love.

And finally, as God's grateful and giving people, as we lay down our pledges before him today, we shall sing:

This gift we now bring, this present, this token,
These words can convey it, the joy of this day!
When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing,
This song we now offer in honor and praise!

Friends, come, the rail is open. Come ye faithful, come ye grateful people come! Give to the God who has given so much to you!

Amen.