

November 4, 2012

The National Presbyterian Church

Stuff: Give It All Away?

Luke 8:1-3; Matthew 19:16-26; 2 Corinthians 8:1-8

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In our sermons through the fall we're looking at different questions that people are asking about religion in general and Christianity in particular. The questions we've been addressing may or may not be the questions which are in your heart and mind but I know they're on the hearts and minds of many, many people because of books that have been sold in their thousands, or even millions, answering some of these questions – questions, for example, about God, God's existence, Jesus, the Bible, the importance or the unimportance of the church. In addition, many surveys have been taken, especially among young people, in which they've been asked what are the questions that bother you most about Christian faith or about religion in general? And the questions we are considering are among the ones they are asking.

Today's question has to do with material possessions and with money. And I'm raising it today not just because every single one of us lives in a society which tends to value people in terms of material possessions and money, and not just because countless books written about this subject demonstrate its importance to many, but I want to raise the question because we are in what we call 'stewardship season' in the life of our church: this is the time of year when our church elders are challenging us to think prayerfully about (1) our commitment to God (2) through the church (3) for the ministry of Jesus Christ (4) in the coming year! That's a mouthful! But it's an important mouthful, indicating that God wants to work through us, and wants to work through His church, in the coming year. And it challenges us to ask "what's our part in this?" Our part, of course, may involve time given to God, as well as treasure – but my focus today is on treasure!

It also "just so happens" that even though I set the date to preach this particular sermon many months ago, and in connection with stewardship, other things are also happening in the world around us that make the topic (money and material possessions) particularly pertinent – with the recent hurricane we have neighbors just to the north of us (maybe some of your friends) who have in this last week experienced the loss of every material thing that they had – watching it being swept away in the flood and wind. So some people not far from us are addressing this question, not from a

theoretical or merely theological point of view, but from a point of view of 'grim' reality.

- Perhaps you've been in a situation like that in your life.
- Or perhaps some time in the future we too will be in a situation like that.
- Or maybe that's where we are just now.

So, here we are in this season of the church year, and here we are also facing the realities of everyday life in our society: *and we need to think about what we have, or what we've lost, and what we do with it when we have it?*

The particular way that I want to phrase the question arose for me many years ago – about 40 years ago – when I was at university, and a friend came up to me who knew that I was a Christian, and who thought he knew what Jesus' teaching was on the subject of material possessions and money. He thought it was straightforward, absolutely clear, because he knew the story that we read as our scripture reading – the story of what we call the rich young ruler. He is young, he is clearly rich and if you put the three gospels together you find he's a ruler as well. He is used to exercising power. And he comes up to Jesus and wants to know about eternal life. And Jesus responds to him by saying that *"if you want to know about eternal life, tell me where you are in relationship to the commandments?"* (referring to the Ten Commandments given to God's people through Moses). And so Jesus shares with him some of those commandments and this young man says to Jesus, *"I've kept them."*

And there seems to be an element of pride in this (as if he's saying "you know I'm a pretty good person. I've really done everything that's been requested of me here"), so Jesus doesn't stop: he's clearly not satisfied with that answer. He probes and pushes a little bit more. In fact he pushes and probes a lot more!

He says, *"Okay. Well, have you done all those things? What about selling everything that you have and giving it all away, all of it away to the poor? And then come follow me and you will have riches, you will have treasure in heaven."*

And then you have that remarkable ending to the story where you can almost feel the pain: the man's face falls, he turns around. He cannot do this, and he walks away from Jesus. He walks away.

So my friend knew this story, and he posed his question to me like this. He says,

"You're not a real Christian are you? If you were a real Christian, if you were a true follower of Jesus Christ wouldn't you give it all away as well? I mean look at what Jesus says in this case. Everything you own and all your stuff, isn't that what Jesus wants for you? You can't be a real Christian and not do that! He posed the question to me directly in my face, as if to say, "What are you going to do about this?"

And that's our question for today. It's a question about stuff and faithfulness to Jesus. How do we put these two things together? Whether we have a lot or whether we have a little. How are we to handle it all? Is it wrong to accumulate wealth? Should we feel guilty with what we have? Does God want us to give it all away or take some kind of vow of poverty? My friend's question was 'in my face' and I have to admit that I was taken aback by it. I really didn't know how to answer it at that particular time ... even though of course I was a student and I didn't have much to give away anyway! Perhaps I should have said, "Okay I'll give it all away!" (Just the contents of my room at university and that would have been about it at the time).

But it was a bothersome question to me.

- There was no doubt in my mind that this story with Jesus and the young man happened. And Jesus really did challenge him to give it all away.
- And it bothered me as well because I also knew that when Jesus entered his public ministry, teaching and preaching, that he left his carpenter's shop in Nazareth behind. He in a sense "gave it all away" in order to become a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- And it was a question that bothered me because I also knew that Jesus said, "Follow me!" That is, become like me.
- And, more than that, I knew that in the early church, at least in the first couple of years of its existence in the city of Jerusalem, the Christians lived a sort of communal life. Look at Acts of the Apostles (1-6) and you will see this going on there.
- And it bothered me as well because some of the great saints that we lift up as those we are called to emulate were indeed people who gave it all away for Jesus.

This is not only stewardship season, this is also All Saints Sunday, a day in which we're remembering those who have left us, and have left behind a legacy, a model of life to follow. And we can think of those who have been a part of our church as we shall be doing later in the service today but we think of others, part of the greater church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- ❖ So we go back to the 1200s and we think of Saint Francis of Assisi who left a wealthy family behind in order for him to follow Jesus more faithfully in his life.
- ❖ Or think of Samuel Logan Brengle in the early 1900s who became one of the first great leaders of the Salvation Army in the United States. The Salvation Army had been established in London by General William Booth at the end of the 1800s. And Samuel Logan Brengle, who had had a great education in Indiana and then Boston, said "I'm going to throw it all away. I'm going to London to care for the poor

with William Booth.” And people thought he was foolish to ‘throw it all away’ as he did this. But this was his choice. In time, though, he would return to the United States and would become one of its great early leaders of the Army here.

- ❖ Or we think of Mother Teresa and her Sisters of Charity serving the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, and now around the world. She became like them, going down to their level so that she could serve them more effectively.

So the question is haunting on all kinds of levels. *If I were a real Christian, if I were a first class Christian, wouldn't I give it all away too?* Stuff – let go of it? Let the wind take it away, the flood take it away? And shouldn't I be happy somehow about that?

Well the whole idea to me seems to be pretty powerful and plausible, though I must admit I didn't do much about it at the time. And historically it may seem to be compelling. And even to raise doubts about whether or not Jesus wants us to do that seems almost to be self-serving – as if we're trying to wiggle out of what Jesus says explicitly and clearly . . . *until, until we read other stories in the pages of scripture.* Until we take the story that we have read and place it side by side with other stories in the greater ministry of Jesus and in the greater story that the Bible shares with us, the greater story of the church of Jesus Christ, discovering that

- *most of the Saints* who have ever lived in fact haven't given it all away.
- There are other stories in the pages of scripture where Jesus doesn't lay on other people what he lays on this particular rich young person.

There are a couple of other stories in particular which have impacted me. The first is a story that we often share with children but it's for adults as well. It's the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19, a man who wants to see Jesus when Jesus is passing through Zacchaeus' home town of Jericho. He's short, so he climbs a tree to see Jesus above the crowd. This man has made a lot of money and he has done it by cheating other people. He is a tax collector, a Jewish tax collector collecting taxes from his own people but doing it on behalf of the Romans who have conquered the land. They told their tax collectors that they wanted them to collect a certain amount of money, but that they could collect it however they wanted -- skimming from the top whatever they wanted so long as they delivered what was asked. And Zacchaeus does that. He beats and he cheats up on other people until they give him everything he wants and then a lot more. And he becomes wealthy by cheating others.

Well, as Jesus enters Jericho he notices Zacchaeus and tells him that he actually wants to go to his house, which he does. He spends time with Zacchaeus, and they emerge from the house and when they come out, Zacchaeus makes a proclamation, a statement to the people outside. He says he's going to return

four-fold to people everything he's obtained by cheating. Make restitution four fold. And then he says "As for the rest, I will give half to the poor." I will give half to the poor! This is pretty significant – half of it away.

But what's important to notice is that Jesus doesn't turn on him and say, "Half? that's not enough! You need to give it all away." Jesus doesn't do that. Indeed he makes a wonderful statement. When he sees what Zacchaeus does with his money he says "Today salvation has come to this house." It's a beautiful statement . . . would that God would say that to you and me: "Today salvation has come to this house." And he says this because he could see that Zacchaeus has been liberated from "the need to get," the need for his own self esteem to be based on what he has. Somehow, through his conversation with Jesus, Zacchaeus has found a freedom to be generous. "Today salvation has come to this house," says Jesus, not because he gave a lot, but because Jesus can see that something has changed in his heart and life which shows that there is a radical difference between the old Zacchaeus and the new Zacchaeus.

So that's one story that I keep in mind and balance alongside the story of the rich young ruler. Sacrificial giving, yes, but not giving all of it away. And there's another story, a second story, that answers for me a question which bothered me when I was younger: *So, if Jesus gives everything away how does Jesus survive with his disciples as he preaches and teaches? What does he depend on to eat and live?* The answer is found in this little vignette in Luke's gospel, in the 8th chapter. It tells the story very briefly of the fact that there were some women (In this case it's very important that it's not men, but women, who generally had little control of economic resources in the ancient world.)... there were some women who traveled with the crowd and Jesus and the disciples, and "took care of them out of their means." Among them,

Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chusa, Herod's steward ('steward' is probably a very prestigious position, possibly in charge of the king's properties; indeed it might well have been dangerous for this woman to support Jesus. Herod after all looked on all kinds of people as a threat to his power and here she is using money gained from his court to support Jesus in his ministry); and Suzanna (we know nothing else about Suzanna). And many others, many others who provided for Jesus out of their means.

In Greek the word "provide" is in what we call the imperfect tense, which means it's continuous ... they kept on providing for Jesus out of their means ... which means they didn't let it all go at once. They held onto it and they distributed it over time in order to support the ministry of Jesus, to make sure that it was sustained, that it survived, and that it thrived and flourished over the long haul.

And that's far and away the pattern we see most clearly in the pages of scripture when it comes to wealth. Not only in Jesus' ministry but throughout the whole of the book, the whole of the Bible:

- We've been given what we have.
- We've been given it by God.
- What we have, we have not only so that we can take care of ourselves and our families. [The apostle Paul writes to a minister in the early church, Timothy (1 Timothy 5:8), asking him to teach his congregation that "If you don't take care of your family you are worse than unbelievers". This is a responsibility for us as Christians to take care of our families – a God-given responsibility]
- We've been given what we have not only to do that, but so that *we can join with Jesus in his ongoing ministry* – so that we can support and sustain and expand God's work in the world through the church, through Jesus Christ living and active through us by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Sometimes this may indeed mean that we've got to let it all go at once.

It's the big move and maybe God is calling some of you to do that – to make the big move. Some people experience this most clearly when they have to leave a job and God calls them to take another job and they have no clue in the meantime how they are going to be provided for. And there are some I know who have made that decision.

But more often than not, the call is not to let it go all at once, *but to let it go step by step*, piece by piece, systematically, thoughtfully and prayerfully until at the end of our lives (we can't take it with us, can we?!) We've let it all go for the glory of God, for the work of God, for the building up of His kingdom here on Earth systematically over the long haul. And *through that kind of systematic giving our lives, like Zacchaeus' life, are changed and transformed and we actually become different people*: we become people who, in the very center of our being, are givers, are generous. Not that we set out to be generous but that we have developed long term practices in our lives which change us, and turn us into the people God wants us to be.

After all, on your tombstone what do you want written there more than anything else? Thinking of my own tombstone: "*David had a lot? Made a lot? Got a lot?*" OR "*David gave a lot? David was a giver.*"

Later in the service we'll be reading names of those who have been a part of our church and have gone to glory this past year. As we think of many of them if you know them, I think many of them could be described as givers. Isn't that what we want others to think of us when our day comes? – "*This person was a lover and a giver; generous, joyful for the cause of God and the blessing of many human beings.*"

This past week I picked up a book that has been sitting on my shelf for many years now. It's called "*The Joy of Giving – The Nature of Spiritual Giving.*" It's by Ben Gill, the founder of RSI, a Christian fund raising organization that helps churches raise money primarily for building projects. He could describe himself

as a fund raiser and in one place in the book he does. But he says he'd rather be described as "*a person who teaches others how to give.*" He begins the book like this:

My life has been spent helping people *learn the gift of giving*. After 25 years in this pursuit I've come now to tell you that one fact has become increasingly clear. ***The happiest people on Earth are the people who learn the joy of giving.*** I say that after having seen it experienced by thousands of people in thousands of ways.

[DR: Some of those he's seen have been very wealthy.] I heard it in the voice of a businessman in Atlanta who had made a commitment to give a million dollars to help build a new sanctuary for his church. He later told me that nothing he had ever done in his life had meant as much to him as that decision to stretch himself in the giving process.

[Some of those he'd seen this in were poor.] I saw it in the face of an elderly woman in Dallas who had just decided to take a Saturday job in order to be able to give five dollars per week to the building program of her church. The tremendous joy of that decision was evident in her eyes as she told of it to others.

[And he saw it as well and learned it from those who were struggling in the middle, and especially from his mother.] Over the years I've come to appreciate more and more the model of generosity set for me by my mother. My father passed away when I was less than a year old and my mother with two young sons set out to make a life for us. She tilled the soil of an Arkansas farm to scratch out a living. When I became ill with asthma she moved us to New Mexico and worked for the Atomic Laboratory at Los Alamos. Through all of this she taught us to give. We went to church and we were expected to put our nickel or dime in the offering envelope. But the lessons also carried over into the world around us. No one in need was ever turned away from our door. Giving was a way of life in the Gill household. I thank her for setting that example in the joy of giving.

And that's a theme that he follows through in the rest of the book. He says the happiest people on earth are the people who've learned the joy of giving.

- The happiest people on earth are the people who believe that all that we have comes from God, that God really is a provider. Whether we have much or whether we have little God is a provider.
- People who believe that all that we have actually belongs to God. It's not ours anyway. We are a pass through account and we've been called to manage it wisely as it passes through our lives and on to someone or something else in the name of God. We are stewards.
- People who believe that God calls us, remarkably, to share in the privilege of carrying out Jesus' work here on earth. We are His hands and feet. We are His body as we shall say when we come to the Communion table. We are His body on earth. He in a sense, in humility, depends on us to carry out His ministry on earth. And He says, "I want you to share in this

through what you give with your body and with your resources, with your stuff and with your money.”

For some of us this may mean we’ve got to give it all. Everything is going to change in our lives.

But for most of us it means that we need to do the math systematically. We need to know how God has blessed us. We have to count our blessings and to share them with others on a systematic ongoing basis. The principle in the pages of scripture is what we call a tithe – one tenth. Some are there; some need to go higher. Some are not there; they too need to go higher. Wherever we are we need to take what we have and offer it to God and say, *“Lord, you’re in control of this, and of me. What is it you want me to do?”* I think, ultimately, that’s what that rich young man couldn’t say or do. It wasn’t just a matter of giving it all away. It was a matter of the fact that he really did believe that he owned it: it was his and he couldn’t open his life to God as Jesus wanted him to do.

We’re all in a different place. I believe the Apostle Paul’s words, though, speak to all of us. He writes to the Corinthians, *“Do as you’ve made up your mind. Not under compulsion but willingly. For God loves a cheerful giver”* (2 Cor. 9:7). God is looking for the person who not only gives cheerfully but for the person who finds cheer, who finds joy in the process and in the privilege of giving.

As I said before, eventually all of us, well, we’ll all have to give it all away. The question is: What are we going to do in the meantime, between now and then, whether that end comes quickly or not, in order to be faithful followers and friends of Jesus?

My friend challenged me. He challenged me in a powerful way. Indeed it was not long after that that I came to this country and I met for the first time adults in a church that I joined who gave with incredible generosity. And this generosity was the basis of my support throughout seminary. I met them and I saw in their lives the joy of giving and I was blessed by it, and decided that where I could, I would join with them. What Jesus wants from us is all of us, there’s no question about that. But more than that He wants us to give Him the permission to be in charge of *who we are and what we have* so that He can conduct His ministry through us, flowing through us, into the lives of others. And in so doing find more joy and peace and fulfillment than we could ever begin to imagine. The cattle on a thousand hills are his, and so too are you and me.

Let’s bow before God in prayer. Holy God, lover of our souls and of our lives in their spiritual aspects and their physical aspects and every part of it for you are the creator of stuff, the giver of stuff, thank you for loving us in Jesus Christ. Not just spiritually but with your body and your blood touching the material world, blessing us as you long to do. Amen.

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