

17 November 2024

Better Reasons to Give
Worship: Bringing Something to the Feast
Deuteronomy 16:16-17

In ancient Israel, where there was only one recognized worship center in the whole country, people couldn't go every week. So the law dictated how often, when, and how the people of Israel were to gather for worship. We read from those instructions: Deuteronomy 16, verses 16 and 17:

¹⁶ Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed; ¹⁷all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you.

Sometimes I talk to myself. That's perfectly normal, right? Very occasionally, I argue with myself. When I do, the argument is generally between Gerald, who is the official and responsible person, and Jerry. Such an argument might go something like this:

Gerald: Um, Jerry, it's November. It's time to think about a stewardship emphasis in our preaching.

Jerry: Oh, no. Already? It feels like it was just last year! I don't want to! I don't have anything to say!

Gerald: Well, there's plenty of stuff about giving in the Bible. Remember the Bible? Where it talks about tithing in the law, for instance!

Jerry: Yuck! You know I hate that. Yes, tithing is in the Torah. So is the law against wearing mixed-weave fabrics and the law against eating bacon. How come we Christians love to talk about being set free from the law, but then make an exception for the tithe? I can't do that.

Gerald: Get a grip and stop whining, Jerry. Remember that giving to the church is what makes it possible for you to be a pastor!

Jerry: There, see? And that's what everyone else is going to think! Well, of course he wants us to give. His salary package is a third of the church's budget!

Gerald: Okay, okay, so maybe don't talk about yourself. But the church is more than you. If nobody gave, the church would go under.

Jerry: Would it? Or would it just evolve and embrace a new model of church that isn't dependent on expensive staff and a costly building to maintain? We've talked about this before, Gerald, remember? The current model isn't working like it used to.

Gerald: I get that. And you're right. But in the meantime, this is the model we have, and because we have staff and a building we are able to do things like offer a respite program for families dealing with dementia, host IM Church for people who are left out of traditional worship, gather weekly for worship and support and ministry to others. Are you saying we should drop all that?

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The problem with arguing with yourself is that it's really hard to win. But some form of this conversation goes on in my head every year, and both Gerald and Jerry are right. Jerry's right that the church *is* changing, and needs to. During the boom years of the 1950s, when everything went right for institutional churches, we developed a posh, very expensive model of doing church: highly educated, well paid clergy leading large, growing congregations from massive buildings with great big, pointy spires. But now the steady advance of secularization has caught up with us, and those massive buildings are half full, and maintaining all that expensive infrastructure is a breaking American church. And yet Gerald is right, too. This is the church we have, and it's not useless. Lake Street may be a dinosaur, but we're an active dinosaur. Our environment has changed, but we continue to live out our purpose and to minister to the community in ways that no one else is doing. If this church disappeared, it would leave a huge hole in the life of Eau Claire. This church is worth supporting, because we make a difference.

In this new church world, I see myself with two different roles. First, to hold things together during a time when churches are struggling, to keep our eyes on service to others rather than merely survival. And second, to raise up disciples of Christ who will understand the purpose of the church beyond the institutional trappings and who will continue following Christ whatever the next generation brings. The church we're used to won't be around forever, but there will always be a church. Now is when we are raising up the people who will lead that church, whatever it looks like. And it is with that purpose in mind that I approach this year's stewardship series, because as Gerald irritatingly reminded me, the Bible does say a lot about giving, and not all of it is about supporting institutions. More of it has to do with our growth as disciples of Christ. Generosity is an essential part of that growth.

Now, on one level this should be obvious. Jesus' most distinctive teachings are all about caring for the downtrodden, loving our neighbors, and being servants to others. In other words, "don't be selfish" is basic, entry-level Christian discipleship. How do we practice not being selfish? By giving. And we can get more specific than that. There is a designated time for giving: giving is a part of worship. Look back at our brief reading from Deuteronomy 16. The Israelites are summoned to the central place of worship at least three times a year, at key festivals, and when they come, they *are not to come empty-handed*.

We should pay attention to that phrase, because it occurs over and over again in the Torah. When we worship, we are supposed to bring something to the experience. Worship is not to be a spectator event. What we bring may not be just money. It should include our time, our attention, our participation. It should include our caring for each other while we are together: welcoming the stranger, comforting the grieving, rejoicing with those who rejoice. All these are valuable gifts we bring when we gather. But in a society like ours, which measures value primarily in dollar signs, our giving should include that, too. We are not summoned to worship to see a show, hear an interesting talk, listen to music. We are called to experience God through each other, and that will not happen unless we are invested in the process.

In 2 Samuel we read where King David chooses a site in Jerusalem on which to build an altar to God, to thank God for deliverance from a plague. That site is owned by a non-Israelite who lives in Jerusalem, Araunah the Jebusite, so David goes to Araunah and asks if he can buy it from him. Araunah says, "Oh, you don't have to buy anything, my lord. I'll give that land to you, as well as the materials for building the altar. I'll even give you the animals for the sacrifice." David replies, "No, I will pay you. I will not offer a sacrifice to God that costs me nothing." In the words of Deuteronomy, David refuses to come before God empty-handed. Worship is a

mutual experience: we give of ourselves, and God gives himself to us. It's not a transaction; I'm not saying that. I'm only saying that if we bring nothing to worship, if we expect to receive only, we will leave disappointed.

So, how much do we give? Gerald mentioned the tithe, ten-percent of one's income, which of course he would, the stick. But look back at Deuteronomy. What did it say? *All shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you.* There's none of that rigid ten-percent business here. We are to give as we are able, and in a way that reflects how God has already blessed us. And, again, this is more than money. If God has blessed you with talents and skills, give of them to serve others. I think of our musicians. I think of Per Forsberg with his audio-visual expertise, Jill Weisenbeck with her spreadsheets, Glenn Bryson and Brad Smith and Randy Espie with their ability to fix whatever's broken. If God – or circumstances – has given you time, use that. I think of our volunteers at the Community Table or Friends at the Lake or the crew that puts together the newsletter over snacks every month (Sorry about the crumbs in the envelopes). And if God has blessed you with financial security, then give of that blessing as well. The point is not what sort of gift you bring or how much it is compared to what others have given, or how it measures up to a fixed percentile standard; the point is that we are not spectators at church, we are a part of all that the church is, and we must not come before the Lord empty-handed.

Over the past forty or so years we've fallen into some unhelpful habits in the American church. Faced with numerical decline, we have poured our energy into planting suburban mega-churches, thinking that was our best hope of holding back the demographic tide. That's not been all bad. Those churches have touched thousands of lives, but in some ways they have backfired. In very large churches, it is easy for worship to become a show with professional musicians before a large audience, and it is easy for church attenders and members to enjoy the show, maybe dropping some spare cash in an offering envelope – nothing that would involve any sacrifice – and then go home. But worship that costs us nothing is thin, watery worship.

So one reason that we give is because it is a necessary part of our worship and service to God. We cannot grow in faith as spectators or hangers-on. Whatever God has blessed us with, that we bring joyfully back to God.