

1 Chronicles 29:13-17, 20-22

“The JOY of Giving”

November 13, 2011 Maple Grove UMC

Two summers ago my church hosted a visiting pastor from Liberia, in West Africa--Rev. Robert Sieh. For a couple of months Pastor Sieh stayed in our homes, preached and taught in our church, and traveled around raising funds for missions back home in Liberia. Here he is:



He's all of 5'3" on a tall day, but his spirit is huge, his laugh is infectious, and his faith in Christ is deep and unshakable. We had a great time getting to know him, learning some Liberian songs, and finding out what life is like in his church in Monrovia.

What I don't understand, Pastor Sieh told me one time, is why in your church the offering is so sad. The rest of the time your choir sings so well, the preaching is great (hey, *he* said it), the people love to sing the hymns.

And then comes the offering . . . People look down at their shoes. Kids get bored and squirm around. Women rummage around in their purses, men check football scores on their phones when they think no one's looking. Even the music slows down. And your ushers, he said, why don't they ever smile? They look like pall bearers. And then there's you.

"Me?"

Your prayer sounds like you read it out of a book, not like you mean it. And you wonder why people in your church aren't excited about giving?

"Well," I said, "I, uh, um . . ."

We do it different in Africa, he said. In Liberia, the offering is the high point of our worship. We are so glad we've made it through another week and we are happy we have something to give to God, that the offering is a celebration.

"So, how do you do the offering?"

We *dance*, he said. And he showed me a video of one of their worship services. Now, the video we're about to see isn't from Pastor Sieh's church—the quality wasn't very good. This one, which I downloaded from Youtube is actually from Chad in north central Africa, but it's about the same. Let's look:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_fO8hQECXI

It is a little different, isn't it? They don't pass offering plates; the people want to bring their offerings to the front of the church. And they don't walk up slowly, as though it's physically painful to part with their money; rather they dance up the aisle and shout 'Alleluia!'

Now Maple Grove's offering isn't always somber. In just the past few weeks we've heard lovely solos by Patty Chandler and Jennifer Larson. And I'm not actually proposing we dance our offerings up the aisle—heaven knows I don't want anyone to call the district superintendent . . . or break a hip. And I'm not sure that shouting "Alleluia!" is the right cultural expression for this congregation. But here's the take-away: the offering is not a pause in the middle of worship to stop and pay the bills. The offering is the high point of worship, our opportunity to give thanks to God, our joyful response for all that God has done for us. A somber offering may get part of it right—it may be faithful and generous—but it misses one key thing—JOY, the heartfelt, body-shaking JOY of giving.

In 1 Chronicles 29 King David is dedicating the offerings the people brought for the Temple in Jerusalem. People gave the equivalent of 150 tons of gold and even more silver, bronze, iron and gems. They brought it

all and put it in the Lord's treasury. And then, it says, they looked down at their shoes. No. And then they listened to somber music and the pastor prayed a boring prayer. No. Here's what verse 9 actually says: And then, it says, "the people rejoiced because these gifts had been given willingly. And King David also greatly rejoiced." It's the JOY of giving.

And here's how that story ends. It says, "They ate and drank before the Lord on that day with great joy." I think that's how the Bible says "they had a great big party." It's the JOY of giving.

God intends giving to be one of the JOYS of our lives, but there are many joy-killers. One thing that kills the joy of giving is a lack of gratitude. You know what I mean. You take someone for dinner and a movie, and instead of saying thanks, they complain because they didn't get popcorn. And your heart burns a little. Oh, it's not a Christian feeling. You're not proud of it. But it's there. A lack of gratitude kills the JOY of giving.

And I am so guilty of this. Maple Grove has 90% to 95% of the money we need to pay our bills. And several weeks ago I talked to you about the missing 5% or 10% and gave you my little fundraising speech. And that's important, but it shouldn't come first. Here's what I should have

said first: Thank you, Maple Grove. Thanks for the 95%. It's good and generous of you. Thank you. A lack of gratitude kills the JOY of giving.

And few things kill the joy of giving faster than comparing your gift to others. If you compare what you give with those you suspect give less than you, it leaves you feeling like this: "Why should I scrimp and sacrifice on my little income, when so-and-so over there with all that money probably doesn't give as much as I do?" There's no joy in that! But why should you let someone else's lack of generosity take the JOY out of your giving? I'm not responsible for what anyone else gives. All I can do is give what I can and dance it up the aisle.

But even more people, I think, compare the other way. Every year when financial pledge cards go out, people come to me and apologize. They say, "I'm so sorry I can't give more." Or "Pastor, I feel guilty that I can't give as much as I did last year." But you know, circumstances change. People retire or go to nursing homes. So many people have lost jobs or had hours reduced. I understand the desire to give more. But I want to encourage you not to feel sad about what you *can't* give, but to have JOY about what you *can* give.

As one teacher has put it, never allow anyone to cheapen your gift.ⁱ Jesus never cheapened anyone's gift, no matter its size. When he wanted to feed 5000 hungry people, a little boy gave five loaves and two fish. There were people there who complained, "What is that among so many people?" But Jesus took the boy's gift and fed the whole crowd. When a poor widow put two pennies in the offering, nobody thought it amounted to much compared to the rich people's offerings, but Jesus said she'd given more than all the rest.

None of this is meant as an excuse to give less than you're able. But never cheapen your gift. Nothing can rob you of the joy of giving as quickly as comparing your gift with what others give or with what you used to give. Give the best you can and bring it with JOY.

There is such joy in giving. When I was in seminary my dear old car—the first car I ever owned—gave up the ghost. The radiator boiled over, smoke poured from under the hood, and it never started again. What was I going to do? You can't get to work and school and make hospital calls in Atlanta without a car. But I didn't have any money, and I'd already borrowed more than I cared to think about. What was a poor theology

student to do? Naturally, I called my parents back in Kansas and told them the whole sad story.

The next day they called back. They told me they'd bought a used car for me, and that my mom would drive it to me from Kansas. I protested. I knew my parents didn't have that kind of money—my dad was a retired custodian and my mom had mostly stayed home with us kids. Besides, they hadn't bought a car for any of their other kids. And I was, after all, 24 years old—you're supposed to be grown up by then, aren't you? But by then they'd already bought it—a '78 Caprice, a kind of copper color, cloth seats. And the next week my mom arrived from Kansas.

And I'll tell you what—I'm not sure my dad was ever prouder of anything in his life than he was of giving his son a car. Every time I talked to them, he'd ask, "How's that car, son?" And when I'd drive it home for holidays, he'd be out in the garage tinkering with it. But it wasn't until I had kids of my own that I understood. Gifts to your kids don't feel like sacrifices—no solemn music needed. If you can give something good to your kids, it is a thing of JOY. I wonder . . . can we bring our offerings to God with just a touch of that emotion? If you can give something good to God, should it not make glad your heart?

One more story. Last month Bill Croy invited us to walk and contribute to the Walk to Defeat ALS. You might remember Bill first set a goal of \$5000. I called Bill a few days ago to see what the final total was. Have you heard? It's over \$27,000! Now that's not all from Maple Grove people—it's from family and friends and folks from all of Bill's churches. Still, when Bill told me \$27,000 I was stunned. I thought about all the people who had given it and all the research it will make possible. And I just sat down and cried. I was simply overwhelmed at the size of the offering. And I wept great tears of joy over being part of such a generous group of people.

And here's the thing: as I watched you all wearing your Bill's Backers shirts and talking about your enthusiasm for the event--\$27,000 lighter in your wallets--I saw not one sad face. I heard no solemn music, and no one looked down at their feet. What I heard were people shouting 'Alleluia' in their spirits and what I saw were people dancing in their hearts, glad for an opportunity to give for a brother in Christ. What I witnessed was the JOY of giving, and I will not soon forget it.

Now, in just few moments we're going to invite you to bring your commitment card forward and place it in the basket. I'm going to ask the

ushers to go and get the children so they can be part of the parade. No, I'm not going to ask you to dance up the aisle this morning or shout 'Alleluia' (though you can if you want to). What I am going to ask you to do is to sing with gusto the old hymns printed in your bulletin and after you put your card in the basket to ring the bell with gladness. And if you've already sent in your card, or if you left it at home on the table and are going to bring it next week, come ring the bell—express the JOY of giving. If you can't pledge this year but are going to give anyway—come ring the bell of gladness. And if you're here for the very first time and have no idea what's going on, come ring the bell anyway. Let forever ring in your heart the JOY of giving.

ⁱ William D. Watley, *Bring the Full Tith: Sermons on the Grace of Giving*, 59-60.