

Joyful giving

For three Sundays we have been talking about one of the most awkward church topics — stewardship, which is only topped by what color to choose for the pew cushions. We have studied Old Testament texts telling the Israelites to tithe, give their best to God and give eagerly to build the tabernacle.



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Today we will consider how our giving can create joy within us as well as in others. No, this is not a gimmick. It's a lesson on freedom and fulfillment.

There is a strong correlation between the Old and New Testaments on this subject. As background, I want you to read Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 and observe how a man trusts his money to three of his servants and how they react.

The first two servants invest the money wisely and make a profit. The third servant sees his master as demanding so he buries the money in a hole where it is safe but unproductive.

When the master comes home and asks for an accounting the first two servants are happy to show what they have done. The master celebrates with them and gives them more to manage. The third servant digs up his money and takes pride in it being safe because he knows how demanding his master can be!

There is a whole story here about hoarding and never getting beyond selfishness. But that third servant is rebuked, the money taken from him, and he is "cast into outer darkness!" Don't miss the master's telling words to the first two servants: "Enter into the joy of your master." There is a message here about joyful giving!

Hold that thought as you read our Deuteronomy text about giving that results in a celebration. We Baptists know a lot about a tithe of 10 percent but I cannot remember any Baptist church hosting a stewardship dinner party that includes "cattle, sheep, wine, beer, or whatever else you might like" (v. 26).

There are many different tithes in the Old Testament, but today's text

describes an annual tithe, one tenth of their harvest or income given to God. This is a very practical offering that supported the priests and Levites as well as operating expenses for the tabernacle.

Unlike the other tribes of Israel, who were assigned income-producing lands, the priests and Levites were dependent on the gifts of the people (v. 27). We will leave any scholarly debate about this tithe being distinctive or a rephrasing of another text concerning a tithe.

The tithes were to be taken at the specified time annually for a celebration banquet for everyone. We know about "bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse," but nobody seems to remember the "party" part! This celebration was to be a beautiful reminder to all God's people that he is faithful and generous to them all the year.

This tithing celebration contrasted with the pagan world's practice of making sacrifices to their gods when they needed something. The children of Israel were celebrating God's blessings from Abraham, to Moses, to their present. Note there is a practical concern for people who live too far from the place of worship to transport animals and crops. They may sell their agricultural products then use the proceeds to purchase equivalent items for sacrifice when they arrive at the place of worship. The point is that all are included, no matter how much or how little they can give.

Israel is learning what it means to be God's covenant people, bound together by God's love and promises, celebrating God's goodness and worshiping as one. The combination of joy and generosity should result in a party. The people have worked hard. Some have prospered, some have suffered, but the connection is a relationship built on God's love and the resultant joy.

A big part of this celebration is the inclusion of all, "Levites who have the designated inheritance like you do, along with the immigrants, orphans, and widows who live in your cities, will come and feast until they are full" (v. 29).

This text should be printed in our current newspapers and quoted at

Formations

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 14:22-29

political rallies! Such generosity and care for the disenfranchised of society has a powerful rationale. "Do this so that the Lord your God might bless you in everything you do" (v. 29).

God is both generous and practical. Jesus' parable of the talents is a very practical story, but the subtle twist of celebration alerts us to a deeper meaning. Giving is only financial management if all we are doing is supporting a budget or fulfilling an obligation.

In the biblical texts God is ever seeking a relationship with people, offering a better way to live, modeling what it means to love and showing the possibilities of joy. Worshiping and serving God should be joyful as this passage shows. But we must not forget the kind of joy God offers is marked by compassion and sharing.

I have known people with significant resources who gave generously to programs and ministries that help people break free from the shackles of poverty and tragedy. I have watched people of modest means give generous gifts of their time and special abilities to change lives, rescue children from violence and offer a shut-in friendship and hope. Each of them experienced joy.

Remember that most famous memory verse we all learned as children in Sunday School: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). When someone discovers that verse, it's party time.

When you give out of your life and resources, making the love of God real for others, it's party time. When you get beyond giving as a duty or religious exercise, and discover the joy of joining God in making a difference, it's party time. May the love of God open your mind, fashion your heart and help you discover the joy of giving.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.