

“Loving Is Giving”

February 19, 2017

Loving Large series – President’s Day and Noisy Offering

We were visiting my parents this past week, and we stopped at the local Meijer. Ana came out of the restroom and said, “Mom, you have to look in the bathroom!” I was a little hesitant at first, but she assured me it wasn’t anything bad. On the changing table, there was a Ziploc bag with new diapers and a note that read something like: “This is from a mom who found herself without a fresh diaper when she needed it. Take what you need!”

It was a great example of encouragement, help, and giving as I thought about today’s Scripture. These are some of Jesus’ most quoted words about money and faith - and the connection between the two. And the challenge is as front-and-center for us as it ever was: how do our lives show who’s in charge?

If someone looked at your personal budget, checkbook, bank statement, or credit card bill, what would they think about your priorities? What would it say about what you value? I don’t mean to start off the gate with that big question, but that connection between faith and finances is vital.

There was a time when my sister complained to me that all her pastor ever talked about was money. She said that it seemed like the focus was always on giving - giving more, giving consistently. And she was a little put off by it. I don’t think she’s alone. I’ve had the discussion with a lot of people.

But it’s hard not to talk about giving and money when it’s what Jesus talked about a lot! If the One we seek to follow talks about giving and money and the state of our hearts, then probably it’s important that we do, too. And not just at certain times of year - not just in the fall when we encourage folks to make a pledge for the next year - but all the time as a part of who we are as the people of God.

I don’t think that people with more wealth are necessarily happier people. I do believe, though, that generous people are more joyful people. There’s something about the joy of giving that’s real and true - and powerful.

By its very nature, loving flows over into giving. If we’re talking about agape love - the love that God shows to us in Jesus - then it’s all about giving for the sake of others. Love - agape - will cause us to give of ourselves in ways that we never have before. It means that we’ll sacrifice and even take a risk to love. It requires time, effort, and thought. Love calls us to be vulnerable and go to great lengths for the sake of someone else.

Love causes us to give. Last week, we focused on Song of Songs, a love song sandwiched in between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. We laughed at some of the imagery, but we also heard the power of love expressed - "love is as strong as death." And there was that deep truth expressed, too - our deep desire - and all of us have it - for someone to love us the way we know we were made to be loved.

We might look for that in each other, and we experience profound connection and love in relationships. But it was St. Augustine whose words have become famous: "God, You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

So if we're seeking out the satisfaction for this deep need to be loved in other things or other people instead of God, we're left wanting. But even more, our hearts get broken when we pursue love other places and give ourselves to other things because they can't ultimately satisfy us. It doesn't mean that we don't experience God's grace and love in one another, but ultimately, God is the One we can trust.

Jacob Armstrong offers a powerful image: think about a toy horse that's made "for ages 2 and under." If an older child uses it, we might see that the horse's legs are crooked and the wheels squished. The older child was too big for it. The horse wasn't made for that, and so it was damaged. Your heart and my heart were made for God. When we give our hearts to other things, when we worship other things, our heart gets damaged and even breaks.

We've been talking about how the world seems to be in trouble - distracted and unfocused from what's most important. When we give our hearts away to things that aren't God, it doesn't feel right. It might feel good for a moment, but not for long. Our world isn't meant to run on power, money, greed, or fear. It wasn't made for that. It was made for love.

Where do you give your time, money, and energy? Jesus says the more you give these things away, the more you find. He's not talking about becoming dependent on others or our work or on something that takes us away from life.

When we love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, we give up our life. When we love our neighbor as we love ourselves, we lose the focus on ourselves. But in losing, we find more of life. We find life in giving up our life for God and others.

Yet our culture tells us to hold on and gather up, not to let go and give away. We're told that our value is in how much we can accumulate - not in how much we can give away. Whether it has to do with money or things or time, giving isn't the first priority. And if we're seeking to live for God and to honor God, that's a trap for our hearts.

Have you heard of the term "influenza?" It's the combination of the words *affluence* and *influenza*, and it's come to mean the sickness of consumerism where we

try to get more and better things - and where we try to keep up with everyone else. It's been called the "desire to acquire." And even though we might not think too much about it, all of us deal with it: the next best gadget - iPhone or Samsung, the need for storage for all of our extra stuff. When I saw my mom this week, she said, "I'm trying to get rid of a box of stuff every day." And then she proceeded to hand me some stuff!

It was the late 1990's when the term *affluenza* really took hold, and we continue to struggle with it. It affects our relationships with others, and it affects our spiritual health, too. It's as if our hearts are restless for more and more, but not for God. If our hearts were at rest in God, would we continue to seek to acquire more and more?

You might wonder why we're spending time talking about giving when this series is all loving, but again, Jesus is clear about the connection between our hearts and our desire to store up more and more. Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth....But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What if we focused on that phrase every day: *where my heart is, there my treasure is, too*. How would it change our perspective?

I've used these words from Jesus at many funeral services. Sometimes it's a reminder about what's important. All of the accomplishments that someone has are important, but it's not the full legacy. Most of the time, I hear about someone's generous spirit and how they gave of themselves to others.

Tomorrow is President's Day when we remember legacies of our leaders. Historian Mark Updegrave says, "History often shines brightest on the things presidents do to unite, unburden, and uplift." Updegrave highlighted LBJ's support of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Ford's pardon of Nixon, and other George H.W. Bush's call for people to get involved in their communities. Remember "a thousand points of light?" Those legacies matter - sometimes years later - but they make a difference. It shows what we treasure.

As we're lifting up Supper House today, I thought about Florence who served as cook at Supper House for years. Her heart for loving God and loving others showed clearly, and it made a difference in my life and in the lives of many people who served and were served there.

Jesus goes on to talk about the power of getting more and more and focusing on what we can get. It's so powerful that it can control us. No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. Jesus knew our hearts could so easily be turned from God when we indulge our desire to acquire. We could get ourselves in big trouble.

Where your treasure is your heart will be also. Where you put your money shows where your heart is. Where you put your time and energy is where your heart is. What does where you spend your time, energy, and money say about you? About your heart?

Now I'll confess that it's hard because we'd all probably say, "I know I'm spending this much on this and that, but that's not my heart. My heart is my family, my faith, and other things that are important to me."

And Jesus continues to say, "Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is." And so even if we don't want it there, if we have to work 60 hours a week to pay off debt from stuff that we've accumulated, we feel it. If we can't find the time to serve God in some way, then we need to examine ourselves. Being good stewards means that we're learning how to be good managers of money and time and energy. All of them are important gifts.

This is ultimately about getting our hearts right. This happens by experiencing God's love and remembering that we are loved. And when we experience God's love, we find the desire to do some things that before seemed crazy.

All of us need the encouragement. Loving means giving. As God grabs our hearts, those voices of fear, saying, "You can't do this," or the voices of self-gratification, saying, "I want that for myself," start to fade away. We begin to seek God's direction and ask, "God, what can I do for you?" We serve God, and we find ways that we want give our money, time and energy, too.

When our hearts are centered on the love of God, we give. And we know the blessing of giving - that it's more blessed to give than receive. We experience the truth that the more we lose ourselves, the more we gain. And we have that perspective that all that we have belongs to God. We give God our best.

We've been challenged each week. First, to be intentional about loving God. Last week, to do something extravagant and over the top for someone. This week, the challenge is to give something to somebody because you love God - give your time, energy, or money to someone who needs it from you.

It's like the woman who put the diapers on the changing table. Surprise someone with your generosity. In God's economy, loving is not getting and taking, but rather giving and receiving, and it does change the world.

What's the legacy that you and I leave behind - not just after we're gone - but even now as we live each day? How does our giving show what's most important to us?

I love Maya Angelou's words: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Friends, loving is giving, and it helps us and others to feel God's love.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.

O God, my heart often feels divided. My desire today is for my heart to be centered on you. Guide me today toward a life that is more focused on loving you and loving people. My treasure is in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.