

The End of Giving

Luke 12:32-40

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 2) 2022

Tithe Sunday

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*The world does not look the same to someone who is angry and someone who is grateful.*

-Jeremy David Engels

Today is Tithe Sunday. For those of you who don't know, this is the one Sunday a year, when we talk about tithing – which means giving 10% of our income – and financially supporting the budget and mission of Austin Heights. It's our version of what other churches have called "Stewardship Sunday," with the emphasis on being good stewards of the financial gifts God has given us and returning a portion of those gifts to God in mission and ministry through the church. Along with Stewardship Sunday, or Stewardship Month, many churches have members of the Finance and Stewardship committee visit every household in the church asking you what you'll commit or pledge to give in the upcoming year, fill out a pledge card, sign your name, and then usually on the Sunday like today, everyone brings their pledge cards to the altar during the service.

So, as you can see, Austin Heights is much more low-key than that. Our tendency over the years is to trust you to give 10%, or more. Many of you started out giving say, 2% or 4%, but each year you committed a little more until you were giving 10% and for some of you, giving 15% or 18% or even more. Everything we do here, from paying the ministers to paying the light bill to paying for curriculum

to paying for mission and ministry with Village Nac or benevolence or supporting HOPE, or supporting yesterday's barbeque, and on and on, comes from your tithes and offerings (money given beyond a tithe). We receive zero money from outside sources.

In other words, you must give financially – your money – or Austin Heights Baptist Church cannot be or do what we believe God calls us to. Yes, we volunteer, and yes, we serve. But we also give money. Together. That is being the church. Just as much as serving food, setting up tables, and volunteering in town, teaching and participating in Sunday School, working with children, and so on, giving our tithes is who we are.

And when we talk about giving our “tithes and offerings” usually what that means is that we give our tithes or more to and through the church, and then offerings are what we give above the tithe. So, for example, this morning, we receive your offerings for HOPE as you exit the worship service.

Now, over the years, we have been able to take a low-key approach because you have given, and because you have known how all this works. I'm being up front this morning, because for many of you, this is new information.

I've being up front, because in our Scripture today, we get at what's deeper and foundational. Today is about the topsoil that grows and nourishes plants that end up bearing fruit.

Today, Jesus says, “Sell your possessions and give alms.” (FYI: “alms” is New Testament language for giving money/an offering.) He does not say it'll make

a difference. He doesn't say it will make the church run. He simply and directly says, "Sell your possessions and give alms."

Our natural response might be, "Jesus, where is this money going? What's your overhead? How much are you paid? What good is being done by your kingdom of God?"

Yet, Jesus's answer to us is disappointing. He says nothing about making a difference. He simply says, "God takes care of you. So give."

This passage from Luke, which is from the lectionary a couple of months ago, makes us think these verses about God giving the kingdom and disciples giving alms and making purses are introducing Jesus' encouragement to be watchful, and to be ready for the unpredictable return of God in Christ. But really, they are the *conclusion* of Jesus' well-known words about being free from worry that began a few verses earlier: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or your body, what you will wear" (12:22). Jesus points to the ravens, and the lilies and the grass—and says, "If all of these are under God's providential care, so are you. So, stop striving, calm your anxiety, and trust the God who takes care of you (12:25-29). Seek God's kingdom instead, and the rest will come." And then he concludes with the *beginning* verses from today: "Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms."

Seek God's kingdom, as most translations put it. Not: build, grow, bring, force, advance. Those aren't the Bible's verbs. We are invited to seek the kingdom and receive it. It is God's good pleasure to *give* the kingdom, a kingdom no amount of money can build. God is the great philanthropist, here. God is the giver. We

seek and receive. We look for signs of God's Way, God's kingdom, God's commonwealth, around us, and we receive it. We don't take it. We open our hands and receive it.

Why, then, sell our possessions and give alms—if the end is not to build God's kingdom?

I think it is interesting that these verses are hinged to one another by the repetition of a single word: *give*. It's God's good pleasure to *give* the kingdom, Jesus says, and then immediately: Sell your possessions, and *give* alms. Jesus takes God's-action verb—give—and applies it to us, without any explanation. He just tells us what makes God happy: giving the kingdom. And then invites giving to characterize our own lives, as if relinquishing possessions and money is the natural way of life for a people who worship a God who, in giving us Jesus and the Spirit, has given us everything we need.

As a little imitation of God, our giving is an end in itself. The end of giving, the goal of giving, is to be like God.

Sell you possessions, give alms. Not to build a kingdom. And certainly not to bring in the kingdom.

But for no obvious reason, except it's just your way of life because it's *God's* way of life. A little imitation of God. We receive from God and in turn, we give like God. Life is a gift. It's grace. And we are grateful.

Contrast God's verb of giving with the verbs Jesus mentions earlier, which all too often characterize our lives: fear (12:4, 7), worry (v.11, 22), striving (v.29),

and again, fear (v.32). Think about the contrast of a society built upon fear, worry, and striving with one built upon receiving and giving.

Jeremy David Engels, in his book *The Art of Gratitude*, suggests that such things as fear, worry, anxiety, striving, and so on are related to seeing life as an economic transaction. Consumer capitalism trains us to think in terms of economic exchange and everything has a price. Furthermore, we are trained to think that we never have enough, so worry, fear, anxiety, and striving become part of our DNA as individuals, but also the DNA of society. At the same time, Engels says that anger and resentment result from those of us put into debt always worrying over not having enough.

Engels says, “The world does not look the same to someone who is angry and someone who is grateful.” Using some of the words in today’s scripture, we can say, the world does not look the same to someone who is angry and afraid and someone who receives and gives. One sees the world full of threats and is angry about it, while the other looks for the kingdom to receive and in turn gives and shares. One hunkers down and bunkers up, while the other opens arms and welcomes. One clutches while the other gives. One goes into fascist mode where everyone who looks or seems different is perceived to be a threat while the other makes food and shows up at the Clay House barbeque, visiting, eating, talking, and enjoying a splendid day of perfect weather.

The issue is not simply learning not to worry. The issue, Jesus says, is learning to lose those fear-filled, angry lives in order to find *real* life. Let go of the lives we fearfully protect and clutch in order to receive the abundant, deep life that is life in God—life it is God’s good pleasure to give. But it’s hard to even imagine letting go of ourselves when we are still clinging anxiously to our things and our

money. So, “sell your possessions, give alms.” It’s an end in itself, but it also has a deeper end: To get us used to letting go, so we finally might be able to loosen our grip on our own lives.

When we let go of the lives we cling to so anxiously, then we can share our true selves with others, without fear of loss. And this kind of sharing is not just an imitation of God, but it’s a sign of our participation in the very life of God, whose life is that eternal Trinity of self-giving love without loss, a love that spills over to us, becomes visible to us, and available to us in the gift of Jesus, God’s kingdom in a person.

Then, as Jesus goes on in today’s scripture to say, when God calls or when God shows up in our lives, we are ready to travel light. Instead of packing a U-Haul truck of luggage to carry, we grab our backpack and are ready to follow Jesus to wherever. We are flexible, able to improvise, listen to the Spirit, and ready to serve. As Jesus says, then “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit” (12:35).

Sometime ago, I was drinking coffee with an old friend here in town who is black. He asked me, “Do you feel threatened by Black Lives Matter, by the influx of immigrants, and calls for change of White Male Supremacy?” We talked about all that a lot and I have continued to think about his question.

So, here’s a short answer to his question. When we learn to practice receiving and giving and we learn to see the world with gratitude, learning to give up White Supremacy is not as threatening as it is to someone who spends their lives clutching and striving and worrying.

God in Christ intervenes in this old world, and we want to be ready to join him. So, we spend our lives learning to watch for Christ's kingdom, receive it, and then in turn give to others. We listen, watch, and practice.

We hear the stories and learn from Francis of Assisi who was a young wealthy aristocrat in twelfth century Italy, who heard the call of God to rebuild his church and he spent the rest of his life doing so. He gave up his wealth, gave up his life, gave up his name and privilege, and in turn, became such a proponent of peacemaking, that he began a peace movement that spread throughout Europe at a time, when the predominant perspective was crusade. Francis led the way in changing all that. And it all began as he learned to give up his life, give up his possessions and give alms.

Or Lottie Moon, missionary to China in the second half of the eighteen hundreds, and famous to those of us raised S. Baptist. She gave up her life to be a missionary, and she gave up her possessions and money and even food to share with the starving people around her in China. When she died in 1912, she weighed only 50 pounds because she gave away all of her food to others.

Or Dr. Paul Farmer, who died last February, PhD and MD, who was on the faculty at Harvard Medical School, and founder of Partners in Health (PIH). For decades Dr. Farmer served the poorest of the poor around the world. He was asked why he kept doing it. They said he was not going to change the system of the world's inequalities. He responded,

*I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. I don't dislike victory. ...*

*You know, people from our background-like you, like me-we're used to being on a victory team... We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat.*

Or a small congregation in East Texas who has spent its entire existence receiving, giving, and being grateful.

And it all begins with following Jesus, "Sell your possessions. Give alms."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.