

Giving to God

Our theme is "Livegiving Transformation: a way to wholeness."

Lifegiving is not hyphenated; it is a play on words. The fabricated word is intended to suggest a life of giving is life giving.

Each Sunday of this series builds and interconnects on that theme.

Today's focus is "Giving to God".

Giving means much more than giving money, yet we tend to trip over the giving money aspect, the most. I suppose that is because of the high priority we place on money, and therefore money control can tell us a lot about ourselves.

In the church domain, the focus used to be about tithing, and there is Biblical support to that practice, too.

Malachi 3:8 strongly declares that if we are not giving our tithes and offerings to God, then we are robbing God.

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Peter Marshall, a famous preacher back in the 1940s, told this story about tithing:

After a sermon on tithing, a prominent and wealthy member of the church came to Peter's office, and confessed, "I used to tithe, but now I make 1/2 million dollars a year. I can't afford to tithe \$50,000. Peter said, "I understand; that IS a lot of money, and I can see that you are greatly bothered by this. May I say a prayer for you."

The man agreed. Peter prayed, "God you know this man's problem, and I pray that you reduce his salary back to the point where he can afford to tithe, again."

That's not what the man wanted to have happen, yet Peter understood the bigger picture.

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A tithe was the benchmark set by a religious community to support the system, and in OT times that included the government. It was like a tax.

Traditionally, Mennonites have maintained a similar attitude.

Members of the Mennonite community were expected to pay their dues / their fair share. And, that mind-set still affects our feelings about church finances. Yet, that perception diminishes God's part, and besides, if God was concerned about paying the bills, then it would be much simpler for God to bypass humans altogether.

Actually, money is a very minor part of giving. Giving includes all our resources and abilities, and more importantly, it is about our relationship with God, others and life itself.

Giving is an attitude of confidence, reflecting compassion, love and grace,.....and a trust in God and others.

Those hesitant to freely give tend to be bound by fear, and fear can make a person selfish, distrustful and angry.

Giving is a soul issue, and fully grasping it is parallel to a personal enlightenment....a rebirth. Giving is that important, so let's look at today's passage for insight.

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The Deuteronomy text reminds us that we did not earn our resources, possessions and money on our own merit,..... contrary to what most people like to think. The affluent tend to take pride in "earning" their wealth, and thus believe they are "entitled" to control it. But, that's not the case. There are scores of impoverished people who work as hard or harder, and many are as smart as most millionaires.

Many variables contribute to one being financially successful, including family support and luck. So, call affluence "good" fortune, Not earned fortune.

Moreover, Deuteronomy points out that all those abilities and opportunities that helped us accumulate "stuff" come from God. We should not / can not take the credit,..... and if we have trouble believing that....., as Deut. notes, then we have a soul survival problem / a salvation problem.

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Our theme passage is Psalm 24:1, "The earth and all things belong to God." That is precisely the message in the Deuteronomy text. All of our possessions, money and abilities are.....well.....not ours to claim and control,.... unless we want to push God out of the loop.

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The Bible is full of mandates and directives about our handling of money, possessions and behaviours. Still. it's not really about obeying the rules. The rules are to point us in the right direction--the way of lifegiving. What is essential is our relationship with God, others and life itself.

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For example, I recall when I was young, my mother giving me money to go down to the end of our street to the bakery on Bloor St. to buy a loaf of bread. Before I got there, I popped into the variety store, and I looked at all the candy, and then looked at the money in my hand. I contemplated the punishment, and concluded that enjoying some candy purchased with the money in my possession, out-weighed the punishment. BUT, I bought the bread as instructed..... because I valued the relationship more. I didn't want to deprive my family and disappoint my parents.

Giving is about our relationship with God, others and life itself.

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So, if we are in a vibrant, healthy relationship with God and all things, including ourselves, then we understand the beauty and wonder of giving. And, I should add donating from our surplus / what we can spare isn't really giving. That is either discarding or investing. The difference is told in our soul, and shows up in the quality of food donated to food pantries, for example.

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Real Giving is letting go of what we claim, what we value. It is letting go.

I do think most people enjoy giving. We appreciate something about the process, including helping or delighting someone else.
We do sense the deeper truth in giving.....yet it can be so hard to let go.....if we don't grasp the spiritual aspect of giving.

It's not just the transaction or the exchange; giving is in the letting go.

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To be sure, we don't particularly take pleasure in having things taken from us, and the pressure / the "obligation" to pay out / to pay a tithe or dues feels much like having something taken from us.

There are times when churches have pressured people, by persuasion or guilt, to contribute. That practice is counterproductive, even destructive because it steals the opportunity to participate in **giving**. The church gets money in the process, yet much is lost,... plus it reveals a very backwards system.

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Too often, churches operate as a cart pulling the horse.

The power of movement is in the horse, so equate that with God.

The cart is the collection of organized believers -- the church.

Sometimes, the focus, the nurture, the loyalty and the expectations are all on the cart. Decisions are made based on available resources that people have contributed, and so the vision is limited, too, because it's all up to people power.

Cart pulling the horse sounds like, "What can we do?... We can't afford to do that. We need to cut back.... or we have more money, so let's do this."

That is backwards thinking.

And, keep in mind, God is a pretty smart and trustworthy horse.

God won't lead us over a cliff, and God does not call us to be stupid or destructive with the resources in our possession.

God leads the church.

God is the power,..... and we participate by giving our part.

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Giving is releasing. It is letting go with no strings attached, as Ben mentioned last Sunday.

Too often, a donation is an investment. It's an investment when a person wants to control/ influence the outcome, such as a particular activity. A designated donation is usually an investment.

And, the donation is an investment if the motivation is to feel good,.. and feeling good can be expensive.

Jesus pointed this out in the Matthew text.

His advice was to donate without a show... because those making public contributions were seeking to feel good by impressing others.

Jesus also noted that we should give with One hand.

I think it's harder to hold on if we are using only one hand.

A gift requires letting go

The Luke passage contains Jesus' admonition to lend money to those in need, without expecting to be repaid / without getting Anything out of it. In other words: to give, to release it..... to let go.

Through the church, we are invited to give to God, not simply to an organization, but to God.

Instead of regarding the offering as a tax or dues, ask God how much God wants you to give, and then release it to God through your church. Let go of it, and trust that the church leaders will humbly, prayerfully release what is passed on to them,..doing the ministry of Christ for God.

The church has the burden and holy responsibility to "give" out those funds as God directs and leads,.... and thus the outward flow continues.

It is a wondrous, life-giving experience to give to God.

And, try not to think of the offering as a charitable donation.

Giving to God is .....giving to God.

The church does not, Should not compete with charitable organizations. The church is different. The church is the body of Christ.

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Above and beyond what we give to God, we can freely, as much as we wish, donate / invest in good charities.

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A tell tale sign that we have it backwards is when there is a controversy in the church and it's reflected in a drop in offerings collected. People reducing their donation because they disagree with their church reveals that they are not giving to God, but simply paying their dues or investing in the church.

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Most of us in this church are fortunate. We have resources; we have excess. We have choices. We can keep what we have and claim it as our own,.....or we can release it as God directs.

Owning and holding on assumes that we are the **power**/ that we are independent / that we deserve what we have.....compared to others.

Moreover, controlling, holding on is based on the fear of depravity ...which spins out into greed.

The fear is that somehow the flow to us will stop and we'll run out,.... which when you think about it, is a confession that we are Not so powerful.

Living in fear / living with a sense of depravity is very stressful,..very gloomy and pessimistic,..... and it is keeping God out of the picture.

It's not good for our soul.

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In contrast, there is the spiritual, life giving choice with what to do with what comes our way,.... and "life giving" is a good way to put it.

Instead of fearing the tap will stop flowing, we understand the source of all our possessions / of all things is God, and God is loving, generous and without end.

What comes our way is allowed to continue. There is a flow laden with a deep trust in God,..... and being open to this flow / participating in it is very spiritual.

By letting go, we allow, even invite more in... and thus more then goes to others, too.

And, by the way, I don't think God requires us to live hand to mouth, maybe some of us,..... I don't know.

Yet, to be sure, God cares for us, and provides for us.. through the whole process of giving.

Also, it is fine to be fortunate / to be entrusted with wealth.

That condition is full of wonderful opportunities for giving.

Knowing that all things are from God, frees us from envy and from degrading those who have less.

Trusting / giving....allows us to let go of prejudice.

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Do we see the spiritual element in this?

Learning to let go / to trust God with our money and possessions teaches us to let go of so many other silly and destructive things,...including fear and judging others.

Giving to God / Life-giving is trusting God with all things in life / with all things under our care.

Life-giving is participating in the process of receiving... and giving,.. of accepting and letting go.

No matter what comes our way, good or bad,....let us have confidence in our God who loves us,..... let us have confidence in each other... that others are freely giving and receiving.... that God's kingdom is unfolding.

As Pope Francis has poignantly challenged all believers,... let us be the church God wants us to be. Let us be Christ in and for the world.

And,.....it begins with the redeeming awareness / the life giving awareness that.....it is well with my soul.

{hymn of response: It is well with my soul}