

Stewardship 3  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 7-15; 9:6-10, 15  
October 21, 2007

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill  
Wimberley UMC  
Notes not for publication

Whether you've noticed it or not, I want to point out that this year's stewardship emphasis has been intentionally somewhat quiet on the issue of money. The stewardship committee put together a plan to lift up this church's ministries, the way what we do is touching people's lives, and our faith relationship with God and one another. This has been the purpose for the keys and the postcards and the wonderful narrative ministry plan—to celebrate the whole life of this church, as the bigger context into which our financial giving fits. They didn't want to hammer us for money; they wanted to help us tell a story. And that's what I've tried to do, too. But the day has arrived—today is the day for me to talk about money.

It's not something we really like to do, and that's partly because of our training. How many of us, when we were growing up, ever had our parents talk to us about how much money they had, and how they spent it? We may have learned something about money. We may have earned an allowance or had a job, and hopefully we learned that we didn't get to buy what we didn't have money for. (Even that basic lesson is taught less and less today.) But most of us growing up didn't know how much money our parents made or had in the bank. We probably didn't know how much, if any, they gave to the church. And if they did give to the church or any other cause, we didn't know how they came to decide how much. This may not be true if you grew up during the Depression, when there was far less money to go around, and things may have

been more transparent. I do know that there were churches during that era that posted on the wall people's names and how much they had given to the church, and people gave a much higher percentage of their income than we do now. But in any case, it seems that at least in the last half century or so, now that we have more money, it's become a taboo subject, one that's impolite to discuss in front of other people. Even a lot of married couples don't talk about it—unless you call fighting about it talking.

We have something that is so important to us, that we work so hard for, something that holds such value, and we don't really talk about it. Now, government and corporations talk about it plenty, and church and charities hit us up for it. And for sure our consumer culture talks about money. Somebody does research and develops just the thing to satisfy our deepest longings and make our dreams come true, whether it be a car or a pair of shoes or a toy or a jar of face cream. And then they offer us credit to be able to buy those things. It's 0% interest, but the rate goes up to 12% after six months, and of course if you're ever late on a payment, they hike it to 20%. This is the context we live in, one which promises happiness it cannot deliver, and one which instead ensnares people and tears up self-esteem and relationships. This reality, so central to our daily lives, is the topic we find it hard to talk about.

There is a movement in the church in this country to break that silence, to begin to help people and families gain control over their finances, using Biblical principles to order that part of their lives. A variety of courses has been developed for this purpose, and we actually hope to offer one here in the coming months. The point is to help

Christian people understand and make choices about the role money plays in their lives, and to free all people from the traps and bondage money so easily brings with it.

Today my basic purpose is just to say that it's OK to talk about it. And what makes it OK is that God means for us to have fullness of life, and freedom in love, and being bound in fear or obedience to our money, having to tiptoe around it, is not part of that freedom. Money instead, I believe, is a tool given to us, a resource entrusted to us, something we get to dominate and control, and not the other way around. That's how I hope we'll look at it as we prepare this week to offer up our 2008 covenant cards in worship next Sunday. As we look at the tool that is money and the ways we decide to spend it, we can start by asking ourselves the question, "Why do I give to God?"

If we turn first for guidance to the scriptures, we find they are full of examples of people making offerings to God. Today's reading from Deuteronomy continues to be a central one for God's people; this is the text assigned to Thanksgiving Day. In it we heard the law's command that the people offer the first fruits of the harvest to God. This was to remind the people that the land that produced the harvest came from God. But the way they made the offering also reminded them that their presence in the land came from God, as a gift. They were to recite what amounted to a type of creed, a history of their own identity—a wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went to Egypt, then the people became slaves, and then the Lord brought us out and into this land, flowing with milk and honey. "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." To make that offering was to claim their identity as God's people, who depended on God for what they had and who they were.

Do you have a story you might recite as you lay your card in the basket next week? We live a long way from harvest days, most of us, but can you tie your offering to the story of your life with God? There's a story Joe Spears shares about a farmer he knew in the Valley. They were going through a bad spell, and the farmer had decided he was going to have to irrigate his fields. He gathered his resources and prepared to pump in the water, but before he got started, the rains came, and he didn't have to irrigate after all. Joe said the farmer showed up in church the next Sunday and put into the offering plate the amount it would have cost him to water his crops. It was his way of giving thanks and praise, of showing that he knew where that gift had come from. How do we see the hand of God in our lives, helping us find what we need to get through rough spots, and covering us with blessings? What is our creed, our statement of identity in God, that we proclaim with our offering? Why do we give to God?

As we prepare to lift up our covenants of giving, a logical next question to ask is a more practical one: "How much will I give to God? What portion of what I have will I put into my offering?" With this one it helps to take stock of what we have and where we're currently spending it. Some of us have sophisticated budgeting systems and keep very good track of where we are financially. Some of us don't know so well how much is going where; we just know it's all going! But we can still step back and take a look at the money that comes in, and how and where it goes back out. We can also look at the practices or the values that underlie the ways we spend our money. When I look at my spending patterns, what priorities do I see at work? This act isn't a judgment of whether we are good or bad people. It's just to know, to be in charge of what we have

and how we spend, to see where we're making decisions that maybe we're not aware we're making.

Scriptures give us guidance on this question, too. The section of Deuteronomy just following the one we read talks about the tithe, or ten percent, and this is what became the standard for the Hebrew people. It is also considered the standard in the church, returning ten percent of what we receive. I've been grateful to be at or near the level of a tithe nearly all my adult life—it's a significant chunk, but it keeps me straight. In the middle of the craziness that pulls from all directions, all the causes and voices and tasks that want our energy and our allegiance—in the middle of that, we can put a stake in the ground and say, in this way, by offering up what the world would have me clutch to myself, I claim my identity as a child of God. I belong to God, and so does everything I have. With this portion of what I have, I give thanks to God. Whatever percentage you decide, whatever proportion of your possessions becomes your offering, making the decision is important.

So once we've decided how much to give, how do we give it? We are in a changing age, in which financial transactions look very different from the way they used to. Not only do we not bring baskets of produce up to the altar, some of us never put money in the plate at all. There are churches these days that don't even pass a plate. My own story is that I once found myself in a former church, as a pastor, three months behind on my pledge. I don't bring my purse with me up to the pulpit, I thought it would be silly to mail it, when I was there nearly every day, and I never got in the habit of writing out my check at my desk on a Tuesday, then needing a safe place to put it

until Sunday, etc. I was good for it, and I finally got it paid up, but I tried hard never to get that far behind again—I generally didn't have three months' worth of a tithe lying around in my bank account!

Many people only give an offering when they're physically present in this room. I think that's part of what has contributed to the financial position we're currently in—a dip in attendance this year. What has saved me is online banking. I point and click as part of my monthly routine, and I no longer worry about forgetting my check or falling behind. An automatic draft through the bank ensures that even if I'm a little bit erratic, my offering won't be. I know this may seem like a very banal, non-spiritual detail, but these are tools we can use to facilitate our discipleship. The way I see it, if we're moved enough to put it on a commitment card, and especially if we have talked about it and really see it as an offering of part of our life, it's worth making sure it happens.

Why do we give? How much do we give? How do we give it? As you reflect on these questions this week, hear again the words of Paul to the Corinthian church, this time from *The Message*—"Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving." (2 Corinthians 9:6-10).

May we delight in the gifts we lift up to God; may they reflect our gratitude and our commitment and our identity as people who belong to God. In the name of the One who gives both the land and seed and the harvest—Amen.