

Series: The Joy of Giving
Part II: Where's Your Heart?
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Last week we began talking about “The Joy of Giving.” If you were here, you will remember that we focused on the words of Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” We said that *we are blessed to be a blessing to others*. And that *real joy comes from giving to help others – especially those who are “weak” and need help*. We ended up talking about all the many ways this church helps those in need and who are weak. Today we are continuing to go deeper as we look at why giving brings joy to our lives – especially how it shapes us to be the generous people God created each one of us to be.

Bob Dylan has been making music for a long time. He began in the early sixties singing folks songs while playing his acoustic guitar in a way that spoke to a generation. After a while, he decided to explore other kinds of music and began playing the electric guitar with a full band. The folk music purists did not like it and actually booed him off the stage the first time he tried it.

But, it was still later on in his career that his music took another turn. In the late seventies Dylan reportedly became a Christian and put out a couple of albums with song lyrics focused on Christian themes. “You Gotta Serve Somebody” was the name of one somewhat haunting song that repeated these lines: “You gotta serve somebody/ It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.” It seemed like just about the time Dylan’s followers thought they had him figured out, he would do something to let them know they could not “put him in a box.”

Sometimes I wonder if the followers of Jesus felt the same way. While the disciples always seemed to be struggling to learn what Jesus was trying to teach them, there were times when they appeared to grasp what was going on, only to be told by Jesus they still had not understood the whole picture. Today’s story from Matthew’s Gospel that ends up talking about serving someone or something may be one of the times.

Jesus tells us this in the words from Matthew’s gospel and what we call “The Sermon on the Mount.” For a number of chapters prior to what we are about to read, Jesus is speaking some of the most familiar words in scripture about a variety of topics – and these are not easy topics he is talking about. Jesus doesn’t dodge the tough issues. More than one passage is about money, possessions, and what we do with them. So, I invite you to join with me in reading from Matthew 6:19-21, 24. As we read this, listen for the word of the Lord! This is Jesus speaking:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . . “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (NIV)

In these verses we just read, Jesus tells us not to store up “treasure on earth” where it will eventually fade away, but to store it up “in heaven.” Now he doesn’t tell us exactly how to do that. Jesus leaves room for some creativity here. But, however we choose to do that, Jesus ends by saying this: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21, NIV) Whatever we think and do with what we have on this earth – our treasure, Jesus says, is somehow related to our hearts.

We may wonder exactly what that means. We have all probably heard someone say, “Their heart just wasn’t in it.” Maybe we have felt that way before, when there was something about us that did not feel a commitment to what we were doing. On the other hand, we may tell someone, “Put your heart into it!” We want to see some enthusiasm, and some passion for something. Jesus is telling us that there is connection between what we choose to do with our “treasure” or our earthly possessions, and what we feel and value with our “heart.” But, that idea doesn’t begin with us. *Giving “from the heart” begins with God.*

In one of the most familiar passages from the Bible, the writer of John’s gospel says, “For God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and Only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” It is John 3:16 – which we sometimes see people hold up on posters at football games. It is one of those passages those of us who grew up in the church learned from the time we were young. And it is the final passage we chose to put in our *Joy of Giving* brochure.

When it comes to giving from the heart, it all begins in the heart of God. God so loved the world that God chose to do something about the sin and brokenness in our lives. God did not sit back with arms crossed and say, “Hey, you are on your own. You got yourself into this mess. You figure it out!” God knows we are not capable of saving ourselves. So, God sent Jesus, God’s Son, God-in-the flesh, to come to earth, to not only teach us how to live -- but Jesus went as far as to “give” his life on a cross. Or, to use some of the other language of John’s gospel, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13, NIV), in order to show us the giving heart of God. It all begins in the heart of God. In turn, we are invited, called, and challenged to give from our hearts in response to what God has done for us.

So, when it comes to giving, *why do you give?* Think about it. Does it come naturally to you, or is it something you make yourself do anyway? Some researchers have been asking the question about why people choose to give selflessly. One author reports on the scientific research using brain scans to find out which part of the brain “lights up” when it comes to giving. What the research is telling us is that when we give, for many of us, there are parts of the brain that trigger a pleasurable response when we give to others. In other words, we can now “prove” something that many of us already know from experience -- that *giving to others can make us feel good.* (*What Makes a Hero?*, Elizabeth Svoboda: 24) Some researchers may want to say this is simply how we have evolved. But, as a Christian, I want to say that this is how God made us – even if that process took a very long time to get to where it is today. God made us to be generous givers. That is why it feels good in our hearts and minds when we give.

Interestingly enough, the research has also shown that even if our giving seems to go against our self-interest, there is another part of the brain that allows us to give anyway. In other words, I can choose to have less for myself in order to give to someone else. (*What Makes a Hero?:* 25) Now there are other factors like our environment that are also bear consideration, but there is something in the way that we are made as humans that science is now discovering about our need to give.

Jesus tackles this question of why we give in these words we read earlier, and in some words we did not read from the first part of Matthew 6. Jesus not only talks about storing up treasure in heaven versus here on earth, he also talks about those who give in order for people to recognize them. In other words, they give to get some kind of reward such as public acknowledgment here in this life. Jesus has some strong words to say about those kinds of individuals.

Henry Van Dyke wrote a wonderful short story called “The Mansion” that builds on this same theme. It begins by describing the mansion-like home of John Weightman. The house was not over-the-top, but it did give off the impression of being better than all of the other buildings around it. John Weightman is described as a “self-made man.” He is very successful in life and the inside of his house was filled with the best furniture and paintings that he could buy. He would say things like, “A man of fixed principles should express them in the looks of his house.” He sits on all the right boards in town -- even the church board. But, whenever he gave to anything, there was always some calculation about how he would benefit from it – he called it getting “a good return on his investment.”

His son, Harold, even though he had finished law school, always had a desire to work among the poor. But those kinds of choices were not in his father’s plans for his son. Like many fathers and sons, they struggled over this. At one point, John’s son came to his father about a college classmate who had been both a mentor and friend to Harold -- especially during some difficult times. The friend did not have the financial resources of Harold's family and had come upon some hard times. He had medical issues with his lungs, was married with a baby, and needed to go to the dry air of Colorado for twelve to eighteen months to recover his health. Harold asked his father if they could loan his friend the money to give his friend “a fighting chance to live.” His father refused, saying, “A fighting chance may do for speculation, but it is not a good investment ... Religion is not a matter of sentiment; it’s a matter of principle.” (“The Mansion” by Henry Van Dyke: 6) Harold grew angry and said he would help his friend anyway with whatever he could scrape together – though it would not be enough.

After they argued, John Weightman withdrew back into his library and did what he always did before bed – he read his Bible. That night his eyes fell upon a familiar verse: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth. But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven.” Then he drifted off, maybe to sleep -- he wasn’t sure.

He “awoke” in a strange land, looking at a long road upon which were many travelers. After a while he recognized the face of one of the travelers -- the village doctor who had cared for him years ago. The doctor invited John to travel along with them – so he did. After much conversation, John realized somehow that they were on their way to heaven. There was great sense of *joy* and expectation.

When they arrived, there was a Guide whose job it was to lead each of the travelers to their new home in heaven – the mansion prepared for them. One by one, John saw each of these individuals, who had lived good but humble lives on earth, be brought before beautiful mansions. Each one seemed surprised and overwhelmed. To one of travelers the Guide said, “This is for you. Go in; there is no more pain here, no more death, nor sorrow, nor tears; for your old enemies are all conquered. But all the good that you did for others, all the help that you have given, all the comfort that you have brought, all the strength and love that you have bestowed upon the suffering, are here; for we have built them all into this mansion for you.”

Finally, John was looking forward to seeing his mansion. The Guide leads him a long way to a tiny hut in the center of a field that looked as if it had been built of discarded fragments of other buildings. John Weightman said that surely there must be some kind of mistake. He asked why his was not a large mansion like the others. The Guide replied, “That is all the material you sent us.” Weightman talked about all of the boards he had served on, but the Guide said, “Wait, we know all these things. They were not ill done. But they were all marked and used as foundation for the name and mansion of John Weightman in the world. Did you not plan for that?”

Weightman went on to list other things he had done, but finally he asks what counts in this place. The guide answers, “Only that which is done for the love of doing it. Only those plans in which the welfare of others is the master thought. Only those labors in which sacrifice is greater than the reward. Only those gifts in which the giver forgets himself.”

The story ends with John Weightman waking from the dream. He goes to wake his son and tell him that he will help his friend. He is given another chance in life. He begins to learn to give from the heart. Author Henry Van Dyke sums it up this way: “What you possess in the world will be found at the day of death to belong to someone else. But what you are will be yours forever.” *Giving now shapes us into persons who are ready to live in the presence of God.*

One of my favorite newer hymns is “Here, I Am, Lord.” It is new, but it seems like it has been around for a long time. It just has that feel to it. One of the verses has God saying, “I will break their hearts of stone/ give them hearts for love alone.” The lyrics echo the words from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, when God says to God’s people, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36:26)

Some of us may have become calloused to the needs of those around us. When it comes to giving, we may have said “no” so often that our hearts have calcified and become stone-like. My prayer for all of us this day and throughout this stewardship season, is that God would transform our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh – that God would “melt” our hearts so that we will be moved to give from the heart to what God is doing -- especially through Johns Creek Presbyterian Church.

Today, I want to invite you to think about the things you are passionate about. Pray that God would soften your heart. Allow yourself to feel again. When the temptation comes to close off your heart when some suffering enters your life, don’t do what we often do – don’t change the

channel – literally or figuratively. Simply allow yourself to feel that hurt in your heart. Then ask God how you might respond – how you might give “with heart” to make a difference in the world.

Next Sunday is both Stewardship Dedication Sunday and Kirkin’ of the Tartans Sunday – with bagpipes, drums, brass, and tartans as we remember our Presbyterian church’s Scottish roots. It will be a great day to worship and to invite a friend. Because it is Stewardship Dedication Sunday, our tradition here at JCPC is to bring our pledge cards to worship as a demonstration of our plans to give generously to God’s life-transforming work through this church. I hope you plan to be here for that. However, if you know you will not be here, we need you to go ahead and make your pledge today using the card in your bulletin and placing it in the offering plate or mailing it to the church office. You can also make your pledge online today on the JCPC website at www.jcpcusa.org, or on the JCPC app. This will help us plan what we can do in 2019.

As Christians, we believe that the Bible teaches us that our goal in life should be to give away a “tithe” -- at least a tenth of what we have been given in order to make a difference in the lives of others. As someone who has done that for many years, I can say from personal experience that it gives our family great joy to be able to do that! I believe it can give you the same joy.

Friends, giving shapes us into the person God has created us to be. The more we give, the more generous and Christ-like we become. So, when it comes to giving, where is your heart today?

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.