

Too Much Generosity?

Part of the More Than We Can Imagine Sermon Series

Exodus 36:2-7

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

October 31, 2021

The second scripture reading listed in the bulletin is not a mistake. We are going back to Exodus 36. We were just there two weeks ago, but that week, I asked John Maynard to read beginning at verse 8. That was intentional, because I wanted to save the first seven verses for today. Now, in case you weren't able to worship with us two weeks ago, or in case two weeks ago feels like a lifetime ago, and you don't remember what you ate for breakfast yesterday morning, never mind what we talked about here 14 days ago, here's a bit of review, just in case it might be helpful.

Exodus begins with God's people enslaved. The Israelites, our spiritual ancestors, are suffering. Moses hears the call to set them free. As part of the same conversation, God reveals God's own name to Moses: I AM WHO I AM. This revelation includes a burning bush and some degree of confusion and concern for Moses, but it ultimately assures us that even when absolutely nothing feels normal or familiar at all, God is going to be God. And that proves to be true. Through Moses, God delivers the people from slavery into freedom and from desperation into hope. They find themselves in the wilderness, though, trying to make their way to the promised land.

Instead of letting them wander aimlessly, God guides them with a pillar of cloud by night and a fire by day. When they grumble because they are tired and hungry, God sends down manna, manna from the heavens for them to eat and be satisfied. When they complain about being thirsty, God tells Moses to strike a rock, and water flows freely from it. And, when they are deeply in need of order and instruction, God issues the Ten

Commandments. But, then the people build a golden calf, and smash the Ten Commandments, and God has to issue a second edition with a second chance, which God does. Over and over again, God and the Israelites travel together, through good days and bad, through feast and famine, and through complaint and celebration. God's capacity for second and seventh and sixteenth chances literally saves their lives. God's generosity becomes the blood that flows through their veins, our ancestors' veins.

And then God says, how about you build a tabernacle, so that you will be reminded that we are together, always? Remember those materials? Gold and silver and bronze, fine linen, blue and purple and crimson threads, and all the rest? This is where all the materials came from. (and this is where we finally get to the second reading). Moses says to the Israelites, the Lord has asked us to build a tabernacle. So, "take from among you an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering."

And then, "Moses called Bezalel, Oholiab and everyone to whom the Lord had given skill, and everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work. They received from "Moses all the freewill offerings that the Israelites had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning. All the artisans who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came. They said to Moses, 'The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do.' So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: 'No one is to make

anything else as an offering.’ So the people were restrained from bringing; for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work.”

Madi Dooley baked me a key lime pie last week. If you’ve ever had one of her pies, the sheer mention of it probably makes you grateful we’re wearing masks, so that no one can see how badly you are drooling. Ten years old and already a State Fair champion many times over. That is the caliber of pie I received last week. Even before I got home, I called a few folks and asked if they would like a piece, because I knew if I didn’t give away some of it, I’d eat all of it. After promising away about half of it, I cut myself a slice and put the rest in the back of the refrigerator. I ate that slice, and then I pulled everything out of the refrigerator again, so I could have some more. And then I put it in the back of the refrigerator ... again. Do not ask me how many times this happened, because I do not want to lie in church. I couldn’t help myself. I ate too much. It was just that good.

I imagine that’s the sort of situation Moses finds himself in as work on the tabernacle gets underway. Moses has to say to his people: “Stop. Please, stop. Enough. Your giving, your generosity, your heart. It’s too much.” A friend of mine, also a preacher, drove through Columbia yesterday. She asked me what I was preaching this weekend. I didn’t get too far into my explanation when she stopped me. “You’re going to preach that to kick off stewardship season? Are you sure? You know the story ends with an instruction to stop giving, right?”

The Israelites, our spiritual ancestors, had a reputation for being a stiff-necked people, which is a nicer way of saying, they were stubborn and a bit full of themselves. They grumble. They complain. They disobey. They tell God what to do, when to do it, and how to

do it. When they don’t like how that goes, they try to build their own god in the form of a golden calf. In other words, they were human, just like us. The details might be different, but the instincts are the same. This story, though, shows us another side of these very human people. It’s been a rough stretch for them, but in this particular moment the Israelites are genuinely aware of all that God has done for them. They understand that God could have given up on them and left them to fend for themselves about a dozen times over. They realize that even if every once in a while it felt like that’s exactly what God had done, never was that actually the case. In the depth of their being, they realize that the God who set them free from slavery continues to set them free.

So when Moses instructed the people to bring their gifts, he doesn’t have a glossy brochure. He doesn’t preach a stewardship sermon. He doesn’t present a budget or show them 3D renderings or cast a vision of how the tabernacle will be used for generations upon generations. He simply says, “Let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord’s offerings.” And, the congregation goes wild. Everyone goes back to the tents to collect their gold and bronze and silver and bring it to Moses. Weavers get to work on tapestries and woodworkers start building frames and furniture. The people give and give and give morning, noon, and night, offering their treasures, their gifts, their talents, and their very selves. Walter Brueggeman says this: “The picture presented is a community so convinced of its covenantal affirmations and so taken up in its conviction of the truth of its long, liberation narrative, [the community] acts completely beyond the usual calculations of prudence and caution.”¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus” in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary

In other words, the Israelites do not give generously because the church programming was meeting their needs. They do not give generously because they see the life and death difference the church's mission made in the world. They do not give generously because they agreed with everything Moses did and said. According to this text, their entire motivation for giving emerges from the realization that life itself is a gift from God. The air they breathe. The water they drink. The bread they eat. The love they share. The courage they find and the tenacity they develop. In this moment, they realize that all of it — all of it — comes from God. And when that realization sinks into their bones, they can't stop themselves. They give and they give and they give. Morning, noon, and night. Once they realize God's generous posture toward them, they cannot help but respond with a generous posture of their own. Their gratitude is so strong, Moses actually has to tell them, "Stop. Please. Stop giving. You have lost control of yourselves. It's too much."

My preacher friend thought it was an interesting choice to preach this story today not because she is cynical but because she knows what all pastors know these days. When asked what motivates people to give, gratitude does not rank high for any generation these days. According to all the research, if you really want to have a "successful" stewardship campaign, you need to offer concrete illustrations of what people's gifts will do, of how their dollars will deliver exactly what they hope and dream they will. An NPR story concluded that most folks these days, especially those my age and younger, have no sense of obligation when it comes to giving. They give only to that which is changing the world. These are broad strokes, of course, and there are exceptions to every rule. But in general, people do not give because they are grateful for what God has done in their lives. They give because they

know the plan, grab hold of the vision, and see clearly the difference their gifts will make.

I'm saying "they" and "them," but honestly, I care about all that, too. I care about inspiring you and reassuring you and I care about knowing what my giving will accomplish, too. So I've had to make a decision. I've decided that I want this story to be my story. Our story. Because this story matters. It matters so much I'm not going to worry about whether gratitude is a successful stewardship strategy or not, because it is a faithful and biblical strategy. I hope we meet our stewardship goals this year. I really do. Because I believe we are standing on the verge of a wonderfully vibrant season of life together. But even more than that, I hope that we all — myself included — learn to walk around everyday with a profound sense of wonder and gratitude. I hope that we will be generous simply because God is astonishingly generous to us.

As Christians, we know that the story of God's generosity does not stop with Exodus. God tells the Israelites to make a tabernacle, to make a home for God among the people but, then God makes that home permanent. God goes "all in" with Jesus Christ. Jesus, who offers bread and says, "Take, for this is my body". Who offers the cup and says, "Take, this is my blood. And it is for you. All of it is for you." Can you imagine? God continues to give and give and give, even giving up his own Son so that we might know life. My friend, the Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner,² puts it this way: "In Jesus Christ, God [goes] 'all in' in order to show creation the profound, generous depths of God's love, so that we can go 'all

² Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner, Senior Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. With her permission, I have drawn deeply from her work on this text. Her work was instrumental in the shaping of this sermon.

out' and participate in the ways God is transforming this world."

This stewardship season, let us remember this story. And then, let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering. Who knows? Maybe on November 14, on Commitment Sunday, I might have to announce that Shandon Presbyterian Church needs to stop. "No, no. You have given too much. Your generosity is too overwhelming. Enough!" Wouldn't that be something?