

- Gratitude is an Attitude -

Stewardship Program of Capitol Hill United Methodist Church • Issue #1 • November 2010

Why Do We Give?

by Sam Marullo

When you think about it, giving money to the church is a pretty counter-cultural act. What service is it that we are paying for when we put money in the offering plate? What kind of treatment do we expect as “dues paying members” of Capitol Hill United Methodist Church when we write a check or make an electronic funds transfer from our bank account into the church’s account? If you are expecting answers to these questions in this article, let me save you some time and let you know right now that this article is NOT going to provide you answers to these questions. Rather, what I am going to do in this article is to explain that these are not even the right questions to be asking. Instead, this article presents an alternative framework for understanding why we give money to church.

The questions above are based on a *misunderstanding* of the offering process. They make sense based on a set of assumptions found in commercial, market practices that are not relevant to our Christian context. That’s right, these reasonable-sounding questions are based in our secular culture’s understanding about money as a payment for services rendered. But our Christian understanding of the offering is not at all based in the secular culture. Rather, virtually every understanding of secular economics is turned upside-down in God’s economy.

Let me start with two contradictory sets of assumptions—noting how God’s economy is the opposite of our human economic system. Once we have clarified how these two basic premises differ, we can then make sense of the meaning of the offering and why we give. The first assumption of God’s economy is that there is an abundance of everything we need. This is in contrast to the human economy’s reliance on the presumption of scarcity—whether it is natural or human-generated. In God’s

economy—the entire Creation as we know it—God created everything we need and created it in abundance (see chapter 1, verses 27-31 of the book of Genesis). The garden in which humans were created overflowed with all the food and other material goods we could ever want (Gen 2:9). We were told to eat freely from it—with one limitation—and to care for the creation so that everything would flourish. But instead of accepting this one limitation, we chose to consume the one thing we could not have, and were thus forced to leave the garden of abundance. However one might understand “the fall” or human’s “original sin,” it certainly entails our human desire to have that which we weren’t meant to have. Through our actions, we chose to live in the circumstance of wanting what we can’t have rather than enjoying the abundance of all that we have been given. Sadly, our economic and cultural systems today reinforce and magnify this message of scarcity.

The second contemporary cultural assumption that we live by—which is contrary to God’s economy—is that money, goods and services are exchanged in a market by an invisible hand that produces an equilibrium of supply and demand reflected in the price paid for a good or service. Basically, we get what we pay for and pay a “fair” price for what we get. But here too, this is the opposite of God’s limitless generosity and love which God has freely given to us, most importantly through the gift of God’s self through Jesus Christ. In our human system of rational economic thinking, we believe that we pay a high price for something we value greatly, a low price for something we hold to be of little value; and we shop, barter and negotiate to find ourselves a good deal. But through our faith, we know that EVERYTHING is a gift from God—

including our very lives—and that we can do *nothing* to pay for all that has been given us. Through the gift of God’s self, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we know that we are freely given eternal life in the presence of God and that no actions or payments or offerings can ever “buy” our way into God’s presence. The most valuable gift of all creation—to be heirs of the reign of God—is offered to us without price.

Starting with these two alternative premises of God’s economy—in contrast to our human economic assumptions—how then are we to understand the offering we make in church? First, we should accept that everything that we have, even our lives, has been given to us as a gift. Our appropriate response is one of gratitude. Our offering is thus a gift of gratitude and we are returning to God only a small portion of what God has already given us. We can never repay God for all that God has given us and we can never compensate God for all the good (Creation) that God has made and done. In fact, for those of us who have received more of the good things of life, we should be even more grateful for all these gifts and return to God a greater portion of what God has given us.

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An Ode of Gratitude

by Rev. Alisa Lasater-Wailoo



Each year at Stewardship Time, I pause to give thanks for all the good that God has done in

and through you, a Community of Christ known as CHUMC, over the last year. But this year, as our stewardship focus is the attitude of gratitude, I want to share with you a few of the abundant gifts for which I give God thanks,

God, thank you... for the one I love who desperately loves me. A friend and Savior and Lord all in one. Thank you for your own son, Jesus, whose healing, truth, teachings, and power cross over centuries, cover the globe, and even break through the barriers in my own heart.

God, thank you... for this barrier-breaking love that reaches far beyond me and takes me beyond myself to others.

God, thank you... for each saint who has hallowed these halls of CHUMC over the decades. This year I give you thanks for Mary Jerrell and Katherine Smith whose strong spirits formed this community.

God, thank you... for each child googling, smiling, crying, toddling and exploring in our midst and for new Sunday school and children’s Sabbaths and what each little one reminds me about new life in you.

God, thank you... for each soul you have sent and welcomed into this Christian community...for 12 new members and numerous new friends, people I would never have known without you bringing us together.

God, thank you... for those we seldom see but who find solace here in your space like

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Pledge Cards

For your convenience you will find a pledge card attached to this newsletter. Please fill this out and bring it with you to the worship service, Sunday, November 21. At the end of the service we will bring our pledges to the altar for consecration.

Do you prefer the convenience of online, automatic payment? If you like knowing where you are in your pledge fulfillment and not having to remember your checkbook, sign up for our Electronic Fund Transfer or EFT program. Just fill out the form on the back of the pledge card and you will be automatically enrolled.

If you forget to bring your card to church Sunday, don't worry we'll have plenty on hand.

"You can tell how spiritually mature a person is by how he uses his money.

If he contributes money to the purposes of God, you are probably looking at a person who has accepted spiritual values.

If he doesn't, he has not come to that point yet.

Giving of money is often the last thing to 'fall' as a person matures, because if you are living for this world, you won't give your money to the next world."

—Max Anders, from his book "30 Days to Understanding the Christian Faith"

Why Do We Give? -continued

The second lesson is that when we give, when we give freely out of love and gratitude, we grow closer to God. Scriptures tell us that we were created in the image and likeness of God and when we are being generous and loving, we are embodying the nature of God as God intends for us to be. This helps us to grow closer to God and helps us to anticipate what it will be like to be in God's presence. (Conversely, when we act in ways that we know to be ungodly, to violate God's laws, we turn away from God and put more distance between ourselves and God. Being selfish, greedy, withholding support from others are all actions that lead us away from God because such actions are contrary to God's nature.)

Third, when we give generously, even sacrificially, we grow more like God, as modeled by Jesus Christ. Jesus gave freely to those around him, ultimately giving his whole human life for the well-being of his friends. Thus, just as Christ taught us to love God and love our neighbors with all our heart, soul, strength and mind (Mark 12:30-31), we should show our love of God and neighbor through our generosity toward them, including financial generosity.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was very clear in his teaching and preaching that we should "give all we can" out of gratitude for all that God has given us, so that we could become more like God (grow in sanctification), and follow the practices our savior Jesus taught us. He encouraged us to follow other spiritual practices as well, all of which would help us to grow in our holiness, which includes attending worship, daily prayer, fasting, visiting and supporting those in need, and reading Scriptures. When we join the church, we pledge to follow these practices when we commit to give of ourselves to the church through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our

service, and our witness. We give of our finances freely not because we are already holy, but rather we give and grow our giving in order to become more holy. For some two thousand years, our Christian tradition has taught us these spiritual practices as the way of giving thanks to the Lord and growing closer to the divine nature of God that we were created to have.

Scriptures encourage us to give a tithe—a tenth of all we receive—as a way of giving thanks to God. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God are told to give a tithe from the first fruits of their crops (see Deuteronomy 14:22-28) and the first livestock born to their herds (see 2 Chronicles 31:6). Jesus tells his followers that he has come not to abolish the decrees of the Old Testament, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). And Jesus condemns the Pharisees as hypocrites because even though they are superficially giving ten percent of what they have been given, they are not fulfilling the spirit of the law, which is to give in a way that liberates people from their burdens (Luke 11:42).

Let me encourage you to consider committing yourself to grow your offering to the level of a tithe. This may take a year, or two or three, for you to grow to this level. (In the meantime, if you have not done so previously, let me ask you to consider making a pledge, regardless of the amount that you are giving. Even this spiritual discipline will help you to grow in faith as a committed giver. I won't promise that it will be easy, but I can promise you that it will lead to your growing in faith. And I believe that God will

honor your intention and commitment and will bless you all the more richly for it. Such a commitment will also help to liberate you and lead to a new way of thinking, for you will be more grateful for all that you have been given. As you give of the first fruits of your labor, committing to paying God first, you will be more conscious of all the gifts that have been given you. You will become free from wanting material things and more content with what you have. Making such a commitment will help to liberate you from the human condition of scarcity and live into the God-made condition of abundance. Along the way, you will come to know God's economy of limitless grace and generosity.

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Thanks to Mikel Rice

10-06-2003

IF SALVATION IS FREE, THEN WHY DO YOU PAY EACH WEEK?

The Deepening Journey

What amazes me is that before we can count we are taught to be grateful for what others do. As we are broken open by our experience, we begin to be grateful for what is, and if we live long enough and authentically enough, gratitude becomes a way of life.

– Mark Nero

By now I hope you've come to experience some of the great joy gratitude can bring, and have begun to see that the attitudes and practices of gratitude lead us on a soul-journey, one that the preceding quote by poet and cancer survivor Mark Nepo so perfectly describes. Gratitude begins with training in what we call manners, a learned response to being on the receiving end of a human transaction: "Mrs. Smith just gave you a cookie, Janey. Now what do you say?" Despite the benefits of such thanks, they are contingent on someone doing something specific for us, and while many of us remain at this level of gratitude, our souls call out for us to move to a deeper level.

Here we begin to discover gratitude apart from a specific human giver, apart from roses on Valentine's Day and the CD player on Christmas, and acknowledge the gift of life itself. Here we begin to be appreciative of everything, as teachers along our soul's path. This second level of gratitude is most often found through suffering, by choosing to get soft and wide, rather than rigid and pointy, under the yoke of life's difficulties.

When we allow ourselves to be broken open by life rather than broken down by it, we begin to be grateful for the difficulties themselves—to cancer for bringing us to our feelings; to bankruptcy for saving us from the rat race; to a demanding person for teaching us how to stand up for ourselves.

When we live from this place long enough, we begin actually to inhabit gratitude, our every inhalation and exhalation a breath of thanksgiving no matter what is going on in the external world. Not many travelers make it all the way here permanently; this is the territory of saints. But all of us experience this spot in glimpses, moments in which we look up at the sky and see it for the work of art it is; hear Beethoven's *Ninth* and feel the majestic surprise of such music in our lives; feel our baby's pudgy fingers on our face and cry tears of thanks for her being.

At each level of gratitude, our soul's capacity deepens. At the first level, we experience contentment—we wanted a cookie and we got it. At the second, we experience meaning—we're here for a purpose and are therefore grateful for all of life's lessons. At the third, we dwell in pure joy, "the simple response of our heart to this given life in all its fullness," as Brother David Steindl-Rast puts it.

May you experience all the levels of thankfulness and the soul-gifts that each offers. For then it will be truly possible to give and receive joy every day of your life.

– M.J. Ryan

Did you know?

Abraham Lincoln established the official national holiday of Thanksgiving in 1863 with this passionate plea for a national acknowledgment of God's blessings.



The Pilgrims were surely thankful people, but the tradition of Thanksgiving did not start with them. Giving thanks is a tradition that is widely shared and has deep historical roots. Where one finds religion, one finds gratitude. People have always sought ways to express gratitude and thanksgiving to God the ultimate giver. Karl Barth once said that the basic human response to God was not fear, not guilt, but thanksgiving.

With the Thanksgiving holiday quickly approaching we are reminded everywhere (even in popular culture) to give thanks and reflect on that which we are thankful for. Here is a Thanksgiving prayer by Scott Wesemann that you may want to use too.

Thanksgiving Day Prayer

Lord, so often times, as any other day
When we sit down to our meal and pray

We hurry along and make fast the blessing
Thanks, amen. Now please pass the dressing

We're slaves to the olfactory overload
We must rush our prayer before the food gets cold

But Lord, I'd like to take a few minute more
To really give thanks to what I'm thankful for

For my family, my health, a nice soft bed
My friends, my freedom, a roof over my head

I'm thankful right now to be surrounded by those
Whose lives touch me more than they'll ever possibly know

Thankful Lord, that You've blessed me beyond measure
Thankful that in my heart lives life's greatest treasure

That You, dear Jesus, reside in that place
And I'm ever so grateful for Your unending grace

So please, heavenly Father, bless this food
You've provided
And bless each and every person invited

Amen!

Gratitude continued from page 1

the anonymous groups who meet here each week. They not only witness release to us by recognizing their own limits in power and calling on you, but they are quiet partners in ministry, like the group who wanted to give back to CHUM and raised money to clean all the carpets in our building.

God, thank you... for each student who wonders about your word and hungers to learn more. I'd never have guessed that a church of 120 in worship would have 45 people in scripture study each week.

God thank you... for a word that is living, alive, and transforms from an old scroll into the blood, sweat, tears, joy and labor of servants in our church each day.

God, thank you... for each time you make us uncomfortable, each way you push us out of our limited expectations and into your abundant promise of Christ's messy and magnificent kingdom come.

God, thank you... for "our daily bread." For the over 30 men and women, housed and unhoused, who come into your living room, the parlor, each morning for warm food, friendship, and prayer.

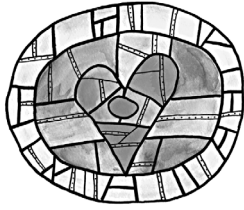
God, thank you... for Mondays full of music. Not just for the artist's hands that dance across the manuals but for the warm reception and unique opportunity to welcome in others who may love music but often wonder about "church people."

God, thank you... for helping us throw our doors wide open just as you opened your arms on the cross, embracing all your children. We thank you for reviving our reconciling ministry and continuing to push us into various ministries of advocacy, justice and evangelism. Use our hands and expose our hearts.

God, thank you... for insisting we be vulnerable like the humble Jesus...for expecting us to pray, study, give, serve and grow that as we offer up our time and talents you can fill us with your unbelievable mission.

God, thank you... that list ode could go on and on and on...So let my Ode of Gratitude end for now with one last thank you. God, thank you... for the unknown.

You, God, alone know what you want to do in and through us and how you will do that in the year to come. You refuse to leave us as we are but push us to go beyond self deep into the depth of your reconciling, redeeming heart. As we prepare for Consecration Sunday, mold us into your instruments, grateful for all you have done, all you will do, and the preposterous, joyful idea that you use our hands, hearts, hours, ideas, dollars, dreams, and dispositions to reveal your saving love. Amen.



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thanks • giv • ing (noun):

- 1:** the act of giving thanks **2:** a prayer expressing gratitude
3: a public acknowledgment or celebration of divine goodness

*"Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever."*

1 Chronicles 16:34

*"You will be enriched in every way so that you can
be generous on every occasion, and through us your
generosity will result in **thanksgiving** to God."*

2 Corinthians 9:11

*"Offer unto God **thanksgiving**,
and pay thy vows unto the Most High."*

Psalms 50:14



On Behavior:

*"Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking,
which are out of place, but rather **thanksgiving**."*

Ephesians 5:4