

19 November 2017

**Why We Give**  
Deuteronomy 14:22-29

Our scripture today comes from a section of the Old Testament law that is often called the “Covenant Code.” We read from the law now, from Deuteronomy 14, verses 22-23.

*<sup>22</sup> Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. <sup>23</sup> In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. <sup>24</sup> But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, <sup>25</sup> then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; <sup>26</sup> spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together. <sup>27</sup> As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you. <sup>28</sup> Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; <sup>29</sup> the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.*

(Singing) Woke up this mornin', turned on the TV set,  
And there – in livin' color – was something I can't forget.  
This man was preachin' at me, yeah, and layin' on the charm,  
Askin' me for twenty, with ten thousand on his arm.

He wore designer clothing and had a big smile on his face,  
Sellin' me salvation, while they sang “Amazing Grace.”  
Askin' me for money while he had all the signs of wealth,  
And I nearly wrote a check out, yeah. But then I asked myself . . .

“Would he wear a pinkie ring? Would he drive a fancy car?  
Would his wife wear furs and diamonds? Would his dressing room have a star?  
If he came back tomorrow, well there's just something I'd like to know  
Can you tell me, would Jesus wear a Rolex on his television show?”

You know, money's a great invention. It's all right to say that, isn't it? What would life be like if we didn't have it? We'd be operating on the barter system, or trading pelts or something. To function at all, we need a way to make our wealth portable, to make a piece of paper (or, today, a debit card number) represent a portion of what we own. And think of the good we can only do because we have money. Take disaster relief: it wouldn't be helpful to mail food to Puerto Rico. Much better to give money to UMCOR (the United Methodist Committee on Relief), which will see to it that every penny we donate to a project will be spent on that project, with nothing taken out for administrative costs. In fact, even some of the oldest writings in the Bible recognize the usefulness of cash. The passage you just heard in Deuteronomy commands all Israelites to bring

a “First Fruits” offering to the sanctuary of God, ten percent of their harvest of grain or figs or grapes or apples or whatever. But, recognizing that figs don’t travel that well, the law grants a concession: Israelites from out of town may turn their produce into cash and bring that to the sanctuary instead. Now, in Deuteronomy, you’ll note that the money stage was temporary. As soon as the Israelite got to the sanctuary with his cash, that money was to be converted back into food for the offering. But either way, my point remains valid: money is useful.

And dangerous. From the very beginning of the history of money, there have been those who realized that you could hold onto it and amass more and more and more, because, unlike figs, it doesn’t spoil! And once you have a whole lot of it, then you can do all sorts of things and buy all sorts of things that others can’t. In fact, for some people, just *having* it becomes desirable, even if you don’t ever trade it in for grain or figs or grapes. And in this way, the invention that I called a “useful tool” stops being a tool and starts being an idolatrous goal in and of itself.

Generally speaking, this idolatry of money is expressed in one of two ways. Sometimes the individual uses his wealth to live in luxury and to buy all sorts of things that nobody really needs: hundred-thousand dollar cars, thirty-thousand dollar wristwatches, zucchini. Other times, the individual may amass money just for the sake of seeing it grow. You hear occasionally about these people: people who have billions but who go to work every day scrabbling to make more (Why?) or people who live in dingy apartments piled to the ceiling with old newspapers and when they die turn out to have millions in the bank (Again, why?), or people who save all their lives for retirement and then, when that time comes, can’t bring themselves to spend anything but just keep on saving. Either way, whether through lavish excess or miserliness, for some people money has become its own goal, not a tool for any better purpose.

And money can become an idol in religion, too, manifesting itself in the same ways. First, there’s the example of lavish excess. In America, we think about television preachers – as was pointed out in the Ray Stevens song with which I began. Remember a couple of years ago when the Prosperity Gospel preacher Crespo Dollar led his congregation in a huge fund-raising drive because God wanted him to have a new private plane? Or we could point toward lavish Renaissance Cathedrals in Europe, Crystal Cathedrals in California, and College-Campus Sized Suburban Megachurch Complexes with their own gyms, shopping malls, and restaurants. Do you remember, about four years ago, reading about the so-called Bishop of Bling? The Roman Catholic Church, under the new Pope Frances, was auditing its books and discovered that the Bishop of Limburg, in Germany, had spent about \$40 million on upgrades to the bishop’s mansion, including things like a \$20,000 bathtub. So, yeah. There’s excess. But there are also churches that follow the other model: hoarding money, turning inward, fearing to spend a dime, focusing entirely on the bottom line – like that miserly old hermit in his dingy apartment. These churches are less obvious than the others, but there are probably more of them. Either way, this is what happens when we let money become an end in itself, and forget that money given to the church is only a useful tool for a purpose.

But wait! you’re wondering. What is that purpose? What should the money given to the church be spent on? Well, let’s take a look again at Deuteronomy. *With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; <sup>26</sup>spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together.* The number one reason to bring your gifts to the sanctuary, according to this passage, is to have a party. The first purpose of giving our gifts is to create a community of celebration. That’s not actually the main

thing you hear about in giving sermons, is it? Give so that we can have parties. Sounds a little selfish, sort of frivolous. It does *not* sound like God's work. But it kind of is. A few years ago, in a different church, I sent out a survey to all the seniors on the rolls, asking them how the church could support and encourage and care for them best. We listed home visits, transportation, care during crisis, and things like that. You know what came back number one? Parties. Time together. Social activities, especially social activities cutting across generations. Remember, the survey didn't ask what would be fun. It asked, "What do you *need* from your church?" And people need family celebrations. We want to gather as the family of God – not just for worship, not just to learn stuff, but to be together and rejoice in the presence of God.

But there's more. The party is not just for the family. <sup>28</sup>*Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns;* <sup>29</sup>*the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident foreigners, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.* When you have this party, make sure that you feed those who don't have enough of their own. Feed the widows. Feed the orphans. Feed immigrants. Feed ministers. (Well, that's what it says; those were the Levites. You see, the tribe of Levi wasn't given its own land as an inheritance, because the Levites were assigned to serve God. So Deuteronomy tells the people to remember ministers, along with all the other needy people.) But the main point is that the celebration is not a private party. Everyone who might not have resources enough of their own, or a family of their own, is invited to share in the gifts we bring.

That's why we give.

*Not* to pay the heating bills, though we intend to do that. *Not* to make budget, though that's our goal. *Not* to pay off our loan from the Foundation early, though I'd love to do that. *Not* to support the institution at all, though I love the church. All those are good. I'd like to do all of them. But those things are secondary. Those things, like money itself, are tools toward an end. The reason we have a building and heat it in the winter, the reason we have a budget and savings, is to enable us to hold a family celebration in the presence of God and to include others in the party.

I have to finish the story of the Bishop of Bling. Pope Francis was not, shall we say, impressed. The bishop was relieved of his duties indefinitely. Last I heard, he had been given a new assignment in a monastery. Meanwhile, the Roman church began talking with the Limburg local government about what to do with that mansion. I never heard the final decision, but one plan was to turn it into a homeless shelter. I do hope that happened. I can think of no better use for a \$20,000 bathtub than as a place for a forgotten child of God to wash his or her feet. Good for Francis, who remembered that, even though we in the church screw up way too often with the money we receive, there is still an excellent reason to give.